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Pale Fire and Johnson's Cat: The Anecdote in Polite Conversation

DRAFT: Submitted to *Criticism* (2012)

Perhaps because I often fall victim to them, I have become interested in those moments when conversations are suddenly struck dead. Take, for example, this anecdote from James Boswell's *Life of Johnson*:

> This reminds me of the ludicrous account he gave Mr. Langton, of the despicable state of a young gentleman of good family. "Sir, when I heard of him last, he was running about town shooting cats." And then in a sort of kindly reverie, he bethought himself of his own favorite cat, and said, "But Hodge shan't be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot."[1]

The speaker in quotation marks is Samuel Johnson. Johnson was the London lexicographer and conversationalist who came, during his lifetime, to exemplify a certain grandeur of style, masculine sensibility, and intellectual firmness; Boswell, his biographer and protégé, composed, in the aftermath of Johnson's death, the monument to

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The author would like to thank Helen Deutsch, Anne Myers, Taly Ravid, and Zeynep Gürsel for their assistance with this article.

[1] James Boswell, *The Life of Dr. Johnson L.L.D.*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill and L.F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 4.197.

Johnson's conversational style which he called *The Life of Johnson* (1791).[2] Characteristic of Boswell's literary form, this compact narrative moment is braced between similar moments, anecdotes related by the living Johnson as he held court in his Literary Club. As Boswell recalls it, Johnson summons up an anecdote about a young gentleman by way of clinching a dissertation on ethics. But while Johnson summons up an anecdote in order to provide force to a moral argument, the effect is more than he bargains for. His rhetorical turn to an historical event reminds him of the very real and vulnerable body of his own cat, a tabby named Hodge. And so the deaths of a number of cats in London's West End return, in a real way, to kill the conversation that they enabled.

Samuel Johnson's Literary Club represents a particularly rich episode in the history of the polite conversation—where the crossing of politeness and the ineffable effects of the real was brought repeatedly, conspicuously into focus. It is the history of this conversational form which this essay takes up—and takes it up through the long history of this exemplary anecdote, born at the literary club, but reappearing, revenant-like, at superficially unconnected spots of time. This Boswellian rehearsal of a Johnsonian anecdote might be said to contain, at its core, this young gentleman "running about town"; it is nevertheless encrusted with a lengthy history recorded in the anecdote itself. Johnson "hears" in conversation a story about a young gentleman shooting cats.

[2] The superlatives are from John Bacon's discussion of another monument composed in the immediate aftermath of Johnson's death: Bacon's funerary sculpture in Westminster Abbey. *The Gentleman's Magazine* 66.1 (March 1796): 180.

He repeats it for the (somewhat obscure) moral it provides. Boswell hears the story from Johnson. When he repeats this same story, however, it does not have anything to do with the moral Johnson intends. Instead, for Boswell, it becomes a way of recalling into the present Johnson's love of even the smallest animals he has "taken under his protection," and, by extension, his love of children and servants in general. In the way that anecdotes become collaborative productions, the trajectory of this anecdote does not end with Boswell's *Life*. This same anecdote also turns up in the paratextual frontmatter of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), between Nabokov's Dedication "To Vera" and the Table of Contents. It turns up again in the critical discourse surrounding *Pale Fire*. Gerard de Vries's note in *The Nabokovian*, as one example which must stand for many, frames the problem posed by this anecdote in this way: "with the epigraph to *Pale Fire,* Nabokov left us with a rather contumacious riddle."[3] De Vries is not interested in what the anecdote is doing in Johnson's Literary Club, or, even, really, Boswell's monumental *Life of Johnson*. He is not interested in the young man or the shot cats. The riddle for De Vries is about what this anecdote is doing in *Pale Fire*—that is, what it meant to Nabokov or Nabokov's interlocutor. It is in the spirit of riddle-solving, then, that de Vries sets about reimagining this anecdote: how this anecdote can be understood to fit into the text it precedes.[4]

[3] Gerard de Vries, "Pale Fire and *The Life of Johnson*: The Case of Hodge and Mystery Lodge," *Nabokovian* 26.1 (1991): 44.

