

From Mr. Big to mr. small

Seven Interludes on Impotence

ABSTRACT

Making a case for the ethico-political potential of impotence, the seven interludes that make up this text focus on the virtues of small life. They show that passive experiences provide a lens through which to reduce the i, which allows for the other to become augmented. Inspired by the formal promiscuity of Jack Halberstam's theoretical methodology, this text revisits some of the biggest figures of the Western philosophical and literary canon, which are read in relation to queer and feminist thought in order to intimate a diminutive, pathetic, and impotent subject.

Impotence and passivity are fundamental ways in which human beings are, but their importance is rarely recognized in the Western philosophical tradition. Western thought has instead been shaped by the projects, projections, and productions of resolute masculine subjects. Its research interests as well as its form has been molded upon the ideas and dreams that pertain to masculine life, which have overwhelmingly centered on activity, productivity, and potency. But in the shadow cast by the potent top who makes big claims about truth and reality, the contours of another masculinity can be intuited, a diminutive self, an impotent bottom who makes small claims, or none at all. From Mr. Big who both enters and exits his interactions intact and proud, these interludes turn to mr. small, who always-already lives in the tender borderlands of ambiguity, negativity, and patheticism. Following these figures through experiences of average everydayness, failure, and impotence, these interludes show that passivity opens up new ways of understanding the subject and its relation to the other.

Keywords: Impotence, diminution, masculinity, passivity, ethics

1. A (not so) very average everydayness

Now, the specificity of the fragment, its uniqueness, is that it is a form that is both complete and incomplete, both a whole and a part. It is a form that embodies interruption within itself. That is to say, the fragment fails. (Critchley 1997, 123-124)

IN LIFE, SOME things happen, even some big things, but a lot of things don't. Existence is filled with average everydayness, with small things, and with no/things. Even though philosophy is a discipline concerned with existence, it has predominantly been preoccupied with the existence of things that happen: with doing, acting, speaking. The things that don't have, at best, been given second fiddle. Western philosophy has assumed that passivity doesn't hold the moral potential of activity; that sleep is a preparation for or depravation of wake; that impotence is a sickness of potency... But not only are passive states necessary for the preservation of human life, they are also generative modalities for reimagining the ways in which human being is in relation to other animals, to plants, rocks. Instead of doing and acting, this text places passive phenomena of impotence, everydayness, and failure at the heart of an alternative way of understanding the I. It argues that by focusing on passive styles of life, the scale of the subject is altered. From Big to small. Renegotiating the English language practice of capitalizing the I, which makes it the master and center not just of grammatical units, but of all relations, the i displays its proclivity for reducing the self. This makes space for an alternative ethico-political way of being in relation to the other and the world.

Besides its one-sided focus on activity, Western thought has also taken a disproportionate interest in masculinity. This preference is rarely named, but marked by the ostensible neutrality of the I, who narrates the stories that make up its canon.¹ Against heroic masculinity, associated with power, domination, as well as expansion, this essay follows Jack Halberstam's call to recognize the existence of alternative masculine lives (Halberstam 1998, 2). Ones that embrace, as they write in

The Queer Art of Failure, incoherent, lonely, defeated, and melancholic “formulations of selfhood” (Halberstam 2011, 148). Only by honoring non-normative ways of being masculine can masculinity as such change. This is necessary for human being, as well as for its relation to animals, to plants, rocks. Masculinity, this essay shows, also happens on the small side of life. Parallel to the potent ἐραστής (*erastēs*) or top who dominates the Western tradition of thought and its culture, this text turns to low forms of life to discover another masculinity, an impotent bottom: our ἐρώμενος (*erōmenos*). If philosophy is a form of masculinity studies, then this text makes a small contribution to another way of conceptualizing the self that lies at the heart of this discipline. From Mr. Big – portrayed by the iconic big shot from the tv-series *Sex and the City*, as well as by some of the canonized big guns of Western literature and philosophy – to mr. small, a diminutive subject, epitomized by the self-proclaimed super-masochist Bob Flanagan. Small theory portrays life on the side of the impotent subject, where nothing much happens; existence is an interlude more than an act, an in-between space filled with average everydayness.

Allowing its content to shape its form, this text takes the interlude rather than the act as its role model. Interludes mark the necessary moments of stillness, rest, and silence between acts, but independently of their relation to active existence, they are also descriptions of what happens or does not happen during the interval. The interlude exists in a different style than that which it precedes and what comes after; it is a temporary diversion, “usually short simple” (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* n.d.). Not a grand gesture, a minor one. A fragment rather than a thesis. Premised upon interruption and failure, as Simon Critchley writes in *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, the fragment introduces “into the Subject a certain impotence and passivity that escapes the movement of comprehension, of philosophy’s obsession with meaning [...]” (Critchley 1997, 38). Although the fragment is complete in itself, it is also “never written in isolation” (Critchley 1997, 125). The seven interludes that make up this text honor the impotence that is inherent to human life, and show that phenomena relating to it, including average everydayness,

passivity, and failure, disrupt the projections of the modern subject and teach it to relate differently to the other. Recognizing its impotence and passivity, the Subject is reduced to the level of the other; the *i* to the *you*. Guided by the formal promiscuity of Halberstam's theoretical methodology, which in *The Queer Art of Failure* is named "low theory" (Halberstam 2011, 21), these interludes engage popular culture, philosophical treatises, queer thought, and inconsequential fancies to intimate a *small* theory that focuses on the impotent, pathetic, diminutive, average, and everyday aspects of existence.

