Politics of the Shared-Interior: on Digital Intimacy and Tangible Space

(an epistolary lecture, to be read in absentia)

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Dear All,

First of all, I want to sincerely apologize for not being here today. Yet given the topic of this symposium, perhaps that failure might be interesting. I left the country on Sunday, in a sense, in order to make up for the failures of online intimacy. I'm going to a funeral for a family member who died far too young. I'm sure many of you – perhaps even most of you – know times like these. In times like these, trauma courses through the network that is a family and robs everyone, each in different ways, of their sense of what that family is. What is its address to the future – what is the very shape of its futurity? At the moment (and in my admittedly melodramatic mood), futurity, zoomed out to the level of a clan set adrift against tides of disastrous conservatism and mounting injustice preying on symphonies of nervous systems, feels like a neoliberal fade-out by pharmaceutical agents, a diminishment unfolding in flecks and flashes upon a species, perfectly timed to Piketty's equation for the dissolution of the middle class. In times like these, one's sense of continuity and justice become unhinged from the material world. (As if justice, a quaint modern abstraction, could really be woven from equitable parcels of individual lifespans.

What is justice to biology? To economy? To fatal pharmacology – a perverse meeting of the two?) In times like these, a family's trust in its ability to represent the future to itself at all comes starkly into question. In the face of all this – in the face of death – a digital hug has no currency. It is not adequate to the weight of the burden which must be shared. Only really being there will do; and all of the seemingly naïve "digital dualism"[1] that such a statement evokes feels perfectly obvious, intuitive, and justified to anyone to whom I describe my decision to go home.

Though it is, perhaps, widely shared, in some form or other, this experience is not exactly everyday. To translate it into a more mundane register: anyone who's ever been Skyped into a meeting, I would wager, knows full well what I want to call the "theoretical feeling" of digital sociality as lack. (By "theoretical feeling," I simply mean the sense in which feelings theorize situations. Feelings' theories are folded up tightly in the moment in which they are felt, so as to merely exude atmospheres. After the fact, though, they can be opened out, read like the momentary DNA of a fleeting social/political/personal assemblage – although such acts of reading, of course, are always situated, always thoroughly self-referential, and never have a transcendental claim to truth.) Being Skyped in, being digitally "added" onto an intricate web of social interactions taking place within a room can feel inherently interruptive. The

[1] I take this term from Nathan Jurgenson, who uses the term to critique a wide variety of thinkers who consider, let's say, the economies of online spaces, including Jaron Lanier and Evgeny Morozov. Jurgenson argues that these thinkers assume that digital spaces are "virtual," whereas concrete, offline spaces are "real" – and that this assumption leads to a great many theoretical problems. To an extent, Jurgenson may have a point in that, for instance, the images Lanier paints of the future tend to give more heed to the agency of technological advancements, and systematically under-pronounce the importance of the ecological crises in the parades of chemicals that hold up the digital world. However, as far as I can tell so far, by and large his is a simplistic, off-the-mark critique, which fails to account for the complexities of enfoldment between online and offline spaces to which the thinkers he criticizes speak, and gains much of its currency from its alliteration.

missing one, digitally brought to meeting, perches on a screen or table, like a disembodied afterthought who cannot so much as turn her head and have the second layer of her situatedness follow suit, expanding her perceptual field in the direction that the turn of her neck has asked for. On top of that… perhaps the sound cuts out. Or the connection goes down altogether. Perhaps seeing her own head on screen is distracting, producing a weird, compound, involuntary narcissism. Perhaps it's just really hard to follow the conversation, if one lacks what I can only provisionally call some sort of sociological proprioception – a grounding in the group that takes place through who knows what combination of information delicately encoded in glances, or chemicals, or complex, spatially-situated weather maps of thought/feeling, or (to sound even *more* hippy-dippy for a moment) "energies" (scare quotes most definitely required). All of this – what I am calling sociality's proprioception – is hard from the Skyped-in side of the screen. That said, this awkward-edged side of the screen might have some scant ecological benefits, at least, insofar as it expresses an inverse relationship to the airline industry. When those who would otherwise fly can Skype, perhaps this ever so slightly lessens the thickness of lines in airlines' continual carbon drawings on skies. Though, of course, to Skype is also to slurp up energy, if of a different quantity and kind.