[4] De Vries's response is part of a more general trend. See in addition Michael Siedel, "*Pale Fire* and the Art of the Narrative Supplement," *ELH* 51 (1984): 837-55, and Maaja

From London to New Wye, from Johnson's Literary Club to *The Nabokovian*: what we would call and recognize as the same anecdote turns up serially, stitching

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A. Stewart, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Boswell's Johnson," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30.2 (1988): 230-45. All three authors set about solving the problem of the placement of this epigraph. Also more interesting than it might seem is Marina Turkevich Naumann's consideration of Nabokovian cats: "Novel Cat Connections" *Nabokovian* 22.1 (1989): 18-20. Boswell and Kinbote shared "an antipathy for a cat."

We might however wonder if the "similarities" which De Vries, in the tradition which I have sketched out here, argues are "forced on the reader" are not sort of "shady," fundamentally "unreal." Boswell, de Vries suggests, is like Kinbote a biographer and editor—and, I might add, an émigré—who also appears in the *Life* that he edits. The connections between Johnson and Shade are more convincing, de Vries argues: they both 1) wrote poetry, 2) devoted each a study to Alexander Pope, 3) attempted, reluctantly and unsuccessfully, to abstain from liquor, and 4) had happy marriages. We are asked to put aside what we might or might not know about Johnson's marriages, and his relationship with alcohol. De Vries's interest in Johnson is limited to what is available in Boswell's *Life*. He is willing, in other words, to make the exact move that *Pale Fire* seems to bring into question—to accept an edited *Life* at face value. These connections made by de Vries aren't connections between the anecdote lurking at the head of the novel and the novel; these are connections between the form of the *Life of Johnson*, inasmuch as the anecdote "refracts and comprises" the narration it contains, and the ironized form of *Pale Fire.*

together different moments in conversational time. Such an anecdote is caught in a double-movement of life and death which Helen Deutsch elegantly identifies as having been inaugurated by Boswell's efforts "to give precedence to… living conversation" over "dead letters."[5] The characteristic thing that governs each of these ritual redeployments is that nobody seems to be interested in all the shot cats; the shot cats are the things that the conversation cannot continue without remembering to ignore. Johnson summons up an anecdote about a young gentleman, but ends up in a reverie over Hodge; Boswell reopens the same anecdote, but ends up in a reverie over Johnson. De Vries ends up in a reverie over parallels between *Pale Fire* and Boswell's *Life,* which are "so rich that similarities… are forced on the reader."[6] The anecdote gets handed on; it participates in conversations that the actual young gentleman shooting actual cats could hardly have anticipated—or, put differently, conversations in which the cats could hardly participate. Johnson, Boswell, Nabokov, De Vries are bound up in a shared project of interpretation, of constructing the compensatory conversation which inhabits the traumatic opening of form which is this story about shot cats. Call this, therefore, the microhistory of an anecdote. For what this anecdote provides is a way of thinking through the history of the anecdote in conversation, especially the special form of polite conversation which has come to be called "academic."

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[5] Helen Deutsch, *Loving Dr. Johnson* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), 174-75.

[6] De Vries, "Hodge," 45.

Pale Fire is itself a book about challenges to the academic conversation, and its epigraph is its sponsoring instance. We are asked to suppose *Pale Fire* to be the collaborative production—the "plexed artistry"—of two interlocutors: Charles Kinbote, a fictional New England professor of languages, and John Shade, a fictional New England poet.[7] Through a sequence of accidents culminating in the shooting death of Shade himself, the unpublished manuscript of Shade's poem "Pale Fire" falls into Kinbote's hands. But here is where things get strange: Kinbote, who is convinced that he is the exiled king of Zembla, provides two-hundred and thirty pages of commentary which