For Martin Heidegger, average everydayness is what allows us to understand our world. Rather than looking to immaterial ideals to explain human being, Heidegger utilizes a phenomenological approach and describes human life based on experience. And the experience of average everydayness is both the most common and the least known:

We board the tram, talk to other people, call the dog, look up at the stars, all in the same way—humans, vehicles, human beings, animals, heavenly bodies, everything in the same uniformity of what is present at hand. These are characteristics of our everyday Dasein that philosophy has hitherto neglected, because this all too self-evident phenomenon is what is most powerful in our Dasein, and because that which is most powerful is therefore the deadly enemy of philosophy. (Heidegger 1995, 275)

Heidegger criticizes Western thought for its neglect of everydayness, which for him marks the very starting point for thinking. Indeed, this aspect of human life as present at hand "cannot be insisted upon too strongly" (Heidegger 1995, 275). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains that everydayness is a determinative mode for Dasein (a term that literally signifies there-being and that points to a way of being shared by a certain community, such as human beings³) – it is the way in which Dasein lives.³ Heidegger argues that human beings in their encounter with the world need to begin with what is readily available in order to understand that world. Everydayness is average, and as such, Heidegger continues, it is dull: "In everydayness Dasein can undergo dull 'suffer-

ing,' sink away in the dullness of it, and evade it by seeking new ways in which its dispersion in its affairs may be further dispersed" (Heidegger 2008, 422 [371]). As Dasein putters on in its boring everydayness, it may try and diversify its affairs so as to momentarily master the everyday, "but it can never," Heidegger insists, "extinguish it" (Heidegger 2008, 422 [371]). Following Heidegger, we learn that everydayness is both prevalent and permanent. Boring everydayness is our human condition, and since there is no overcoming boredom for Heidegger, all that is left is to embrace it (Nikulin 2022, 52). Boredom, as Dmitri Nikulin explains in *Critique of Bored Reason: On the Confinement of the Modern Condition* is "the assertion of life" (Nikulin 2022, 32), and out of boring average everydayness, philosophical inquiry into the how and what of that life can be awakened.

Everydayness is an average way of existing, and because of its capacity to reveal a snapshot of our shared quotidian existence, it is also popular, in all the senses of the word. But even though Heidegger described average everydayness as a dull suffering, it is strangely also a privilege. Women and queer people, as Halberstam observes, have always had a way of transcribing everyday life, but it is male authors who make the absence or presence of thinking, doubting, eating, shitting, or fucking into Big, marketable ideas (Halberstam 2022, 190). In their ventriloquial essay "My Struggle: Confessions of a Tall Aryan White Man – Volume 7 or Nothing According to Karl Ove Knausgaard," Halberstam highlights the somewhat excessive average everydayness of one of our most loved contemporary literary heroes: Karl Ove Knausgård, while also emphasizing the discrepancies that haunt his magnum opus *Min kamp* (2009–2011). Knausgård's Big books portray his small, everyday experiences, as well as the tepid adventures of his small, flaccid penis. Despite this, Knausgård's everydayness reaches a heroic status by the sheer size of his auto-ethnographic Work, which comes in six big parts. True, Good, Real: thus constituting what Luce Irigaray has called the parody of capital letters (Irigaray 1985, 365).

In the potential seventh tome, Halberstam intimates the continuation of Knausgård's *oeuvre*:

...my books were big—not just big in terms of their impact but physically big, blocks of words and paper, virtually impossible to carry around in a backpack. When stacked side by side, they were huge, big tomes brimming with, well, everything. Yes, my books were big and my name was on them, therefore I was big. I wanted to shout this truth to the world—I am big, these books represent me and they are better than anything else that has been written on the topic of me. (Halberstam 2022, 192)

Due to his obsession with size, Knausgård follows in the footsteps of many great writers, as well as philosophers (such as Heidegger [not to mention Friedrich Hegel, who was payed by word, which is why he wrote so much, so big]). Reading Knausgård–Halberstam, we remark that judgement seems to be suspended in favor of average everydayness, yet such mediocrity is a privilege reserved for dominant societal groups. “Thank god I am a white man,” Knausgård sighs through the mouth of Halberstam, “and I don’t have to engage in the tiresome jockeying for position that marks the work of homosexuals and women. No, a white man can just sit down and write and he writes his way into the whole world!” (Halberstam 2022, 194) We are all supposed to be able to relate to Knausgård’s struggles with premature ejaculation and forbidden desire for his young students with fantastic breasts (Halberstam 2022, 191–192), but the experience of those who possess fantastic breasts is seen as extra-ordinary. As not so very average everydayness. As proof of an exceptional form of life that it is impossible to relate to. This we might call the tragedy of diminutive life-forms.