Digital embodiment is not quite – not yet? – so seamless as it seems it could be in, say, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. In the world described in this visionary novel, those who cannot attend meetings can "ride" on another's consciousness – seeing, hearing and feeling just as their host sees, hears, and feels for a given period of time. And yet there is an irony here, in that Gibson's image is not, I would argue, about a technology that is fundamentally "digital" at all. For what is Gibson's futuristic image, if not the description of a much older technology already at play,

already spread like a virus through the world? What is Gibson's image, in fact, if not a succinct summary of the tasks of literature? Or at least (I should backtrack a bit here), his image expresses what has often been seen as one of literature's main tasks (though this has surely been contested[2]) since the eighteenth century: to let a reader's living consciousness ride within the coordinates of an artificial one, for a time – seeing, thinking, and feeling as a character does, with nothing but the passive agency ascribed to readerly wit. (This situation is oiled, it must be admitted, with a hint of omniscience). In effect, the relationships between readers and characters produce means through which to *share* interiority, to find an avenue through which the paradox of a shared interiority can play itself out. In doing so, the relations between readers and characters, arguably, aim to resolve some of the tensions between accumulation and circulation that were building up in the eighteenth century economy – to resolve them through the very medium of shared/private consciousness. I won't delve into this last point too much here; suffice it to say, for now, that this is the basis for some of Deidre Shauna Lynch's thinking on the development of complex, interior lives in eighteenth-century British literature in *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998). That said, my description departs from Lynch's in its focus on how interiority (or privacy) becomes shareable through written prose. Lynch's work describes the development of complex, represented interior lives, as such, as a response to the influx of commodities from

[2] Think, for instance, of Deleuze and Guattari's denigration of literary interiority in their "Introduction: Rhizome" chapter in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari do not necessarily intend to moralize when they associate the literature of interiority with the state apparatus, and the literature of asymptotic rupture with the war machine. That said, it would be fairly easy to argue that their pronouncement, in fact, does moralize against interiority in literature, and as such, merely reflects the prejudices of a whole generation of structuralist literary scholars, rather than doing the harder work of coming up with a way to read the paradoxes of state apparatuses and war machines *within* each of these respective modalities.

overseas in Britain at the time, and the concomitant need for people to learn how to render such possessions truly private – how to create private possession out of nothing but vast circulations of goods that vastly exceeded their buyers' horizons. Complex characters could teach this. Yet (and here is where I shift the focus), this is not only because of characters' performance of interior complexity as a mode of being for this newly commoditized world. It is also because they turn that interiority into a form of *commerce*, doling out the life-worlds of characters (how each one sees, thinks and feels its world) like packets of spatio-psychic doublings across fields of extensible minds. To wit: in their commerce, characters perform a paradox of the shared-interior.

Toward a politics of shared interiority: acts of sharing "interiority" (in the form of narrated feeling, for instance) point to the paradox of sharing that which cannot be shared, and yet must be shared in order to come into being as some sort of a social fact. This paradox courses through online spaces on a regular basis, through their platform architectures laden with sharing. These, let's say, allow their users to circulate feeling, let feeling feel its way through new networks, negotiating the distinctions between psychic value and commerce in feedback loops and imitative rays.[3] Yet the paradox of shared interiority is one that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature, in its own way, already amply queried. The shared-interior performs a continual swapping between various kinds of value, as it is differentially framed from economic and individuated, psychic perspectives. Austen's young heroines perform such acts of swapping quite explicitly. Their complexity, their interiority – and the highly differentiated forms, and levels, of intelligence, sensitivity and wit of which each of these were comprised – each process

[3] I take the latter term from Gabriel Tarde, for whom "imitative rays" of behaviour carried a foregrounded economic function. As Nigel Thrift points out, Tarde's privileging of imitative rays of behaviour seems ever more relevant to online

circumstance differently, conceive of opportunity differently. For these fictitious women, marriage is the singular economic event of a lifetime. Their judgments, their speculations, as to the value of prospective husbands' "character" were the primary tools with which they could influence their lot, with one, singular decision, which compromised between internal volition and familial pressure. (Of course, the characters' assessment of potential husbands' financial assets also comes into the equation – although Austen's most refined characters see beyond financial value, locate value's highest "truth" in the interior realm of the household: in highly coded intimacies encased in social mores and legal contracts, trading in moral currency.)

Long before digital technologies helped their users share intimacy, of sorts (with all of the enhanced, diminished and invented potentialities that accompany any given medium and its socio-technical milieux), literary characters shared synthetic interiority between readers. This always-already-sharedness of literary interiority (a mode of narrativity which each of us, I would wager, has deeply internalized in some form, and which, therefore, structures our thought), throws the stories of feeling digital sociality as lack I mentioned at the beginning of this talk into question. Character, as a technology for shared-interiority, provides its own, specific ways in which intimacies are always, already extensible, always, already shared, yet private. Shared interiority dispersed by means of characters, we could say just as plausibly, makes up for the failures of face-to-face intimacy, removing intimacy, as it were, from the antagonisms of finite resources, and producing new and fertile time-zones for its reflectiveness which course through the world in imitative rays, condensing into thought and folding back out again onto the material present, in an ongoing field of exchanges, or shares.

