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**Hidden Things:  
A Case of (Reading and) Disappearing on the Subway**

A few months ago, I was talking with a friend about the experience of commuting downtown on Toronto's subway system. The subject turned to the various kinds of conversations it's possible to encounter while minding one's own business on the way home. Apart from the one-sided discussions of cell-phone, drug and alcohol users we categorized the animation of cultural dissemination after a night at the theatre/art gallery/symphony, lovers' quarrels, high-school drama, work-related crisis (often having to do with office politics or questionable decisions of a boss or supervisor) and the banter of tourists either lost, amazed or disappointed by the city. As interesting as these conversations are, both my friend and I noted that they can be often overwhelming and even intrusive. He noted one such conversation that had occurred next to him earlier that week. It was a combination of our categories involving a high school crisis, a lovers' quarrel AND a cell phone. He mentioned that it was incredibly annoying and that it seemed to go on and on.

"What did you do?" I asked. "Did you eavesdrop for the entire trip?"

"Nope," he answered. "I just opened my book of poetry and I was all by myself."

I couldn't resist. "Who moved?"

He took me more seriously than I had anticipated. "They were still there when I shut the book at the last stop, so it must've been me who disappeared."

His surprising description left me thinking about the phenomenon of disappearing on the subway. The experience, and his choice of words in telling me about it, is interesting

for a number of reasons. Where do we go when we “disappear” while reading? What are the limits of this disappearing? Why do we allow it and what do we desire when we become “lost” in a book? (And how do we find our way back?) Specific to his example, how might disappearing into a book of poetry be a different kind of experience than disappearing into a textbook or a work of fiction? In his book *Literature, Psychoanalysis and The New Science of Mind*, Leonard Jackson calls the suspension of disbelief necessary for entering into narrative time a “portable psychosis” (9). The condensed literary form of poetry with its short stanzas and concise turns of phrase, then, must be the most portable psychosis. Using the psychoanalytic method to think about the uses of this portability is what I hope to offer in this paper.

At first glance, psychoanalysis gives us a deceptively clear framework with which to begin an analysis of becoming lost in a book of poetry. “The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious,” writes Freud. For him, the daydream of disappearing is a form of sublimation, the fulfillment of a childhood wish for both writer and reader. “...A piece of creative writing, like a day-dream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood,” he tells us in the 1908 paper “Creative Writers and Daydreaming”. “The essential *ars poetica*...is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others.” This is hardly a satisfying explanation for anyone who has ever been moved to the point of disappearing by a piece of writing, and many aesthetic theorists—with whom psychoanalysis has an unsteady relationship at best—seem more dismissive than usual. “Freudian psychoanalysis,” George Steiner tells us,

Which is at this point the almost naïve heir to nineteenth-century scientism,

sees in the aesthetic impulse and fulfillment a mechanism, more or less infantile, of sublimation. The daydreaming poet and the artist seek to sublimate, in an endeavour at once neurotic and therapeutic, or to attenuate and postpone the confrontation of the mature psyche with the “reality principle”. These diverse incorporations of the hermeneutic and the evaluative practice within encompassing philosophic systems, within encompassing ideologies and edifices of social or psychological doctrine, are themselves susceptible of study and critique.

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Later, he goes even further, stating that “the psychoanalytic mining of aesthetic and poetic forms are themselves fictions and mythical scenerios” (173). Steiner, well-versed in Freudian typology and a declared admirer of the “final confiding” necessary for psychoanalysis, is by no means alone. And his frustration is not so difficult to understand; the lived experience of the literary encounter certainly feels like something other than fantasy. We *want* it to be more than wish-fulfillment or sublimation. The question of disappearing into a book of poetry then becomes one of desire. What do we want the experience to be? In what way can we see that the needs of both text and reader are met? As Rifka R. Eifermann notes in her important essay “Textual Analysis and Self-Analysis”, how does the interactive process come alive in terms of “wishes, conflicts, fantasies, and defences” when it is a poem, and not a story, that is the focal location (444)?

