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RUSSELL FORD

INTRODUCTION: WHY CALDER?

Richard Calder's *Dead* trilogy depicts a world in which the force of pornography has broken free of its moorings in an existing set of social practices and is overpowering all other competing representational codes (from the implicit norms of quotidian fashion to the psychological norms of individual behavior and the social norms of political life). Through the creation of a particular sort of literary catastrophe, the trilogy demonstrates that the power of pornography in itself harbors its own subversion; it is a virus whose success risks destroying the condition of its very existence. On the one hand, composed of easily-recognizable elements of contemporary science fiction, the trilogy ought to be all-too-familiar: the gynoids (hypersexualized artificial women) that are simultaneously feared and desired; the theme of utopia (both in the protagonist's fantasies and the future as an idealized instantiation of a scientist's dreams); its grotesquely—even baroquely—sexualized violence; to say nothing of the plots and counterplots, the familiar cyberpunk backdrop, the hero(es) and heroine(s). On the other hand, despite these figures and tropes, despite even Calder's explicit assurance that this fantastic story is the reader's own fantasy—writing of the central character Primavera (first, or primary, truth) that “she was the dream of the age” (*Dead* 11)—the trilogy is unsettling, even uncanny. Its pages are populated with a seemingly inexhaustible stream of caricatures and avatars of a violent sexuality, characters and places that form an overwhelming pornographic tableau. These “psychoids” as Calder calls them—entities that are no more than the substantialization of phantasmatic desires, erotic stereotypes, and culturally coded libidinal paths—disturb the reader with their insistence. There is very little in the way of a countervailing reality that

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interrupts Calder's world of dramatized sexuality, his dead world. In this respect Calder's trilogy works as a parable of pornography, a story that draws its lesson by following to its logical conclusion the pornographic fusion of eroticism and violent death.

Where does this deathly desire come from? For Calder, the idea that there is a causal relation between the physical and moral health of an individual is a characteristic symptom of the Enlightenment.¹ Historically, this idea is most evident in the preoccupation with moral physiology—evidenced by the extensive literature on the hazards of masturbation—that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The underlying preoccupation here is over how the free citizens of now-democratic nations might be justly compelled to adhere to certain behavioral norms. A ready answer is that thoughts that contribute to some objectively measurable negative effect can rightfully be curtailed to some degree. However, the specification of such thoughts gave rise to vigorous debate and, at the extreme, to the deliberately provocative creation of art and literature with an emphatically and morbidly erotic form: the so-called decadence at the end of the nineteenth century. This literature is a symptom, a moment in the ongoing debate concerning the seemingly intractable problem of how to resolve the fundamental friction between the individual liberties and societal responsibilities.² Calder's *Dead* trilogy, as the narrative of the desire-plague of pornography ("Meta"), attempts to follow to its utmost conclusion the desirous force that animates the pornographic resistance to the Enlightenment. In Calder's text, everything—individual psyches, clothing, bodies, even whole cities and social realities—is assimilated by a homogenizing sexual desire into a stable economy populated by individuals whose imaginative powers have been externalized into a system of control.³

STRATEGY AND CATASTROPHE

Imagine a world in which the most private and guarded sexual desires are made public—are shared—where what is desired is not only made real but made law. What if the resulting world was a disappointment? What if some of its inhabitants found that the realization and instantiation of their desire was in fact not what they desired? How could they escape this creation of *their own desire*? How could they even desire escape *from desire*? Such is the problem that organizes the parable of pornography. It faces the immediate problem of becoming a farce, of allowing its exaggerations to win out, as it were, and then failing to offer any instruction—in other words, it risks itself becoming simply another piece of pornography. Calder avoids this danger through an attention to form and rhetoric that is even more careful than his development of the plot and that is certainly unusual for what seems to be merely a piece of genre fiction. He recognizes that the problem confronting

a parable of pornography is that it risks becoming a dead letter, a lesson without force, because its reader has been taken in or seduced by a deliberate exaggeration that appears normal. Calder is quite literally writing to make his book ineffective. The danger that his pornographic parable is continually skirting is that of becoming merely another piece of pornographic writing. The *Dead* trilogy exists only by repeating caricatured erotic elements of genre-fiction and, if Calder's *détournement* is ineffective, the trilogy will join their ranks. This danger is emphasized literally within the text when it is revealed that Calder's trilogy is responsible for the desire-plague. In order to operate, Calder's parable must successfully differentiate the free possibility of desire from its projected caricature. This is a substantial task for a first-time genre author but, as the narrative complexity increases and the text is forced to repeatedly double back on and revise—even rewrite—itsself, it becomes apparent that Calder's parable is determined to persevere, to complete its instruction and to face up to the aporetic threat of its theme or thesis.⁴

Like Bataille, one of his acknowledged influences, Calder writes in a style that contests the mastery of both the sovereign author and the narratively unified text. The dialectic of desire, so clearly and comprehensively elaborated by Hegel, calls upon a logic of the limit and transgression, a logic that permits the cyclical recovery of the different through the work of the identical, the self-same, but that also circumscribes that cyclical production within the expressiveness of language. A practice of disappearance and contestation, writing frustrates this dialectical progression. In modernist writing, the writer is subjected to the movement of language in the text, disappears as an external agent, ceasing to exist as an anterior guarantee of meaning. This practice challenges not a particular value or set of mores but is a transgressive act that exposes to critique the formal nature of values as such. Calder's text contests pornography not as a social issue but as the figuration of the dominant discourse of desire; its stylistic contortions are the movement of sexuality in language that, through writing, force the reader into an aporetic and transgressive experience of the limits of pornography's dialectical desire.