When I proposed this talk, it was going to be about online dating. (Clearly, I have lost the plot.) Specifically, it was going to compare the ways in which Alain Badiou and Michel Feher understand online dating platforms. It's an interesting contrast, to be sure. In his short book *In Praise of Love* (2012), Badiou begins by denigrating online dating altogether, arguing that it diminishes the concept of love by rendering it in the language of insurance. Online platforms, for Badiou, enable a "safety-first" approach to love, allowing users to mitigate their risks in advance, determine whether there is enough shared interest (does this person smoke? Do they like Proust, pubs or long walks? Do they want children?) to risk investment. Making shopping lists out of partnership, online dating platforms, in fact, do away with love altogether; for love, in Badiou's view, is not about sharing in sameness at all, but about constructing a world of Two, from the perspective of difference. Online dating merely trades in compatibilities; love, on the other hand, affirms that one can be in the world, construct a world, from a tenacious difference that emerges in an event but also unfolds over time and endures.

Badiou's argument is interesting; but it sweepingly dismisses online dating platforms as a grammar of insurance, rather than doing the far more subtle work of understanding the genealogical roots of that insurance-language. Further, even in its affirmation of the perspective of Two, it seems rather too concentrated, failing to account for the ways in which each of us is, already, multi-voiced, carrying hordes of imitative rays in our veins, carrying the ways in which literature, language, and digital doubling have already shared us out, multiplied us from the get-go.

In light of these caveats, Michel Feher's account of online dating is, arguably, much more interesting. Feher situates online dating platforms within his genealogy of neoliberal sociality. To summarize very quickly (and, no doubt, with a few casualties

along the way): he argues that the understanding of marriage, say, as a form of exchange (a trade of services and resources, if you will) fades with the liberal era; for the neoliberal era, the corresponding image of the relationship is predicated on sharing, not exchange. Queer and radical feminist movements helped to produce this shift in small subcultures, chipping away at the uneven, or even impossible, terms of exchange as they were coupled with love in the liberal era, and slowly, in their place, producing an altogether different image of love founded on shared commitment. Eventually, this idea became mainstream, as is perfectly expressed by the online dating platform, which implicitly poses the question: in order to have a relationship, what must be shared?

In the face of Feher's immanent critique, Badiou's seems rather simplistic, unsituated, even transcendental. Yet perhaps Feher's account could be pushed further, as well, by means of its very own question: for indeed, *what* must be shared? And what are the conflicts between various conceptions of what must be shared? What is the difference, for instance, between shared interests and shared feeling, in online dating? What is the significance of the fact that to share (an interest, a feeling) is also to inhabit the paradox that what is shared is, in many ways, not shared at all, but, rather, differentially coursed through two lifeworlds filled with characters and imitative rays? Perhaps a pinch of Badiou's worlds constructed from the perspective of two, from the perspective of difference, comes in handy after all; but, read against itself, this difference comes to stand in for many and multiple differences, produced through all acts of sharing.[4]

[4] Yes, this is all starting to sound a bit… Deleuzian… though perhaps what I'm getting at is a Deleuze/Feher synthesis of sorts, that would combine a more or less Deleuzian conception of difference with Feher's understanding of the importance of self and self-esteem to neoliberal governmentality?

Without an enormous philosophical enquiry or original sociological research, perhaps the best I can do, by way of contribution, is to take a run at this terrain from as many oblique angles as possible, in hopes of adding something in the collision. This is where my earlier images come in. Death in the family, Piketty's theories felt through the prism of kinship, the Skyped-in meeting and all of its embodied inadequacies… through these images, perhaps I could open up some new inflections in the analysis of online dating and its expression of the speculative labours of kinship. Perhaps I could suggest that online dating avatars are like literary characters, producing commerce of shared feeling and/or shared interests between readers and characters – except that all of the readers are also characters, and all of the characters are also readers. Thus, these platforms shift the narrative constellations of literature into cloud-form, and resolve their antagonisms not through linear progression but through filtering what each reader-character sees. Perhaps I could flip the terms entirely, and situate the contradiction between Badiou and Feher's accounts of online dating platforms within a broader genealogy of the paradoxes of the shared interior, which eighteenth century literature already anticipated. This talk, I hope, is an engine, a sketch, a letter. I would like it to also be a provisional set of questions.

Yours truly,

Emily