2. Mr. Big

Who can guarantee to us that man in this present-day self-conception has not raised some mediocre aspect of himself to the status of a god? (Heidegger 1995, 22)

Mr. Big is born on April 7, 1955, and seven, according to numerology, is the most masculine number. Those with personality types who align

with the mystical qualities of the number seven are analytical, introspective, and perceptive. Born on the 7th, one is born to be big like Big. Mr. Big is called Mr. Big because he is rich and powerful. He has a big personality, and he is tall, big. He will be the next Donald Trump, Samantha exclaims in the first episode of *Sex and the City*, which aired on June 6, 1998. Carrie deems him way out of her league, and as they eventually start to date, she consequently calls him Big, and he calls her kid; two different leagues indeed. Throughout the series, Big and kid date on and off, and each season is loaded with a particular set of drama: Big is unable to emotionally commit so kid breaks it off; Big and kid start dating again although nothing seems to have changed on the emotional dedication front; Big gets married to another (even younger) woman; Big misses kid's messy hair and personality and they eventually embark upon an affair; the affair is disclosed which leads to kid's breakup from boyfriend Aiden and Big's from wife Natasha; Big moves to California; kid and Big eventually reunite toward the end of the sixth and final season.⁴ During the shows' last episode, which aired on February 22, 2004, Big's *real* name is revealed: John! John... John was supposed to play a larger role in the *Sex and the City* sequel *And Just Like That...* where he dies in the first episode. But since actor Chris Noth was accused of sexual assault by four different women, his subsequent planned dream-sequence appearances in the show were, like Noth himself, cancelled (Richardson 2023). Between 2004 and 2021, Big goes from sexy paragon to sexist perpetrator.

Like Big, Knausgård (in the voice of Halberstam) wants to be big ("Look, I want to say, I am big, I am Karl Ove, I am a writer, I can have sex for longer than 2 minutes" [Halberstam 2022, 196]), but unlike Big and despite #metoo, Knausgård remains a hero: a hero of the everyday. Knausgård's heroism consists in hiding small stories in enormous tomes. Knausgård, Halberstam writes, refuses to let nothing be nothing by making nothing into something; interludes into acts. The "alchemical process" that transforms the nothing of everyday life into something – "shit into gold" – is epitomized in the sixth volume of *Min kamp*, where Knausgård "goes on a 400-page detour into the life and times of

Adolf Hitler, in order to justify calling his autobiography *My Struggle/Mein Kampf*” (Halberstam 2022, 191). This deviation through fascism, Halberstam argues, is fascist. It “pulls Knausgaard out of the realm of nothing and places him firmly in the world of accumulation, profit, commodity and, yes, white supremacy” (Halberstam 2022, 191). Through the distorted lens of the white male looking-glass – or rather, magnifying-glass – small becomes Big, impotent potent, and nothing something. Mediocre aspects of the self, as Heidegger worried, become divinized. But even though cis men are the sole inheritors of the *vita activa*, they are *also* able to revel in passive modalities to a significantly higher degree than feminine, queer, and other diminutive beings. They rest, relax, are bored, loiter, sleep, dream... They have more access to activity, but also to passivity, at least to the kind of passivity that comes from the inside.

3. Frontal passivity, lateral passivity, radical passivity

In his lectures on passivity held at the Collège de France in Paris during the spring semester of 1955, Maurice Merleau-Ponty made a crucial distinction between inside-passivity, which he calls lateral, and outside-passivity, which he calls frontal.⁵ When we sleep, rejoice in erotic pleasure, or stroll without a determined aim, it is lateral passivity that is at play. When an external force or person controls our movements, restricts them, it is frontal passivity that plagues us. Passivity becomes pacifying when it is external to one’s own nature. As Fiona Hughes explains in her reading of Merleau-Ponty: “‘passivity’ does not involve being acted on by an external or alien force, which is a common sense of being passive. Passivity is an ‘involvement in,’ rather than a ‘being caused by’” (Hughes 2013, 4). The passivity that Merleau-Ponty places at the heart of his ontology is lateral instead of frontal; it emanates from within rather than imposes itself from without. These two aspects of passivity are never clearly separated, but often experienced at the same time, by the same subject. Lateral passivity, Merleau-Ponty insists, cannot be undertaken as a project by the active ego, as this would entail reducing passivity to agency.⁶ Instead, the subject needs to submit to the passivity that always-already pertains to human (and all earthly) life.

In their 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam offers another account of passivity which is named “radical passivity.” “Radical” as well as “masochistic” passivity critiques, Halberstam writes, “the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity”, as well as “opts out of certain systems built around a dialectic between colonizer and colonized” (Halberstam 2011, 131). Passivity refuses to reproduce the ideology promoted by colonial and neoliberal states, and it also resists traditional feminist politics marked by decisions made by a coherent ego, and acts planned by an integrated self. Aiming to create an alternative feminist project, *The Queer Art of Failure* seeks to sever traditional oedipal genealogies, where the subject develops its ego in relation to a normative maternal bond. Passivity, for Halberstam, marks a form of negativity or negation and can lead the way to an alternative, antisocial feminism (Halberstam 2011, 129). Halberstam turns to passivity in order to reimagine selfhood, yet in the end, radical passivity marks a refusal to be as such (Halberstam 2011, 124).