The immediate answer is that poetry is, on its own, a kind of story we use to tell ourselves something. It is a form, Jane Hirshfield tells us in her engaging work *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, offering connection and “exploration without limit,” (28). Like psychoanalysis, Hirshfield tells us that poems “explore one thing by means of another...we turn to Shakespeare’s sonnets to learn not about Shakespeare’s life but about our own” (35). Hirshfield sounds like Freud in “Creative Writers and

Daydreaming”; both writers suggest that disappearing into the dream of poetry is a form of disappearing into ourselves. So, once again, how does this happen, and in what ways does the exploration become something that feels other than sublimation or childhood wish-fulfilment? What technologies does poetry offer that lure us into desire, into allowing ourselves to want to believe that defined psychical processes might be worth more than mere function? How does the portable psychosis of a poem take us from function into poetry?

I will suggest, for the purpose of this paper’s experiment, that there are three ways. But the expository essay is insufficient on its own to take us there. Instead, I thought it would be useful to offer a poem today and to see if we might together get lost in what it tenders, and if we might find our way back. I chose the small piece “Hidden Things”, a deceptively simple text by the early twentieth-century poet Constantin Cavafy:

From all I did and all I said  
 let no one try to find out who I was.  
 An obstacle was there that changed the pattern  
 of my actions and the manner of my life.  
 An obstacle was often there  
 to stop me when I’d begin to speak.  
 From my most unnoticed actions,  
 my most veiled writing—  
 from these alone will I be understood.  
 But maybe it isn’t worth so much concern,  
 so much effort to discover who I really am.  
 Later, in a more perfect society,  
 someone else made just like me  
 is certain to appear and act freely.

(Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard)

It is a favourite poem of mine, and I think an interesting choice to present at a conference for those with an interest in psychoanalysis. There is a lot to listen for. It’s a piece containing the shared intimacy of a secret; Cavafy’s lines hold an untold

confession, a release, and the promise of vicarious hope. How is it that the poem can give us so much in fourteen lines of free-verse? What are some of the possibilities for “disappearing” into this poem?

The first technology of disappearance is the unavoidable, uneasy map of the psyche we call language. Perhaps one of the most contentious issues between psychoanalysis and poetry, words are the fundamental underpinning to both. This difference, Adam Phillips tells us in his essay “Poetry and Psychoanalysis,” stems from a perception of language as a way of “telling of our doubts about language, a skepticism...about words and the value of meaning” (5). Language as a psychoanalytic thing becomes an obstacle to itself. As a poetic paradigm, it is a much different thing. “In poetry’s transparent and active transcription,” Jane Hirshfield writes, “language itself becomes an organ of perception” (131). The difference seems to be one of typology; overdetermination and overstatement aren’t always the same thing.

And yet the distance is not so far as we might imagine. Consider Cavafy’s poem. In it, he writes of an “obstacle” that changes everything, but he does not name it; he talks of impossible secrets discoverable only in unnoticed actions and veiled writings. Here, language is the perfect cross between Hirshfield’s “organ of perception” and the psychoanalytic skepticism of meaning. Instead, we have an unknowing, a non-perception rendered active through what language does not tell us. It is a creative mix of signifier and signified from which the words become the very meaning they wish to convey. Here, language is both a poetic and a psychical structure. “In language you can have a purple-coloured pain, a grin without a cat, a square circle, a person who is both dead and alive,” writes Terry Eagleton in *How to Read a Poem*. “Seeing language as no more than an

image or representation of reality is a way of restricting its liberty” (139). Eagleton paints language as a concept parallel to the psyche itself. (One cannot help but think of Lacan’s assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language.) It is only in language and dreams that the reality principle finds itself so relaxed. The difference between a dream and a poem, Meredith Anne Skura writes in “Literature as Psychoanalytic Process”, is that both “return us to more primitive levels of experience” (385). The return leaves us lost and wondering from where we have reappeared. Hirshfield states that poetry asks of us, “What is the nature of this moment?” (53). “Poetry’s grammars, strategies, and language have their own wisdom –entering its woods, we find ourselves living with thought-forms that feed only within the ways of the leafy and hidden” (108). As Cavafy’s unspoken obstacle and veiled writings show, language is at once perception and doubt, an impossible temporality of simultaneous seeing and unknowing.