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[7] Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage, 1962), l. 814. One of the persistent concerns in the criticism of *Pale Fire* is who, in the fictional world of its own imagination, wrote it. Kinbote and Shade are dead; so is Nabokov. But the critical controversy, like the reflection of Shade's waxwing, lives on, flies on. Historical positions include the Kinboteans—Stegner, for example—who assert Kinbote invented a fictional Shade as an opportunity to develop his vision of himself; Shadeans—Field and Bader—who insist Shade invented a fictional Kinbote as a way of filling out a poetic vision that could not round itself off without artistic "plexing,"; and radical revisionists, like Boyd, who suggests that *Pale Fire* is the work of, for instance, Shade's widow Sibyl, or even, possibly, a sort of spirit-message from Shade's dead daughter, whose suicide is itself the most obvious subject of the poem "Pale Fire." But the best source for the current state of this question is probably also the most recent: the online Vladimir Nabokov Forum, (nabokv-l@listserv.ucsb.edu (University of California, Santa Barbara, 1997-present)) in which the question of the authorship of *Pale Fire* turns up, repeatedly.

gradually overwhelm the poem to introduce a theme of their own: they erase Shade's autobiographical poem about the drowning of his daughter in a frozen lake to introduce Kinbote's interpolated history about a regicide gone wrong. They insist that the absolutely illogical death of Shade is in fact the realization of a deep logic of abdication and revolution, Kinbote's own anxious self-history impinging on the otherwise sleepy college town of New Wye. It is this final text structured in four asymmetrical parts (Kinbote's "Foreword," "Notes," and "Index" nested around Shade's "Pale Fire") that composes *Pale Fire* as we receive it. Thus, as Kinbote contends, and many scholars after him have agreed, whatever "human reality" the poem "Pale Fire" has "depends entirely on the… reality only [Kinbote's] notes can provide."[8] The effect is reciprocal. The poem, as critics are obliged to receive it, could no more exist without the strangely alien and beautiful notes that it sponsors and inspires than the story of abdication and flight contained in the notes could continue to exist without the poem to which they uneasily refer. Inasmuch as the world of *Pale Fire* emerges as an aesthetic object sufficient to itself, it is at least as much Kinbote's work as Shade's.[9]

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[8] Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 27-28.

[9] See, for one strong study of this problem, David Packman, *Vladimir Nabokov: the Structure of Literary Desire* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982). "Clearly," writes Packman, "the poet could not have foreseen his accidental death at the hands of Gradus. Kinbote's assertion that the poem is incomplete outside this edition is not without its ironic validity" (77).

The corporate history that produced *Pale Fire* is very much like the corporate history that produced its epigraph: both *Pale Fire* and epigraph are collaborative productions, editions of recitations taken up and incorporated into new contexts. Each emerges out of a conversation between members of an academy: Shade and Kinbote at the aptly-named Wordsmith College; Boswell and Johnson in the perpetual conversation of the Literary Club. And however interrupted these conversations will eventually be, the space of the conversation is fundamentally, constitutively timeless, an "Arcady"—in Kinbote's words—of the contained academic friendship, with its own laws of physics. Though Kinbote notes, for instance, that "the calendar says I had known [Shade] only for a few months," nevertheless, he insists, "there exist friendships which develop their own inner duration, their own eons of transparent time, independent" of the impingements of "contumacious contingency."[10]

Both text and epigraph emerge out of a shared formal desire: they both—both *Pale Fire* and Boswell's *Life*—share a formal desire for a conversation without end. Such a conversation, which rediscovers Johnson's prospect of an art without end,[11] might be thought to be the constitutive category of the academy. "The task" of the academic, David Simpson tells us, "is to 'keep the conversation going' and its failure (and that of philosophy) would be 'to close [it] off.'"[12] Even consistency becomes subordinate to the

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[10] Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 279, 295, 18-19. De Vries, "Hodge," 45.

[11] Helen Deutsch, *Loving Dr. Johnson*, 74.