Early on, the protagonist recalls that "in history class they taught you of times before love had become indistinguishable from pornography" (23). The narrator's awareness of the distinction between love and pornography severely complicates any straightforward reading of Calder's trilogy as a prescriptive intervention in critical social discussions of gender and sexuality.⁵ The protagonist knows that he has been compromised, knows that there is a counter-memory, a time to which desire aims to return, but is equally aware that advocating this return could only ever be the valorization of a particular narrative, one that would then serve as a new projection, necessarily foreclosing ethical possibilities.⁶ For that near-mythical past to be attained by desire would amount to its subordination to the present—in other words it would cease to be different from this present—unless it can be refigured

as a time essentially refractory to desire itself, a time of as-yet-unrealized possibility. In an interview, Calder describes writing as the “promise of being consumed by the alien” where the alien is not just some other thing but something so other that it is as-yet-unrealized. Writing is a practice that allows one to forget the persistent desire that shapes the future according to a remembered past and, then, allows one to recollect the future as what makes possible the desire that sutures the present and past into a continuous narrative. The form of this remembrance would replace the persistence that marks desire with the insistent intensity of wonder or joy. How can this shift from persistence to intensity be achieved, especially given the temporal constraints of the narrative form that privileges persistence from the outset? In order to resist and counter the formal power of narrative—which in Calder’s trilogy is closely allied to the dominant power of pornography—the text must somehow be turned back against itself such that it preserves its integrity as a narrative while also, through its own movement, opening out onto something that is refractory to the desire for (and of) narrative shaping. The world given form in and by the desirous narrative of pornography must fall apart and must do so precisely through its own formal power (Dick 262). Such a literary catastrophe resists the dominant pornographic power formations and structures by working to become powerless, by subverting any desirous agency (of the text, hero, or reader) before it can be constituted. Calder’s trilogy is such a literary catastrophe, a writing that narrates the breakdown of pornographic desire.

The danger of such a strategy is that the catastrophe will be sterile, that the impossible will be a sterile aporia. Such a threat is met by Calder with Ignatz Zwakh, a conceptual persona not only fabricated to resist the seductive forces of pornography but also implicated by the problematic structure of these forces.⁷ It is (literally) pornography’s power of acquiring non-fictional consistency that constitutes Calder’s protagonist, and it is Calder’s genius to accept this implication as a rule of the game, to resist the temptation to admit defeat by allowing some sort of *deus ex machina* to intervene and transform the text from smut to a sort of austere and moralizing chapbook. The perpetually shifting identity of Zwakh, his confusion and the breakdown of the various narrative worlds that he inhabits, the way that he is always struggling to catch up with the action of the novels, all of this shows that he is more protean than agonistic. He is the sort of character that we expect from Kafka or Philip K. Dick. If Primavera is the name of the problem posed by Calder’s text (what is the ground of desire if desire can only ever be a surface, a text?) then Ignatz is the name of the incipient concept whose endurance of the questioning of this problem yields, not a solution—or not one that would somehow be privileged, final, that would dialectically eliminate the problem—but rather a new path for thinking, for imagination, that insists in spite of the dead end of a too-deathly desire. The problem of pornography requires a solution in and of the imagination, a way for it to

break down the sterile blockage produced by its own activity. Calder's trilogy is a hybrid of fiction and philosophy, a form entailed by the dual problem of pornography (both affective and conceptual). The problem of the imaginative conjoining of sex and death requires the creation of a persona that demonstrates both the athleticism to endure the affective transformations of pornography as well as to create or construct a path of thought other than that of pornographic desire. Such an affective athleticism is traced by Zwakh as he passes through the zone of indetermination where his subjectivity becomes indistinguishable from the surface of desire—his passage from human to psychoid to text. To this trajectory is joined the creation of a concept counter to the conjunction of sex and death that organizes the psychoscape of pornography, a concept that is the shadowy other of pornography's appetitive desire and that Calder names "love." The *Dead* trilogy is at once a dismantling of the reader's imaginative investment in the narrative of pornography and the development of conceptual tools for the creation of a differently formed desire.

PORNOGRAPHIC COUNTER-TIME

Dead Girls, the first book of the trilogy, begins in the past. Its first lines: "They smashed through the door; I vaulted the balcony, running. It was midnight in Nongkhai City and I was lost. The story so far?" (3). From this snapshot with its frozen movement (wood splintering, curtains sweeping out an open window, a backdrop of darkness) the text reaches back to construct its history, its consistency, inviting the reader to become the memory of the narrator. The first pages are a dizzying info dump: characters and plot elements pile upon each other until the uncanny consistency of Calder's world begins to emerge. The teenage Ignatz Zwakh is being pursued by the Pikadon Twins, who have just broken through the door of his hotel room. The Twins are enforcers in the employ of Madame Kito, a kingpin in the criminal underworld of Bangkok who was also the employer of the now-AWOL Ignatz. Kito has tracked Ignatz down because his partner, the assassin Primavera Bobinski, refuses to work without Ignatz and now, unless he returns, Kito will return Primavera to London from which she fled along with Ignatz. There she will be summarily executed because she carries a highly contagious disease that has transformed her from a young girl into a cyborg with superhuman abilities. Unable to set aside his infatuation with Primavera, Ignatz returns to Kito's service and is immediately dispatched alongside Primavera to assassinate a rival crime lord. The assignment, however, is a trap and Ignatz and Primavera are captured by a group of CIA agents led by Jack Morgenstern.⁸ From Morgenstern, the two youths discover that their real importance to Kito (and others) is as pawns in a global political conspiracy. Heavily sedated, the narrative switches again to the past: Ignatz's life in London before he fled

with Primavera. It is with this second recollection that the voluminous facts and details that begin Calder's text start to cohere.