Constantin Cavafy’s “Hidden Things” uses terminology that sounds in many ways more psychoanalytic than poetic. The poem asks us to listen carefully to all that was said and done in “veiled writings” and “unnoticed actions”; in the opening between world and self that constitutes the poem, there is a wish for a “more perfect society” where one might “act freely” coupled with a twin wish to be understood linked to the discovery of “who I really am”. And, he speaks of an obstacle that prevents free speech and even changes the course of his life. The poem is strangely deficient of metaphor. We have no reason to believe that the “veiled writings” and “unnoticed actions”, the “more perfect society” or the wish to be understood have any meanings other than their immediate implication. In Cavafy’s piece, an obstacle is actually an obstacle –a block hindering the progress of life. A poem without metaphor, “Hidden Things” might seem more

journalistic than imaginative. Surely getting lost in a newspaper report is a much different experience than losing oneself in a poem; yet, Cavafy's piece retains the critical desire in at least one of its readers (me) necessary to classify the poem as a lived experience.

Can a poem truly be without metaphor? Eagleton defines the term as "the use of language which is imaginatively but not literally appropriate...or the representation of a thing by another which resembles it" (167). While Cavafy's use of language is beautiful in its simplicity and what it does not say, every word in "Hidden Things" is "literally appropriate" and, as I've said, virtually every noun represents nothing but itself. Without the figurative depth of metaphor, how does this poem elicit the poetic desire? The question is a complex one. In her book *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser writes, "I wish to say that we will not be saved by poetry. But poetry is the type of creation in which we may live and which will save us." At first, this sentence confused me. What is poetry that it should be something different from itself, a creation different and more capable than its own definition? Upon reflection, I've come to think of Rukeyser's words as an intricate statement of poetics. What she does in this sentence is cast poetry in a strange and important light.

I believe what Rukeyser is saying is that a poem is always, in itself, a metaphor. And a metaphor is the most intricate, thoughtful, human of devices. It is doubtful whether any other species on the planet can imagine or describe one thing in terms of another; a metaphor goes beyond being reminded of something, instinct or making a mistake. And even in the human realm, metaphor remains the essence of who we are when the accoutrements of life are stripped away; the metaphoric thing is a parallel to the psychological thing. Simply a descriptive comparison that humans are capable of making because we

are creatures for whom one thing in life brings to mind other, seemingly unrelated experience, metaphor is the essence of who we are. We are capable of understanding one thing by means of another, reaching toward the new and unfamiliar in the return of what we already know. Metaphor matters because thinking is complex and feeling is important. If madness is the price of being human, metaphor is one of humanity's gifts.

For words in a poem without metaphor, Jane Hirschfield suggests, "their meaning is their own existence...within them lies also the irresistible seduction of Being itself" (130). The same is true of a poem. This viable and expansive suggestion leaves a responsibility on each reader of poetry. What we might want a poem to be a metaphor for is the work of reading and understanding our own narrations of poetry against the lived life. A poem might represent the possibility of beauty or the expression of meaning in language. What the hidden things of Constantin Cavafy's piece mean is up to each of us. What the poem represents, what any poem represents—"how it is imaginatively but not literally appropriate" to our lives—is a question large enough to find oneself lost within. Thus, I would posit metaphor as the second technology of disappearance possible through poetry. Like a primal memory, we find in poetry the return of what we've known and felt as we encounter the adventure of a new experience.

"Like dreams, literature represents a trade-off between disclosure and concealment,"

Henk de Berg tells us in his book *Freud's Theory and Its Use in Literary and Cultural*

*Studies*:

The reader's unconscious is both provoked and pushed back, aroused yet kept at a distance. Reading is a battle between drives and repressions, between the desire for expression and the need for censorship. It engages the mind in its full complexity...literary texts do not simply *result* from a conflict between consciousness and unconsciousness but *embody* it. Their artistic greatness, judged by its psychological dimension, depends on the extent to which they

allow the reader to re-enact this conflict.