[12] In the spirit of his subject, Simpson (44) invokes the prior scholarship of Richard Rorty (377) and, elsewhere, Michael Oakeshott. See David Simpson, "Anecdotes and

imperative to continue the discourse. Conversational icons like Samuel Johnson, for instance, were at least as much admired for their style as for their fidelity to an argumentative or rhetorical position; Johnson was admired as a conversational virtuoso rather than the dogmatist of consistent lines of reasoning.[13] Of course, such an endless conversation always threatens to lapse into what Kinbote calls "mere facetiation," the kind of conversation constructed between "intellectuals" of the "inbreeding academic type."[14] This is what we—or at least Kinbote and his circle—have come to mean by an "academic issue"; an academic issue is that issue which is argued for the pleasure of arguing, which has, at least according to the outsider, no reality. It is what Richard Rorty calls "a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with

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Conversations: The Method of Postmodernity," *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half-Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 41-71; Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933); and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[13] Boswell and David Garrick suggested that "there was hardly any topick, if not one of the great truths of Religion and Morality, that he might not have been incited to argue, either for or against. Lord Elibank had the highest admiration of his powers" (Boswell, 3.24).

[14] Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 21.

nonhuman reality."[15] Such an "academic" conversation always threatens to lapse into what Kinbote calls "mere fatiguing jesting."[16]

As Simpson points out, however, one would not be exactly right to indicate that the academic conversation is only a conversation between persons. Instead, the problem is to imagine human conversation, the conversation between persons, which can nevertheless turn on real matters, which can, at nodes of convergence, construct what Kinbote calls "human reality." This is where the anecdote comes in. Anecdotes substantiate. Anchored conversations turn around anecdotes: the anecdote functions as a kind of "yardstick" (in Simpson's words) for distinguishing and quantifying polite conversation; it temporarily delimits the otherwise infinite possibility of speculation. It provides a "temporary clincher," a "landing place" that we recognize is only provisional, to introduce a measure of certainty into the "orbit of the voice."[17] It also opens up. It is a conveniently small bit of text instantly available for critical analysis; it provides a hardpoint for the kinds of methods developed by humanists for the consideration of reality. This, certainly, is how the *Life of Johnson* works; Boswell's *Life* is obsessed with the application of Johnsonian anecdotes. This, too, is how Kinbote's "notes" operate. His "Commentary" is loaded with anecdotes about Shade—and about himself. It is the "real" provided by these anecdotes that, through interpretation, provide "human reality" to a poem that otherwise "lacks" it. These are Kinbote's words, but they may as well be

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[15] Rorty, *Philosophy* 170.

[16] Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 21.

[17] Simpson, *Academic Postmodern*, 53.

Boswell's, or Johnson's; the habit of thinking the anecdote through the rhetoric of the real is at least as old as the conversation of the Literary Club.[18]

The anecdote, then, is that resource which opens up the possibility of conversation by providing access to the real. Of course, the anecdote is, in one sense, no more real than the rest of the conversation that it anchors. In Northrop Frye's terms, "Truth and falsehood are not literary categories"; rather, they "represent the directions or tendencies in which verbal structures go, or are thought to go."[19] "Human reality," in Kinbote's sense, is different than what is "true"; it is different from the real. It is in fact a "tendency" of a "verbal structure," a semiotic effect. This is why an anecdote can make a claim to its own origins in the truth of historical fact—as with the catshooter of Johnson's anecdote—even though its historical origin is itself often the least verifiable event about it. That an anecdote is uttered—this is true; they are witnessed and recorded in the records of conversations. But the catshooter, though he only exists by being actual, might never have existed; what exists, without a doubt, is only Boswell's judgment of Johnson—and his attendant efforts to capture and knit back into living conversation his

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[18] Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 28. Nabokov's late novels struggled with this question—with the problems put by interpretation and "reality." As Nabokov himself put the problem, *reality* is "one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes." Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Alfred Appel, Jr., ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 283.

[19] Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 17.

unmatchable style. The real, in this sense, is precisely that which lies outside the story, what can only be pointed towards or elicited through a structural tendency.