In the early twenty-first century, Europe's leading industries have elected not to compete with the nanotechnological companies of the Pacific Rim and instead devoted themselves to the manufacture of luxury items. The crowning jewel of these luxuries were the so-called "dolls": life-sized automatons that quickly became the most coveted symbol of Europe's decadent opulence. Toward the middle of the century, Cartier began to manufacture dolls whose mechanics were engineered on the quantum level. This pinnacle of creativity became the instrument of Europe's destruction when these quantum dolls are found to carry a nano-disease, transmitted through contact with human bodily fluids, that infects human males. The disease leaves the male unscathed at the macro level, but affects the female children of the infected males, in whom, at the onset of puberty, the nano-scale machines of the virus activate and begin to physically remake the body of the girl into that of a doll. The physical transformation is accompanied by the onset of an unquenchable desire to propagate the virus by cutting human males and passing the nano-virus into their blood, generally in the course of a ritually violent sexual tryst.

Primavera infects her schoolmate, Ignatz, and together the two children escape into the no-man's-land that rings a London placed under absolute quarantine to try to stem the spread of the "doll plague." There they find a subterranean city populated by dolls and ruled by Titania, one of the original Cartier dolls. Aided by Titania, the two children escape to Thailand in order to avoid the mass executions being used by the authorities in England to try to end the plague. Kito took them in but has betrayed them because the CIA has threatened to frame her as the original source of the doll plague, a threat given credibility by Kito's actual attempt to destroy European dolls with a non-lethal plague (thereby gaining a greater market share for her own Thai imitations). The plot now revealed, the remainder of *Dead Girls* unfolds in the present as Ignatz and Primavera attempt to convince Kito that she is not the source of the plague before Primavera is killed by a poison injected by Morganstern, a poison that will destroy her mechanics and thus eliminate the only evidence of the true source of the plague.

Throughout the *Dead* trilogy, the very form of the narration calls attention to itself and to its complicity in shaping desire, its fulfillment, and the delay between the two. The apparently forced use of memory that jars the temporal flow of the narrative of *Dead Girls* might initially be taken as evidence of Calder's poor skills as a writer. It is bad form to open a novel with not just one scene but a whole series of episodes that require a good deal of exposition before they become meaningful and then, when the reader is oriented, to break the narrative again for yet further memory-explorations with the almost comically absurd complication of Primavera's clairvoyance now added. The novel gives every appearance of being the clumsily written

account of an overly complex story. But the repetition of recollection as a narrative device following upon Ignatz's capture shows that Calder is not just using a rhetorical trope to cover clumsy plotting. The time of the novel seems to be circular, advancing and retreating in a feedback loop, creating a fiction in which this sort of remembrance is a mode of existing in addition to being a mode of depicting. In *Dead Girls* the world is one of memory—Ignatz and Primavera's childhood, the origins of the doll plague, the plot that the characters find themselves enmeshed in—that culminates in an encounter with Dr. Toxicophilous (the lover of poison) who is the creator of both the Cartier dolls and the doll plague. This nano-engineer inhabits the quantum world of Primavera's CPU, a place indistinguishable from fantasy, from fiction, that serves as the fulcrum of the entire trilogy (90).

To find Dr. Toxicophilous (the "secret of the matrix") Calder's characters enter into Primavera herself, the world of the novel again displaced now into the dream narrative of one of its characters—it becomes a *jeu vérité*, the fantasy of a bodily memory, a flesh made desire, rather than the transformation of desire into flesh more typical of pornography (94, 99). Drawing herself and the others into her own quantum structure—"Time to Ourobours," she announces—Primavera leads them to the "Lilim ur-universe" where the infinite possible worlds of deathly desire converge: "The necropolis seemed (as it always did) limitless, extending out of eye-shot, beyond hope, beyond the world; a singularity of death where the curvature of space-time was infinite, Eternal" (99, 108–09). Toxicophilous, whose individuality is never certain (he exists in every doll as what "represents the programme," serving as its "operating system") spins the narrative of the doll plague: it is a quantum effect of nano-engineering that incarnated the decadent fantasies of its creators (99). Born of the desire "to find ... that point of complex simplicity from which life would spontaneously emerge" (111), the dolls still bore a trace of their creators. These were predominantly exiles, men whose displacement led them to find comfort in the dark folklore of the late twentieth century, what Calder calls (implicating himself) the Second Decadence. In their search through the tropes and icons of the past the engineers found materials for the production of a future that would fulfill their desires. But these desires are bivalent. On the one hand they are the dreams of the relatively powerless, dreams of possessing the symbols that represent social prominence. However, these symbols have themselves been created as tools of social distinction, markers that determine the powerless as such. Thus, on the other hand, the desires of the powerless are inflected with a desire for their own annihilation in the triumph of the symbols that strip them of all power, of social existence. The doll plague is that deathly desire, that pornographic playground that desires its own death, its own apotheosis, as the furthest extremity of its desire to become something new, different, other. Humanity is being consumed by the actualization of the secret shadow of its culture.

In the confrontation with Dr. Toxicophilous the rather conventional narrative of the characters' search for the origin of the plague is rewritten and repeated as the plague's desire for a narrative. The desire that is the origin of the plague, its cause, aspires to be an effect of the world that it will have transformed. Similarly, pornography does not merely depict a world in which its desire is normative, it seeks to depict the world of the viewer *as that world*; pornography works to appear not as possibility but as actuality. Its implicit narrative is therefore one in which the desire of the viewer for the pornographic representation finds a new context within that representation that makes the representation the cause of the desire that gave rise to it. It is this rhetorical sleight-of-hand that creates the danger of such a desire (because it would seem to appropriate any desire by replacing reality with fantasy) and, again, makes Calder's work important. Is there an outcome of pornography other than its normalization?