Even though contemporary readers of Merleau-Ponty have emphasized the political potential in lateral passivity,⁷ Halberstam’s account of radical passivity has an explicit political aim: to reimagine feminist politics beyond a universal subject and beyond traditional models of recognition and agency. Masochism is one way to access an understanding of this feminism, where the self not only severs its bond to the world by drifting off into impossible pain, humiliation, and humility, but where the subject’s very selfhood also becomes fundamentally altered. Similar to Merleau-Ponty who was worried about actively assuming passive modalities, of for example trying to will oneself to sleep – which we all know is impossible – Halberstam is wary of using masochism as a way of transforming the self, which would also submit a passive experience to an active ideology. To be passive means to lose control, to lose one’s way, to loosen the binds that make up one’s “official personality” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 149). In this way, passivity is incompatible with traditional political projects, projections, productions.

Instead of outlining a new ethical and political program, Halberstam is interested in how the subject fails at undertaking such agendas.

Masochism, and sex in general, is not for Halberstam a self-improving moral act, but an experience that needs to be unthought “as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation,” in order to “think it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming conduct” (Halberstam 2011, 145). Failure, for Halberstam, is not negative as in bad, but it is negative by marking a style of life that is dissident and anti-ontological. Failure is a fundamental way in which modern capital(ist) being is, and recognizing the prevalence of failure for modern life is the first step toward reimagining it as a political lifestyle.

4. I fail, therefore I am

Success and failure are constitutive states of capitalist states, as Halberstam states (Halberstam 2011, 88). Contrary to the beliefs marketed by the American dream, failure is a truer way of describing modern life than success. Behind every success story, an abundance of failures prevail. To fail – following a capitalist logic of scarcity – is infinitely more common than to succeed, but much less known. Failure is an experience or a way of life that we tend to speak of only in the past tense, against a thick backdrop of success. Failure needs to be qualified: it needs to be successful in order to be allowed to be at all in our contemporary contest-driven culture. Failure, as Halberstam writes, leaves no record: those who fail do not publish big books, or any books. There is no archive of failure. There is, Halberstam notes, citing Ann Cvetkovich, an archive of the feelings associated with it: “rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, over investment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment” (Halberstam 2011, 110). These feelings belong to a form of passivity that rather than “revolutionary” hinge on another synonym for “radical”: desperate. Desperate passivity is felt in what Halberstam names a “homeopathic refusal to speak” (Halberstam 2011, 130). A form of self-reducing cure of the big subject and its compulsory “fulfillment, recognition, and achievement” (Halberstam 2011, 130).

Even though *The Queer Art of Failure* draws on non-standard academic sources to address negativity, passivity, and failure, it does recognize

and fulfill standard academic formal rules. Each animated movie, and each more or less obscure performance piece or artwork is dated, cited. More a thesis in form than a fragment. Its style achieves coherency, and – as far as i can tell – fails only once, which is in the case of Luce Irigaray, who also appears in the book only once, in the chapter about nazis:

Sedgwick is responding to what she perceives to be both a popular and a feminist tendency to conflate the Nazis with homosexual community, a tendency that can be found in the work of theorists such as Luce Irigaray as well as in popular form in films like Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1969) and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970). (Halberstam 2011, 155)

Unlike Visconti's and Bertolucci's films which are dated, cited, we are provided with no information as to where it might be that Irigaray "conflates the Nazis with homosexual community". Halberstam invokes, but refuses to speak with Irigaray: she does not appear in Halberstam's bibliography. This is a failure in need of desperate repair.

Halberstam suggests that somewhere in her vast corpus, Irigaray – and other unnamed "theorists such as" her – conflates the Nazis with "homosexual community". My best guess is that Halberstam alludes to what Irigaray says about *hommo*-sexuality in *This Sex Which is Not One* (although there is no talk of nazis there...). Against phallogocentrism or *hommo*-sexuality – which is a concept spelled with two m's to reproduce the spelling of *homme* in French – Irigaray argues for the elaboration of a hetero-sexuality. Here we need to bracket our understanding to not only perceive the colloquial meaning of these words, but also intuit their Ancient Greek heritage where hetero (from ἕτερος, *héteros*) means other, another, different, and homo (from ὁμός, *homós*) means same. For Irigaray, Western culture and thought has never admitted the existence of more than one gender: everything is but a reflection of the same, man. This is what she strives to create: a true sexual difference, thus hetero meaning different, rather than homo signifying at the same time sameness and maleness.

In the essay “Commodities among Themselves,” Irigaray acknowledges that hommo-sexuality is prescribed by a symbolic order where homosexuality is proscribed:

The ‘other’ homosexual relations, masculine ones, are just as subversive, so they too are forbidden. *Because they openly interpret the law according to which society operates*, they threaten in fact to shift the horizon of that law. Besides, they challenge the nature, status, and ‘exogamic’ necessity of the product of ex-change. By short-circuiting the mechanisms of commerce, might they also expose what is really at stake? Furthermore, they might lower the sublime value of the standard, the yard-stick. Once the penis itself becomes merely a means to pleasure, pleasure among men, *the phallus loses its power*. (Irigaray 1985, 193, original emphasis)

By taking a mere interest in the penis of other men – in pleasure rather than commerce – homosexual men devalue the symbolic status of that ruler. There is, Irigaray says here, something subversive about homosexual relations between men, and also about the homosocial bond between a father and his son. “Why is masculine homosexuality considered exceptional, then, when in fact the economy as a whole is based upon it? Why are homosexuals ostracized, when society postulates homosexuality? Unless it is because the ‘incest’ involved in homosexuality has to remain in the realm of pretense” (Irigaray 1985, 192, original emphasis). Within a hommo-sexual economy, the love between father and son can only surface through incest, which is taboo, which means that it cannot surface anywhere, except in language. This is why Irigaray pays so much attention to the symbolic realm.