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Psychoanalysis teaches us that a person is a conflict; we are at war with our own drives and desires, often unbeknownst to ourselves. Poetic time –like narrative time—is defined by the push-and-pull of opposite drives. The “play of childhood” Freud talks about in “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” might well be an embodied acting out of the conflicted drives against the safety of a suspended reality principle; the parallel he draws in that paper suggests that the literary experience runs parallel to this equation. In literature, the “acting out” of the conflicted ambitions is analogous to childhood play; it is the spectrum of the reality principle that is different. Instead of the suspended “reality” children manipulate in play, literature recycles experience, bringing back affect in the form of a return. Our unconscious is “provoked and pushed back”, to use de Berg’s phrase, based on the criteria of what reading brings to us of our own experience. Once again, it is in our own inner representations that we find the “wishes, conflicts, fantasies, and defences” of a literary text. A poem can only bring us ourselves. Psychoanalytically speaking, then, the work of reading is a decoding of our experiences of a text. As Shoshana Felman notes, interpretation might well be “the effect of a deadly struggle between consciousness and the unconscious...resistance and what can neither be resisted nor escaped” (Felman 51). In the space between Felman’s “resistance and what cannot be resisted” is the poetic disappearance; here, we find our own “hidden things”.

What is provoked and pushed back by a specific poem must, then, be unique to each reader, and often unknown. Constantine Cavafy’s poem, for me, brings the pleasure of remembering the obstacles that have changed my life, the mysteries I have put up in “all I did and all I said” that make disclosure to myself and others impossible. He reminds me,

with mixed feelings of sadness and the proud keeping of a confidence, how I have kept the world at bay by carefully guarding my own secrets –and, like the poem, this comes with a poignant wish to be known and understood. The poem’s final lines –that we may not be worth so much concern after all, that perhaps someday the world will easily overlook the very thing that has taken so much energy to hide—brings to me the ambivalence of hope for the future and “those like me” with a sense of despair and outrage for being born out of time, too early, in the wrong world. Reading this piece, I am lost in myself; I disappear into my own story and the sometimes thwarted wishes of my experience. I disappear into the language that becomes a metaphor for my own life. I disappear into the conflict that is me. The poem is, indeed a sublimation: the frustration of isolation is eased by a bit of self-knowledge, that small recognition inherent in living through the unconscious struggle of being aroused and simultaneously resisting this arousal.

Why do we refuse to give in to the word “sublimation”? Why is it such an unsatisfactory description for what happens when we encounter a moving piece of art? Why do we prefer to give the experience magical connotations like “disappearing” or “getting lost in a book”? The answer may be as simple as our own resistances to categorization. The term “Stage Four” does little to describe the cancer patient; the words “C+ student” tells us hardly anything about a child’s encounter with education. The criticism I mentioned earlier by writers like George Steiner is somewhat justified, and it may well be time for the work of psychoanalytic literary commentary to move beyond categorization and doctrines of mechanistic diagnosis towards something else. Within its core beliefs and vocabulary, psychoanalysis provides a technology with which we might

explore and seek to understand the varieties of literary experience. There is much we can't know, but perhaps psychoanalysis is at its most poetic in the search for new questions. How can we come to talk about what it means to be moved by a poem without using the pseudo-scientific jargon that so bothers Steiner and his contemporaries? How can we honour each reader by wondering about all readers, each beautiful and difficult experience by acknowledging the wonder of any aesthetic encounter? I wonder if psychoanalysis might help us to somehow move away from reductionist concepts and into a frame of reference where we understand that the affective experience of a poem matters because the psychological world matters, and that this is true precisely because each individual is, as Freud states, irreplaceable.

We might come to wonder, for example, not whether disappearing into a book of poetry on the subway matters, but how our lives might be different if it did. A change in how we look at ourselves might be inspired; we could come to understand a bit of our own complexity, our dependence on metaphor and language, how each of us lives day-to-day by unconsciously remembering and pushing away so much of who we are. And, for those of us interested in issues of social justice and how psychoanalysis might help us to see and act in a way that is more kind and more human to others, it's possible that we could come to see the complexity of each other as well. If I can "disappear" reading the words of a gay Greek poet written a hundred years ago, so can the group of high school students next to me, and the fellow sitting next to them, and my own students, and my brother. Where do they go when they get lost in the poem? What are they remembering and pushing back, what conflicts are embodied for each of them? Is it possible for us to "disappear" together, and if so, how are we different when we return? How can

psychoanalysis help us to think beyond disappearing, so that even in the most profound experience of art or literature, we come away wondering not only where we've been, but who we are—for ourselves, and for each other—when we return?

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