The dolls need and desire "an *explanation*," a history, a narrative, and this desire organizes the three-part wish that Ignatz makes at the conclusion of *Dead Girls* (84). Now a sort of avatar of Dr. Toxicophilous's desire, Ignatz wishes for escape, for happiness and, finally, with Primavera dead in his arms he wishes for the simple persistence of desire. This is a familiar schema: initially desire aims at release, for the cessation of its own craving through a kind of self-displacement. Finding that it brings itself along in such a displacement, desire wishes to be reconciled with its object, but finds itself essentially structured by separation and forced to acknowledge that it can apparently never know rest; its issue is always its own unceasing and unchanging reproduction. The death of Primavera completes the sublation of the pornographic desire that began with Ignatz's crush, continued through his consequent imbrication in Primavera's adventures, and culminated in her death by which desire freed itself of its particular and therefore limiting object. But this is only the first act of the narrative, in which Calder sets out the problem, the restlessness at the heart of pornographic desire. In the second, *Dead Boys*, the desire that has worked through Ignatz and Primavera, worked through *Dead Girls*, and has endured beyond the finitude of its object, now turns back upon itself in an attempt to secure its own persistence.

Dead Boys is the story of the desire-plague itself. Titania realizes that the limitless hunger of the dolls for human men will soon eliminate both humanity and the parasitic dolls. To solve this problem she forms a political alliance with a struggling United States that will make it appear as though the United States is the only country that can control the dolls and the plague. This solution repeats the lessons learned by Ignatz: pornographic desire is parasitic, dependent upon its object, and once this is realized it attempts to overcome this weakness by somehow taking control of the object, thereby attaining persistence. Titania's makeshift solution allows desire to be reproduced—the plague would continue—but it would not persist. To persist, the

desire-plague must regulate itself according to its own nature, according to a desire that fuses sex and violent death. This desire for persistence gives rise to the dead boys, the male counterparts to the dolls (or “dead girls”). Whereas the dead girls are the irresistible object of a human desire, the dead boys are driven to execute the dead girls for their faithlessness to the plague itself. Dead boys and dead girls, Elohim and Lilim, are the two poles of a single desire, one condemned to a life of ritual murder in order to preserve desire in the final, rigid pose of the corpse of the beloved, the other fated to the faithless squandering of the pornographic charms that create desire.

To tell the story of the plague's pursuit of persistence, of its desire, without *giving in* to that very desire, requires a complex narrative strategy. A story about pornography is simply a pornographic story because the substance of pornography is objectification.⁹ In order to avoid this trap, the subject of the narrative must become indistinguishable from its object so that the development of pornographic desire—a conceptual development—is undergone by that pornography's reader as an affective transformation. In *Dead Boys*, the character of Ignatz becomes unstable as Calder works to break down the separation between the reader and pornographic desire in order to draw a lesson from his parable. Where *Dead Girls* used recollections that organized the universe of the narrative at the same time that they collectively affirmed the identity of the one doing the recollecting, the narrative of *Dead Boys* is organized by the future. This creates a kind of anxiety as the text pursues a promise of persistence that, now deferred, threatens never to be achieved. The reader is subjected to this same anxiety throughout the displacement of Ignatz's identity within the world of the plague, Meta. The struggle of Meta for persistence, against catastrophe, replaces the desire of Ignatz as the organizing force of the narrative.

Dead Boys begins six months after the events of *Dead Girls*. Its narrative is extremely complex but, before it begins to break down, Ignatz is trying to figure out how to create a child using Primavera's embalmed uterus. This child would embody the fulfillment of Ignatz's but also the desire-plague's wish for persistence. The narrative of *Dead Boys* quickly fractures, however, as Ignatz becomes Dagon, a dead boy in some future Bangkok hunting his traitorous mistress Vanity. The narrative abruptly snaps back to Ignatz who finds a letter apparently sent by Vanity, his yet-to-be-born daughter, and, understandably worried for his sanity, Ignatz seeks the help of a therapist, Dr. International. In a drug-induced state, Ignatz receives a narrative from his future daughter. According to this narrative, the desire-plague, Meta, alters not merely the perception and desires of its victims, but exterior reality. Ignatz accepts this story, submits to the future narrative and sets out to try to have the child (191).

The narrative of *Dead Boys* is split between Ignatz and Dagon as Meta works to suture the threat to its persistence that is embodied in the child Ignatz is attempting to conceive. This child, Vanity, if she was born, would

indicate Meta's limitations, it would acquire a history.¹⁰ At the same time, her birth would also be a mark of Meta's unpredictability since she would be another iteration of desire but not one necessarily subordinated to the ubiquitous force of the desire-plague.¹¹ Vanity's communication with her father is an incomplete erasure of Meta's origin, an instance of Meta's retroactive subversion of history. Its content tells of the emergence of dead boys, male counterparts to the dolls that have eliminated Meta's parasitic need to rely on external support. The importance of the letter for Meta is its communication, not its content. It tells the story of how Meta might become autonomous but, as long as the story exists, its autonomy would appear as conditional or provisional. Only if the message can erase itself as message—can actually rewrite the past—can Meta achieve the purpose of the transmission. The emergence of the dead boys is itself a product of Vanity's letter to Ignatz; instead of creating a child, Ignatz becomes Dagon, Vanity's brother. Through Vanity's transmission the desire-plague is "purified" into "information" (215). Vanity is the tool by which Meta is dispensing with individuals in its self-absorption. Pornographic desire, fascinated with surface and death, is transforming the thickness and noise of reality into a self-absorbed fiction. "The narrative was disintegrating," Calder writes; "we shall become fictions" says Vanity; the text and its content are collapsing into each other as "everything is requisitioned by the Future" (212, 227). For Calder, "an age of information inevitably becomes an age of pornography" as information is made ever more fluid and the darker desires of human dreams achieve physical form with the result that, in the transformed history wrought by Meta, cruelty and death are eroticized and thereby redeemed (264, 279).