By casting Irigaray as a straw woman for bad popular feminism, Halberstam refuses to listen and fails to recognize that they have more in common with Irigaray than they might think. Not only is Irigaray deeply invested in rethinking relationality beyond oedipality (like Halberstam); in finding a new grammar for feminism (like Halberstam), but Irigaray is also an exceptionally skilled ventriloquist (like Halberstam!), which becomes obvious to any reader of *Speculum de l’autre femme*

(a book that has caused much discussion and drama, but that “no one has actually read” [Irigaray 1995, 352]). Halberstam’s masochistic feminism looks for a new voice, perhaps a passive voice (Halberstam 2011, 144), that could become inspired by Irigaray’s heterosexual utopia, which is expressed in a feminine voice unknown (unknowable) to the hommo-sexual syntax. The dissonance, dissent, drama, and disorder of Halberstam’s discourse on failure is steeped in average, everyday examples of being, but it also aims for the extra-ordinary, for utopian narratives that exceed the ideals formulated by “the active voice of Western feminism” (Halberstam, 2011, 128), for what Irigaray has described as an abundant passive resistance:

Exchanges without identifiable terms, without accounts, without end... Without additions and accumulations, one plus one, woman after woman. Without sequence or number. Without standard or yardstick. *Red blood* and *sham* would no longer be differentiated by deceptive envelopes concealing their worth. Use and exchange would be indistinguishable. The greatest value would be at the same time the least kept in reserve. Nature’s resources would be expended without depletion, exchanged without labor, freely given, exempt from masculine transactions: enjoyment without a fee, well-being without pain, pleasure without possession. As for all the strategies and savings, the appropriations tantamount to theft and rape, the laborious accumulation of capital, how ironic all that would be.

Utopia? Perhaps. Unless this mode of exchange has undermined the order of commerce from the beginning—while the *necessity of keeping incest in the realm of pure pretense* has stood in the way of a certain economy of abundance. (Irigaray 1985, 197, original emphasis)

Irigaray’s abundance is foreign to the capitalist logic of surplus production, it exists outside of the hommo-sexual economy. Her mode of exchange is not premised on winners and losers, but wholly “exempt from masculine transactions”. Because Halberstam’s exchange with Iri-

garay fails at being anything but transactional, everyone loses, both fail. Irigaray fails – as she has failed so many times before in the eyes and minds of psychoanalysts, philosophers, and American feminists – as a result of being too obscure, too poetic, too feminine, too much⁸ – and Halberstam fails to listen, and fails at letting Irigaray be heard. This failure opens the space of questions not asked: What if Irigaray would venture into a real exchange with Halberstam, what might she sound like in their voice? This is untrodden place. Utopia? Perhaps. But how iconic all that would be.

5. Impotence

For nothing characteristically human has the capacity to engage in continuous activity. (Aristotle 1980, 1175a4-5)

Passivity is intimately, ontologically, linked to impotence. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle displays this link by developing an account of potentiality, which encompasses both the potential to be and the potential not to be. In Aristotle's cosmos, teleology is a strong, structuring force, but in the case of potentiality (δύναμις; *dúnamis*), it is not always subsumed into the arch of actuality (ἐνέργεια; *enérgeia*). Sometimes potentiality remains impotent. In book Θ of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle develops his argument about δύναμις by critiquing the philosophical school of the Megarians. For the Megarians, everything that a capacity is not at present exercising is impossible, which means that “what is standing will always stand, and what is seated will always be seated; for being seated it will not get up; for it is impossible for something not capable of getting up to get up” (Aristotle 2006, 1047a15-17). Given the identification of presence with possibility and absence with impossibility, these actualists end up collapsing δύναμις and ἐνέργεια and obliterate the difference between them. This collapse, Aristotle writes, “is no small thing” (Aristotle 2006, 1047a20). It is a big thing.

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* shows great care for the impossible. Because δύναμις is not reducible to ἐνέργεια, Aristotle recognizes that mul-

multiple opportunities and ways of being lay open for δύναμις. But, the fact that many things could take place does not mean that everything can. Toward the end of chapter 3, Aristotle summarizes his position on potentiality in relation to the notions of possibility and impossibility:

And this is what is possible—that for which, if the actuality of which it is said to have the capacity obtains, there will be nothing impossible. I mean, for example, if it is possible for it to sit and it can sit, should sitting belong to it, there will be nothing impossible. And likewise in the case of being changed or changing or standing or making stand or being or coming to be or not being or not coming to be. (Aristotle 2006, 1047a24–29)

Impossibility entails the possibility of potentiality to be or not be. Thus, rather than saying that everything is possible, Aristotle defends the importance of impossibility: the sides of a triangle are not potentially the same as those of a square.⁹ There are limits to the potential, and these limits are set by potentiality itself. When Aristotle says that the possible is that which is not impossible, our understanding needs to first work its way through that which seems apparently clear, until it arrives at what appears impossibly obscure. As Heidegger shows in his reading of Aristotle, only in this obscurity can we reencounter the meaning intended by Aristotle before it has been simplified by “the judgement passed by the history of philosophy” (Heidegger 1995, 68). It is only in that ground, or underground, that the possible and the impossible refer back to the same thing without contradiction: that thing is δύναμις.