Struggling to endure this breakdown, Ignatz sets out to determine "who/what he *was*" by accessing a computerized database and searching for information on "Dagon," his future and textual self. The computer responds with a literal, word-for-word repetition of the opening text of *Dead Boys* before that text is overwritten by the narrative supplied by Vanity. The new narrative extends its scope to recount a startlingly new world history in which Meta has existed as long as humanity as the desire that sanctifies "the viciousness of the human heart" (237). After his oracular consultation with the computer, Ignatz meets O'Sullivan, a pornography vendor, who Calder uses to further emphasize that Meta is pornographic desire made substantial. The desire-plague is humanity's "shadow," its pornographic psyche, and as it becomes real the substance of history is transformed into fiction. Pornography does not simply cover over history, it replaces it with a narrative of surfaces—with their ritually ordered combinations and poses—whose seamlessness eliminates any possible contestation. The conflation of history and pornography extends to the point that the entire history of humanity can be narrated as a "sex war" in which Vanity is the apotheosis and caricature of every victim and Dagon is the polyglot archetype of every misogynistic predator (242–46).

At the end of *Dead Boys*, overcome by Meta, Ignatz has become Dagon and history has been rewritten by pornography. Meta has thus eliminated the resource needed to challenge the tyranny of its deterministic play of surfaces. This same desire, however, drives Dagon to choose to destroy Meta, to render it consistent precisely in its self-annihilation. Meta is the instantiation of a deathly desire that couples violent death with sexuality, a paradoxical coupling that can only be ineptly rendered by the perpetual narration of pornographic couplings. To persist, these couplings must become a totality. Dagon thus joins an endeavor with several other dead boys, marauders, to perform a grand circuit through space and time, destroying every dead girl in order to eliminate the support of the desire-plague, and then return to the same moment of departure (through faster-than-light travel) and eliminate the source of Meta. The ultimate accomplishment of the pornographic imagination is its own self-sacrifice. The task of *Dead Things* will be to find a way out of the fatality that is pornographic desire accomplished.

Dead Things opens with a sort of still life, a dead dream, in which Dagon has returned from his trans-temporal marauding and is ready to destroy the final stronghold of Meta, the Chapel of the Presence. What narrative there is in *Dead Things* consists largely of dreamy gaps between a series of discontinuous scenes, words that express the constellation of symptoms constituting Meta, a psychoscape that is driving the text itself into ruin, into a final disaster. Calder is clear from the outset of *Dead Things*: this is the end, the coda, the culmination of the adventure of desire made flesh, made text, where pornography must show itself to be either creative or nihilistic. In its pursuit of seamless persistence, the desire-plague has reduced time to a standing now, a "Polaroid whose only temporality is an imaginative projection into the Future" (345). If the desire-plague achieves the consistency that it strives for, the result will be that "only heteroconsciousness will remain: language of outside, surface, text" (261). Meta completed is a desire whose sound and fury is only so much deathly noise occluding its selfsameness, its dead inertia. What's more, simply telling the tale of Meta's destruction is insufficient. The text of the trilogy is itself infected, it *is this representative desire*: an imaginary, dreaming text. Calder provides the algorithm "information = entertainment = pornography = information" at the outset of *Dead Things*, a text which is itself information and therefore also at least incipiently pornographic and entertaining (291). How can it become instructional? How can it provide a lesson about pornography? Calder's trilogy is unavoidably an instance of the desire-plague, a piece of "transcendental pornography," and so threatens to collapse into a dead letter, into yet another pornographic story even as it tries to narrate its apotheosis (311).

What precipitates the text through its collapse is the increasingly complex persona Dagon/Zwakh. But how can this textual thing be trusted? How can Calder's text narrate the destruction of what is, essentially, a force that corrupts perception, rewrites text, and renders narration and memory into

imagination and fantasy? The first step is to foreground this corruptibility whose power relies on its imperceptibility. Dagon/Zwakh learns from the preserved computer of Dr. Toxicophilous that the source of Meta was a trilogy of books that appeared in the early 1990s—Calder’s trilogy, the very one that the reader has before them:

“Why is all history, past and future, compacted into 1994?”

“Thank you Dagon.” Mephisto smiles indulgently; pivots the VDU so that it is invisible to prying eyes; palms the swagger stick’s infra-red, then points with it. A video is showing the covers of three books. “Toxicophilous was inspired by the literature of the 1990s, the so-called “Second Decadence”. When he nanoengineered the Cartier dolls the effects of quantum indeterminacy—the interaction of atomic particles with the observer—ensured that his creations were infected with his own dark dreams, the fears and lusts of *La Decadence*. That was the reason his dolls mutated—they became hybrids of those creatures celebrated in 90s literature: succubi, vampires, chimeras, sphinxes—images of the dark side of Toxicophilous’s anima that had been unconsciously programmed into their CPUs. They became *these* books”—Mephisto taps the screen—“and they acted out the roles allocated to them by these books’ narratives. Meta—the doll-plague virus in its purest form—has, in its turn, tried to re-create these narratives on the grandest possible scale, imposing them upon the world in which the last of these books was written, the world of 1994.

So: I have been a character in a book; I am still a character in a book; and to restore the world to reality I must again become a thing, but this time a thing of words, rather than a thing of flesh. Only by reassuming my rightful form could the world be disburdened of this *estbique du mal*.

We must all, I think, become words again.” (366–67)

The text becomes the source of the plague and the reader thus becomes Dr. Toxicophilous, an unwitting carrier of pornographic desire. This implication of the reader is borne out by the Sadeian litanies of pornographic violence that occupy more and more of the text. That the reader is still reading is evidence of the infection and the task of the text is now to fulfill that other aspect of the pharmakon: the poison must alleviate its own effects. The text must precipitate its own undoing according to the laws of its own development—it must reach the point of catastrophe or, echoing Dick, “fall apart.” Dagon/Zwakh, the instrument of this catastrophe, thus finds himself confronting the heart of Meta in the Chapel of the Presence, able to destroy it only through “an act of will” (391). What does it mean for a character, a thing of text, a *dead thing*, to exercise its will? It means to recognize that text has no will, that an intention narrates, creates, but can never *be narrated*. Just as text requires an external agency to be written and narrated, to develop, Meta must be perceived to exist (324). Dagon/Zwakh remembers that his animating principle, the source of the desire that impels him, is in another world, is sitting in an armchair, is Richard Calder (392–93).