While tending to the importance of impossibility, Aristotle still tends to relate δύναμις to ἐνέργεια. It is the necessity of this teleological orientation toward actuality that Giorgio Agamben reimagines in his reading of potency and impotence. Instead of coupling δύναμις with ἐνέργεια, Agamben places passivity at the heart of potentiality: a passivity that submits only to itself:

The potential welcomes non-Being, and this welcoming of non-Being is potentiality, fundamental passivity. It is passive potentiality, but not a

passive potentiality that undergoes something other than itself; rather, it undergoes and suffers its own non-Being. (Agamben 1999, 182)

The hospitality of potentiality has the capacity to imagine a passivity that is not the other of activity and that answers only to itself. It is a manifold place harboring a multitude of possibilities and ways of existing. Actuality allows only presence or enactment, whereas potentiality encompasses coming to be, ceasing to be, letting be, and letting not be. Because what is potential can both be and not be, potentiality carries within itself what Agamben calls a privation. However, this privation does not signify mere lack, but “the presence of an absence” (Agamben 1999, 179). In light of its capacity to not be, the potential thus carries within itself the possibility to not become actual. The absence within being that the presence of potentiality institutes is not imposed from the outside, but always emanates from within. Agamben writes: “To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, to be in relation to one’s own incapacity” (Agamben 1999, 182). This lack harbors hospitality; it generates space.

The independence accorded to δύναμις bears important consequences not only for ontology, but also for ethics and politics. Δύναμις understood as potency, power, and domination is a perverted form of its originary meaning as possibility and passivity. Tending to the intimate ties between potentiality and passivity, Aristotle – in Agamben’s reading – reveals an aspect of human life to which Western thought has remained oblivious. The privilege of potency over impotence has turned into a destructive yet prevailing ideology in the Western world “to the point of imposing its power over the whole planet” (Agamben 1999, 177). Agamben’s assertion resonates ever more strongly today than it did in 1999 when his anthology *Potentialities* was published, but to reimagine this political ideology preoccupied with ability, we need to become attentive to the value of inability. Doing so, passivity – lateral passivity – comes to the fore as a necessary way of life.

Impotence evokes not only lack of power or weakness, but also erectile dysfunction or sterility. As Emanuela Bianchi points out, Agamben fails

to acknowledge the gendered connotations that inevitably are attached to “impotence” (Bianchi 2014, 221). Ignorance with regard to the sexed aspects of δύναμις and ἀδύναμια is all the more striking because they are also the main ways in which these forces are exemplified by Aristotle: “The primary referent of Aristotelian *adunamia* is, like that of the English ‘impotence,’ a lack of generative power, or sexual *dunamis*, on the part of the male”¹⁰ (Bianchi 2014, 211). For Aristotle, ἀδύναμια is a privation (στέρησις; *steriseis*), which can be absent by nature or by force (Aristotle 2006, 1045a29–36). For example, the feminine contribution to generation – which for Aristotle is menstrual fluid – *naturally lacks* the principle of soul; woman is essentially impotent. If δύναμις is interpreted as power and potency and ἐνέργεια as fulfillment and perfection, then they both hold masculine connotations in an Aristotelian understanding. Man occupies both active and passive life, and accordingly, the only modality that remains for the feminine is ἀδύναμια – lack and privation.¹¹ However, if δύναμις is placed alongside a passivity that exceeds the bounds of activity, then we may develop a feminine way-of-being that is not merely privative. So, even though Agamben’s emphasis on potentiality opens up a parenthesis in our habitual modern understanding of subjectivity, he forgets the gendered dimensions of potency and impotence. Dimensions that Bob Flanagan, in his *Pain Journal* as well as in his *Fuck Journal*, painfully remembers.

6. mr. small

We fuck after a terrible day of nothingness. Me on top, her hands around my neck, choking me into a shaking, quivering come. (Flanagan 1987, 11)

As is true for every phenomenon that pertains to passivity, sex is ambiguous. Bob Flanagan – masochist par excellence – lived this ambiguity. Flanagan describes his everyday existence as torn between different forms of pain, and their own agonizing absences and presences. While being subjected to involuntary chronic pain from cystic fibrosis, he simultaneously expresses his desire for pain as a masochist. *The Pain*

Journal is Flanagan's diary – intended for publication – from December 27, 1994 until December 16, 1995, concluding shortly before his passing. In *The Pain Journal*, Flanagan writes about the symptoms of his illness, about stays at the hospital, about his various art projects – he was a poet, writer, and multimedia artist – about life at home with his partner and domina Sheree Rose, about problems of sleep and pain, and about potency and impotence. Sickness and masochism are indistinguishable in Flanagan's experience. Sickness, as he writes in his self-authored obituary, is in fact “the backbone of his work and his masochism” (Flanagan 2000, 104), and Flanagan also partially attributes his resilience and strength – his survival beyond anyone's expectations – to his masochism. The threat or possibility of non-being pertaining to masochistic passivity that Halberstam alluded to is the horizon that Flanagan's life continually rubs up against. In an interview from *Bob Flanagan: Super-masochist*, Flanagan tells us the following story about the contradictions and possibilities haunting his pain:

My mother said that when I was a baby and really sick in the hospital, they had to stick needles in my chest to draw fluid out. I was always thrashing around and fighting (I was in pain), so the doctors tied my hands and feet to the bed so I wouldn't hurt myself. And that's still one of my favorite positions to be in: flat on the bed, tied up.
(Flanagan 1993, 12)

Flanagan's diary displays that there are no strict boundaries separating play from reality or pain from pain. Masochism is not a mere suspension of reality, but its distorted reflection. An image that inadvertently, yet effectively, can alter the mirror itself. Flanagan would approach, even heal, the pain of his illness with self-authorized pain. Curing nothingness with nothingness. The tensions between reality and fantasy haunt play, but they also mark a contradiction that, at least for Flanagan, was generative. Contrary to Halberstam who wanted to escape from seeing sex as “connection and liberation,” Flanagan's diaries suggest that there is transformative, therapeutic potential in subspace and bottomness.

Flanagan cultivates the value of impotence while recalling the defunct erectility that lies at its core. To come, for Flanagan, is possible, but it is “a pathetic form of coming” (Flanagan 2000, 43–44). Flanagan misses his erection when it is absent, yet when it is present, it marks the presence of an absence. Rather than heroic, Flanagan’s potency is pathetic. Pathetic is an adjective stemming from the Ancient Greek παθητικός (*pathētikós*), which means capacity to feel, which in turn means that patheticism inevitably is a way of being that we all share in. Pathetic can be mobilized as an insult due to its contemporary cultural status, but it can also, as Eileen Myles writes, be a badge of distinction (Myles 2022, xiii). In the volume *Pathetic Literature*, Myles has collected texts that speak of and to pathetic experiences, as an ode to the small, pitiable side of life. To be pathetic, for Myles, is to “be ready for ruin” (Myles 2022, xiv), to revel in porosity and refuse the illusory hardness of human liminality (of skin and flesh). Patheticism challenges the common understanding of agency as the only way to be ethically and politically. A pathetic ethic is a living ethos modeled on a passive subject: the i.

In a July 1995 letter to Ed Smith – another poet that Flanagan has previously conversed with on SM, but whose views on the topic he deems ignorant yet amusing, he writes:

[W]hen one is as devoted a slave as i indeed was (notice the lower case “I”) the psychological commitment to the top and the sole desire to please the top is the number one concern. This obsession on the erection is banal, and, to be quite honest, truly boring. And as far as this issue of control is concerned, self control is the ultimate discipline, as long as one knows the difference between controlling one’s self and controlling others. Apparently you do not. (Flanagan 2000, 135)

Contrary to Smith, Flanagan holds that the bottom undergoes a deep psychological quest for self-control that ultimately allows him to become a limited self, a small consciousness: an i. This self-discipline vastly differs from an ideology of potency that always extends the control of one’s self to the control of others. Obsession on the erection is boring, but

obsession on self-reduction is generative, ethically as well as politically. When we dwell on the side of patheticism rather than agency, new political models may begin to open up. Ways of being that are neither pure negations nor pure force, but that carve out room for understanding collective resistance beyond dualisms of success and failure, agency and pathos. In lieu of the ideology marketed by the potent ἐραστής (*erastēs*) who both enters and exits his intercourses intact and proud, Flanagan teaches us to nurture our diminutive i's. Bottomness, for Flanagan, is a form of self-reduction reliant upon self-control. The bottom artfully, carefully, modifies its own self so as to expertly, erotically, serve the other.

Flanagan's *Pain Journal* and *Fuck Journal* are testaments to a small, average everyday existence, filed with what Chris Kraus in her foreword to *The Pain Journal* calls "banal minutiae" (Flanagan 2000, 7). Flanagan's record of the everyday does not make small Big, but reveals life as diminutive, pathetic. Shit is not turned into gold. It is, however, turned into art. At the end of April in 1995, Sheree is out of town, which prompts Flanagan to revisit the thought of trying to eat his own shit. "But it's so disgusting. Auto-humiliation" (Flanagan 2000, 44). Shit-eating is the "ultimate degradation" (Flanagan 2000, 45). Nonetheless, or therefore, Flanagan creates an elaborate plan where he fully restrained in bondage will need to eat his way through a pile of shit in order to release a string that will allow a set of keys to drop which in turn will allow him to unlock his shackles. Both succeeding his "experiment with excrement" and failing it would leave Flanagan feeling humiliated (Flanagan 2000, 47). But not doing it "would make me a failure. It's hard enough being such a weirdo. I don't want to be a failed weirdo" (Flanagan 2000, 45). No one wants to fail, but lack of failure can't be willed, as it marks a way of being that belongs to possibility and impossibility. The rectum, for Flanagan, is not a grave but a treasure chest filled with possibilities and impossibilities, which means that in some ways, shit is gold, after all. Shit is, at least, a serious game that unveils the ethico-political stakes of Flanagan's art, which refuses to separate humility from humiliation, to sanitize passive experiences. To be pathetic, humiliated, might not be

exactly what Halberstam longed for in their discussion of radical passivity and its methodology of failure, since it doesn't extinguish the self, but it does diminish it. Patheticism is less a refusal of being and more a new ontology, gleaming with a gentle political potential.