This final transformation is accomplished in three parts.¹² First, within the narrative, Dagon/Zwakh must eliminate Meta by finding a “self-sufficient narrative”—by extracting himself from the ceaseless pornographic desire and thereby depriving it of its force (403). This is accomplished within the text by finding another (unnamed) character that will exchange places with Dagon/Zwakh, a character that will die in his place in order to destroy Meta. This breaks the chain of the desire-plague by introducing a difference that is not one of the surface. On the surface, it is still Dagon/Zwakh detonating but the intention—something not present at the level of the text—has changed. Even if the intention were described in the text, precisely by writing it, it differs from the intention itself. The mere insertion of another text fails to account for the difference in the repetition of Dagon/Zwakh’s moment of self-destruction. A substitution has taken place somewhere other than within the text and what dies as Dagon/Zwakh detonates now dies for a different reason (a father dying to save his daughter). The narrative fiction of Meta ends, becomes a dead letter even as it gives life to Calder’s own text, because its accomplishment necessarily excludes what animates it. Meta desires to live, to persist as a desire for death and this paradoxical life would end if the desire for death was achieved in a way that does not invite its own repetition. The will of Dagon/Zwakh is replaced by that of someone that wills otherwise than pornographically. Meta’s surface logic thus creates a result that closes its circuit. Narrating this collapse has the effect of bringing Meta into view as a whole, as a thing. The first stage of the catastrophic collapse of pornographic desire results in the separation of the two moments of that desire: the totality of those signs as ideally bound by the distinct animating force that conjoins them.

The second stage begins with the confrontation of the desire and its ideal consistency: Meta itself, which appears as “a child playing with automata,” a robotic parody of the Heraclitean demiurge, is now confronted by the “I” that emerged from the destruction of the desire-plague (403). The universe of pornography persists—“*I am pure information*” it desperately insists, only succeeding in emphasizing its textuality—but only for a moment (404). Bereft of the force that sustains its narrative, the fiction ends: “Now only *heteroconsciousness* remains, the language of the perpetual outside, the idiolect of people who are their clothes, who live their lives in extreme exteriority; the language of people who are things, who are text” (405). What is left after the collapse of Meta is the text as a dead letter. Calder has followed out the logic of pornography to its end, to the point where the tension between desire and death reaches its crisis and precipitates the elements that allow for the possibility of such a desire: the world of signs with infinite possible valences and the subjectivity that grants them mortal life. Hypostatized, the pornographic signs are revealed as a world that instantiates and thereby betrays the polyvalent subjectivity that animates it.

“Fiction. This story ends—no. Die into the imagination” (405). Far from precipitating the death of desire, the pornographic catastrophe makes possible

other stories that, faithful now to its multiplicity, would no longer be fiction but would exist as the possibilities of actual beings. The deathly text of pornography, its inevitable reduction of desire, reveals the polyvalent imagination as it (literally) crawls away. "This story ends—will end, does end, *must* end—with a beginning, begins, now, yes, even as it ends" (405). The force of the catastrophe precipitates, necessarily, not a new narrative but a non-textual force that, persisting not in the deathly concretion of signs but in their virtual multiplicity, takes the form of a beginning without origin or goal:

And still nothing happens.

And then suddenly, quite unreasonably, I remember who I am; remember that I am not Dagon, not Gabriel, not Ignatz, not even The Toxicophilous Device. Remember that I am sitting in an armchair in a universe so far from this one that my reality is greater than the reality of this world; far greater, greater even than the reality of the world The Device was designed to re-create, that all about me is insubstantial; that the only thing that connects me to this planet is my love for Primavera, for Lipstick; that it was that love which has brought me here, now. Yes; this core of my being, this Self is the fissile material I seek, that will enable me to— (392–93)

The final movement ("apokatastasis."¹³) is written in the wake of Calder's withdrawn double, in the absence of an outside, a surface. How can anything be written after such a vanishing when, seemingly, there should be no text remaining? By creating a text that preserves the virtual multiplicity of the imagination. The final section of Calder's trilogy is emphatically anonymous—"Names didn't matter anymore"—in order to neutralize the desire for narration (407).¹⁴ The confusion of names, their ultimate irrelevance, their inability to fix the identities of the speakers, ensures the passing of the pornographic not into nothing but into a different possibility of community (what Calder calls "love") a community bound by something other than a shared language or a common identity that must be defended. The resulting community is an "inoperative" one, a community between those who have nothing in common and are thus bound together by their imagination, not by a text. The lesson of Calder's parable is not that there is some desire that ought to be preferred to pornography. The lesson is instead an invocation of the common space that makes possible community, a space whose aporetic nature is covered over by every desirous projection, but whose persistence makes possible an individual's resistance to the illusion of such fantasies.¹⁵

ANONYMITY AND POLYPHONY

Is Calder successful in making his text a dead letter? Does his text successfully dramatize the collapse of the projected fantasy of pornographic desire, its inevitable catastrophe, and avoid the twin dangers of either becoming pornography

itself or substituting a new fantasy for the old one? In a word, yes, but Calder's solution is not a call for the further restriction of language. Censoring or limiting the expression of desire implicitly capitulates to the power of the narrative that is being guarded against and thereby grants that narrative a phantasmatic power. Theorists such as Angela Carter and Drucilla Cornell have argued for a proliferation of non-harmonious desires and a more heterodox imaginary domain of desire—and thus an end to the simple, graffiti-ized depiction of sexuality (an example of dead letters), but it is in Calder's work that the challenges of such a project fully appear. Calder pushes this argument to its furthest extent, finding that pornographic writing engenders a peculiar kind of liberty in which the reader is precipitated into a space of human community prior to any possible organizing narrative. Although it is predominantly figured as an erotic relation between individuals, Calder's trilogy argues that sexuality is implicitly predicated on a reconceptualization of social relations in general—a reconceptualization achieved through the exhaustion of that decadent shadow of the Enlightenment, pornography.

The *Dead* trilogy tells the story of a particular sort of desire, one that he argues is exemplary of the erotic imagination at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This desire of the contemporary age of information to know this shadow, to eliminate its difference from conscious life, is figured in Calder's trilogy as a pervasive and lustful violence. Haunting the desire to know is the desire for possession and the corresponding death of the singular and vital individual. Against the fatefulness of this world Calder creates a literary fiction that, discovering the fiction at its heart, works against the projected illusion that hides the essential, and gives new life and a new hope to the precarious existence of the present. Formed from nostalgia, from childhood images, pornographic desire is not characterized by its objects as much as by the fact that these objects are never enough. To possess such objects—hypersexualized trophies—the subject must refashion itself into a projection, a psychoid, a transformation that renders that desire consistent by eliminating the discontinuity of individual possibility. Pornographic desire, for Calder, requires a double death: the murder of the desired who is replaced by a surface, and the corresponding suicide of the desiring one who, in self-sacrifice, attempts to dramatize an impossibly faithful devotion to the desired. Ignatz/Dagon suffers this transformation and thereby serves as a lesson in the force of pornographic desire. Calder argues, however, that there is something that this desire fails to grasp even in its accomplishment: the finite and fatal temporality of the mortal subject. This finitude is what ensures for the subject the possibility of an intersubjective relationship, of community, of a non-fateful future.

There is a kind of fatal acceptance by Calder of the near-ubiquitous existence of pornography. In the *Dead* trilogy it arises from fable and folklore, is produced by the mechanics of industry, of technology, and perpetually renews itself in the prospect of future developments. It waits everywhere desire might go. Calder's parable of pornography is not then an attempt to dispense with eroticized death, to show some essential flaw that might allow

for a world that no longer proves hospitable to it. Pornography is an ever-present possibility of desire, a sort of false hope that the work of community might at some point no longer require agency and work, that its instantiation would be enough to ensure its future survival. Calder argues with his trilogy that pornography cannot be resisted through censorship, which only fuels its exoticism, but must be contested through a strategy of proliferating counter-narratives. Because pornography's power is due to its homogeneity, to its self-presentation as the fulfillment of desire, its seductive power is most effectively neutralized by stories that multiply desire's forms since this multiplicity forecloses any possibility of homogeneous fulfillment.

As a challenge to the subordination of the power of imagination to the concretization of one of its possibilities, Calder's trilogy also demonstrates the importance of writing as a tactic of resistance to the ideological tendencies of imagination. Because the present is nothing other than the persistence of a collectively affirmed narrative, writing is a real disruption of the temporal persistence and reproduction of the world. Even when writing is profoundly complicit with prevailing discourse, the mere fact of its reinforcing iteration testifies to its power to differ from the dominant narrative, to show itself as the screen behind the image. It is because writing repeats the creative act that establishes the world that it can differ, fail to reproduce the narrative either deliberately or accidentally, and so become the agent of a catastrophic subversion of the dominant narrative. Catastrophic writing is revolutionary according to the way that it utilizes the future in an untimely way, a way that acts counter to the prevailing historical narrative of the present. By breaking the persistence of the present at the level of its sheer temporality, it confronts the present with the desire that haunts the self-assurance of every narrative.

The possible styles of catastrophic fiction would then correspond to so many reconceptualizations of the desire of power for temporal persistence. Writing shows that the "opportunity" presented by the time of the future—in many ways the paradigmatic opportunity—is also the chance for a very particular kind of refusal, one that foresees and welcomes novelty precisely by remaining blind to its form. Writing subsists on the space between imagination and its actualization; it is a virtual space that is essentially unable to close itself off to the most radical change because the possibility of that change comes from the activity of the writer and is never necessitated by something anterior to the text. The fact of writing, the fact that expression may be unmoored from its moment of enunciation and repeated indefinitely, becoming different according to the inexhaustible variety of its situations, the fact that, to use Calder's terms, the desirous shadow of pornography that haunts the present world has a force independent of that world, this fact is what orients Calder's trilogy. Countering pornography's power to silence the articulation of differential communities, the final scene of Calder's trilogy asks the reader to create identities for the anonymous couple. In the story of Ignatz, Calder has created a vehicle where the reader is carried to the limit of pornographic desire, where the possibility of multiple forms of human relationships are shown to be

possible, and therefore to a place where the reader is forced into a deliberate choice as to how to live, a choice that must be perpetually renewed.

NOTES

1. In *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France*, Vila argues that the concept of "sensibility" served as a "conceptual metaphor" that, in part, was used by thinkers such as Rousseau and Tissot to argue that "the physical and moral realms of human existence were closely interrelated" (4). Laqueur's *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* similarly shows that moral and physical health were inseparable for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

2. Mason describes Calder's work as "an examination of post-human society through the mapping of Enlightenment male discourses of power and desire in opposition to new cyborg desires" (110).

3. Latham describes the *Dead* trilogy (taken together with Calder's subsequent novel, *Cytherea*) as "the most potent popular-culture illustration to date of the critical power of the vampire-cyborg, the ability of this dialectical metaphor to capture at once the transformative longings and the binding limitations of capitalist consumer culture" (251).

4. In "Finis" Derrida writes that the aporia "is a matter of what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where *it would no longer be possible to constitute a problem* ... There, in sum, in this place of aporia, *there is no longer any problem*" (12). In Calder's parable, the trajectory of Ignatz ends not in formulating and responding to a reframed problem of pornography but in precipitating the reader into an aporetic experience of the sexual other that has, to borrow from Jung, previously been hidden behind a projection. Derrida writes of aporetic experience that it "concerns the choice between the relation to an other who is *its* other (that is to say, an other that can be opposed in a couple) and the relation to a wholly, non-opposable, other, that is, an other that is no longer *its* other" (18). Fusing Derrida and Jung, Calder uses Ignatz to carry the reader to the point where sexual desire is experienced as a relation of responsibility to an other person who is wholly different from one's projected unconscious (collective or otherwise) fantasies.