7. Lowlives

The interludes that make up this text have made a case for small life. They have shown that small life, by way of letting nothing be nothing, generates another way of being in relation to the other. Bob Flanagan's life and art has served as the paradigmatic example for this style of being. Flanagan's ethics of submission echoes what I have called patheticism. To be pathetic is to acknowledge one's permeability: rather than Big and hard, patheticism understands the self as prone to porosity. Patheticism pays heed to small life, but also to low life. Low lives, as Jack Halberstam has shown, feel permeable, and they sound like small whimpers as opposed to big bangs: "Perhaps it is always better, *pace* T. S. Eliot, to work toward the whimper rather than the bang, if only because 'bang' narratives are almost always, even when describing self-shattering, to use Foucault's cliché-resistant phrase, 'to the speaker's benefit'" (Halberstam 2011, 150). Colloquially, lowlives live lives that are deemed morally dubious, but these interludes have shown that – at least morally – lowlives are better. To the listeners' benefit.

Low, Halberstam explains, indicates something small: "I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse; I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies" (Halberstam 2011, 21). By inhabiting the adverse, low theory doesn't only become what high theory isn't, but it also upsets the binary as such. Low theory, Halberstam writes, does not make us better people, but "might offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing" (Halberstam 2011, 20–21). Like low theory, low living offers other, strange ways of being and knowing, but living on the diminutive side of life also does

makes us better people. Against normative models of hyper-masculinity which has plagued straight life – as we saw with Mr. Big, as well as gay life, as Halberstam has shown in their discussion of homosexuality and fascism (Halberstam 2011, chapter 5) – an ethics of impotence purports another masculinity, a faltering *i*. When the *i* is diminished, the other can be augmented. When the *i* is smaller, embraces its passivity, failure, average everydayness, and impotence, it leaves more room for the other to grow.

Mr. small is our teacher on lowlives and all things small. His lesson is that there is a difference between controlling one's self and controlling others. His *i* gestures toward an ethics and a politics of reduction that makes space for others; other subjects, other animals, plants, rocks. His self-control evokes an ethics of impotence that bottoms have perfected since antiquity. To expertly undergo does historically pertain to those who have been forced to submit – to the ἐρώμενος – but it is a horizon open also to those who are accustomed to claim their selves by way of the upper cases.

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NOTES

1. Luce Irigaray demonstrates the conflation between neutrality and masculinity in Western thought in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985).
2. In their translator’s introduction to *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Gregory Fried and Richard Polt explain Dasein as: “that being for whom Being itself is at issue, for whom Being is its question. For the most part, in Heidegger, this being is us, the human being, although Dasein is not *equivalent* to human beings; Heidegger insists that Dasein is not an anthropological, psychological, or biological concept.” Dasein is “a condition into which human beings enter, either individually or collectively, at a historical juncture when Being becomes an issue for them [...]” (Heidegger 2000, xi–xii).
3. “‘Everydayness’”, Heidegger writes, “manifestly stands for that way of existing in which Dasein maintains itself ‘every day’ [‘all Tage’]. And yet this ‘every day’ does not signify the sum of those ‘days’ which have been allotted to Dasein in its ‘lifetime’. Though this ‘every day’ is not to be understood calendrically, there is still an overtone of some such temporal character on the signification of the ‘everyday’ [‘Alltag’]. But what we have primarily in mind in the expression ‘everydayness’ is a definite ‘*how*’ of existence by which Dasein is dominated through and through ‘for life’ [‘*zeitlebens*’]”. (Heidegger 2008, 422 [370]).
4. See *Sex and the City*, season 1–6 (Darren Star 1998–2004).
5. “Passivity [is] not frontal, toward another *I*, but congenital to the *I*...” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 191)
6. See for example the discussion on sleep (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 142).

7. See for example Alia Al-Saji's work on passivity and hesitation (Al-Saji 2012).
8. Not only was Irigaray fired from her post at Paris 8 University and ostracized from the Freudian school in Paris upon publishing her dissertation in philosophy, *Speculum de l'autre femme* ("Je—Luce Irigaray: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray," 1995), but she has also been charged by a number of American feminists since the 1980s for propagating an essentialist understanding of gender. Because of her style, which absolves the difference between form and content, philosophers and feminists alike have deemed her texts inaccessible, overly complex, obscure, elitist, or simply impossible to read. For a discussion on Irigaray and essentialism, see for example Naomi Schor's "This Essentialism which Is Not One" (1994).
9. See Θ_4 for other examples of Aristotle's account of possibility and impossibility.
10. Heidegger also obscures the sexual difference at play in Aristotle's metaphysics in his account of privation (Bianchi 2014, 212–213).
11. As Bianchi shows: "[...] while completeness and perfection may be easily marked as masculine, and incompleteness and lack as feminine, *dunamis* is not the simple obverse or privation of completion. Rather, as possibility, potential, capacity, and power, *dunamis* also falls on the side of the masculine. In *Generation of Animals*, we find that the male possesses great power or potency (*megalên dunamin*), while the female is frequently characterized by her lack of *dunamis*: *adunamia*" (Bianchi 2014, 185–186).