5. For instance, Melzer finds Calder's *Dead Girls* useful to feminist theory because it "poses questions of possible female posthuman subjectivities." However, because she does not follow Calder's text beyond the first volume of his trilogy, she concludes that "his writing seems to join other cyberpunk fictions in their reinscription of Western narratives" (184, 216). Tatsumi links Calder's work to Donna Haraway's and argues that it is a kind of "cyborg-feminism" that depicts the "greatest potentiality of nanotech, or ... picotech ... to undermine the myriad ideologies of domination" (96).

6. See, for instance, the discussion in *Dead Girls* where it is revealed that the desire-plague is the result of an attempt to retrieve a particular idealized past (99).

7. "Conceptual persona" is Deleuze and Guattari's term for the emergent actuality of a philosophical concept, a literary tool that is used to work out (rather than represent) the creation of concepts. Importantly, a conceptual persona differs from a character insofar as the latter transmits concepts formed anterior to the text while the former is an instantiation of thought that acquires consistence only retroactively (61–83). The name Ignatz is drawn from two sources. The most obvious is the character Ignatz Mouse from the cartoon series *Krazy Kat*, known principally for returning Krazy's infatuation with a thrown brick. The other source is the puppeteer in Meyerink's *The Golem*. In a crucial scene, the narrator describes Zwakh's "simple life" as follows: "it suddenly seemed monstrous, even uncanny, that someone like him ... should have suddenly returned to the shabby puppet booths and fairgrounds of his ancestors, putting the same puppets with which they had made their meager living through the same clumsy movements and acting out the same threadbare plots. I realized that he was unable to abandon them. They were part of his life, and when he was far away from them, they changed into thoughts which lodged in his mind and made him unsettled and restless until he returned home. That is why he looked after them so lovingly and proudly dressed them up in their tawdry finery" (57).

8. Morganstern is a slightly altered form of the German "Morgenstern," "morning star," the German equivalent of "Lucifer."

9. Calder repeatedly emphasizes pornography as a production of surfaces, a kind of theater without depth. Near the end of *Dead Things*, Lipstick says to Ignatz/Archangel, "You were a thing. Like me. I'm a thing too. A psychoid. We've both been willing players in the theater of cruelty" (377).

10. By acquiring a history, Meta would cease to function as an ideology. For Althusser (who pays particular attention to the non-historical nature of ideology), ideology cannot have a history because the process by which individuals are interpellated as specific kinds of subjects by an imaginary narrative is eternal (127–86). In Calder's trilogy, the challenge for Ignatz is to attain an individuality not always already compromised by Meta's interpellation.

11. Much like Calder, Levinas sees birth as a moment of radical or absolute discontinuity: "Both my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other, of the Beloved, my future does not enter into the logical essence of the possible. The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity" (267).

12. Meta, the desire-plague of pornography, is a particular instantiation of the anima, the dramatic projection of the feminine aspect of the (collective) unconscious. To this projection is paired a masculine aspect, the animus, and Jung writes—in a passage that could just as easily be found in Calder's trilogy—"when animus and anima meet, the animus draws his sword of power and the anima ejects her poison of illusion and seduction" (15). In addition to these two aspects of the collective unconscious, Calder makes use of a third, the shadow. The shadow is an aspect of the psyche that consists of unrecognized negative emotion. The Jungian analytic process consists of a sort of individual recapitulation of the hero's descent into Hades, with the analysand first encountering and reconciling themselves with the shadow, or the personal unconscious, then passing on to a recognition of animus or anima, and then passing back up into consciousness. Calder's trilogy uses Ignatz as an affective vehicle (because the shadow is affective/emotional) to carry the reader into the Decadent anima and then back up into conscious life.

13. Apokatastasis is a Christian term meaning "restitution," or "restoration," but that is sometimes used to mean "universal reconciliation."

14. Maurice Blanchot describes the anonymous space opened by literature as one in which "[language] speaks, but without any beginning. It states, but does not refer back to something which is to be stated, something silent, like the meaning behind an expression, which would guarantee it" (*Space* 51). This space is one of hope, but not hope for a determinate future. "Hope is true hope insofar as it aspires to give us, in the future of a promise, what is. What is is presence. But hope is only hope. There is hope when, far from any present grasp, far from any immediate possession, it relates to what is always yet to come, and perhaps will never come; hope says the hoped-for coming of what exists as yet only in hope" (*Infinite* 41). Calder's trilogy concludes, at the end of a cascade of displacements both figurative and textual, with the invocation of a space that is not organized by an anterior desire. To conclude with a desire for a narrative world without pornography, in which desire is refashioned in some idealized way, would invite the return of the same sort of projected fantasies, would merely culminate in a new iconology. The lesson of Calder's parable is that pornography can be resisted only through the vigilant repetition of a virtual space that holds desire free for its actualizations.

15. "The community of those who have nothing in common" is Lingis's title for his intervention in a discussion of community begun by Blanchot and continued by Nancy. Nancy, while largely sympathetic to Blanchot's contention that writing is able to clear the way for a community that is open to the radical possibilities of its constituents, argues against reifying the "hope" that Blanchot describes. "'Literature,' thought as the interruption of myth, merely communicates—in the sense that what it puts into play, sets to work and destines to unworking, is nothing but communication itself, the passage from one to another, the sharing of one by the other. What is at stake in literature is not just literature: in this, it is unlike myth, which communicates only itself, communicating its communion" (65). Nancy's emphasis on community stresses that writing is not the creation of a determinate community, but the sharing of a space that makes community possible.

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