This is what the late Joel Fineman—in one of his last essays—calls the "effect of the real," the unique province and property of the anecdotal form. The anecdote, Fineman tells us, is "the item of history that… is convincing enough to come across as real at the same time as it dramatizes the act of telling and requires an act of interpretation or application"—a requirement which especially suits it for the academy. Its key work is to

> produce… the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity, i.e., it does so only in so far as its narration both comprises and refracts the narration it reports.[20]

The anecdote is useful, then, because it is both positioned "within" the "framing context" of the historical time to which it gestures, and also "without" it, separate from it; it marks an event as real by bridging between a historical moment in the past and a conversational moment in the present. It is, in fact, because it reaches back to a lost moment, an event which the conversation follows, that the anecdote creates its characteristic and definitive

[20] Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essays Toward the Release of Shakespeare's Will*, Stephen Greenblatt, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 59, 72.

“effect of the real.” The “real” of the anecdote is registered as a kind of a gap—a missed moment that creates the effect of the “occurrence of contingency,” the rhetorical effect of the ineffable event. Fineman continues,

> The opening of history that is… traced out by the anecdote within the totalizing whole of history, is something that is characteristically and ahistorically plugged up by a teleological narration that, though larger than the anecdote itself, is still constitutively inspired by the seductive opening of anecdotal form—thereby once again opening up the possibility, but, again *only* the possibility, that this new narration, now complete within itself…will itself be opened up by a further anecdotal operation, thereby calling forth some yet larger… circumscription, and so, so on and so forth.[21]

The ancecdote, as Fineman sees it, is an opening, an opportunity for narrative precisely because it is a “hole” in the totalizing “whole” of historical narrative. It punctures narrative time; it creates “the seductive opening” that allows history and dialogue to happen, a kind of “wound” or “hole” which is “plugged up” by narrative. And it is because of the double direction of the “wounding” and “plugging up” that an anecdote maybe be serialized; the narration which plugs up the anecdote becomes “complete within itself,” and can therefore be “reanecdotalized.” The event of the narration, that is,

[21] Fineman, “History,” 72.

is rendered formally small and incorporated into a new narration, "thereby calling forth some yet larger… circumscription, and so, so on and so forth."[22]

Fineman's innovation was to introduce, explicitly, a Lacanian vocabulary to anecdotal theory; this turn has struck other scholars as apt. Jane Gallop's *Anecdotal Theory*, a project which she signals she began without knowledge of Fineman's parallel research, similarly appeals to the psychoanalytic for its framework. Theory, as Gallop

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[22] Fineman's "Fiction and Fiction: the History of the Anecdote" was among the last of his essays. It imagined a longer discussion, a whole history of the anecdotal form from Thucydides to New Historicism, which he was, himself, ultimately unable to complete. Nor will it ever be completed by anyone else; this is, ultimately, part of the point. As Rosalind Krauss and John Rajchman note, "The quiet heroism on both their parts," both Fineman and editor Stephen Greenblatt, "in feeling that the debate itself is of utmost importance and that it should not be cut off by the sudden silence of one of its participants shapes, then, the introduction to this book." The historical lesson of "Fiction and Fiction" is that the "plugging up" of the anecdotal hole is simultaneously a pleasurable activity and a sort of compensation or warding-off of death; the effect of the real invited into the space of the academy is both a response to a sort of seduction and the register of a kind of trauma. In fact, the seductiveness of the anecdote is partly exactly the imperative to keep the conversation going, to keep it, in other words, from dying, even while we, as scholars, find ourselves limited by the all-too-real effects which the anecdote itself simulates. Rosalind Krauss and John Rajchman, "Foreword," in Fineman, *Subjectivity Effect*, viii.

puts it, "likes to set up an ideal realm where it need encounter no obstacle to the expansion of its understanding"; anecdotal theory, on the other hand, promises "to find seductive fissures in theory" and pry them open with the "unpredictability of event." Each essay in her collection summons up a personal anecdote, usually of the traumatic variety, by way of troubling, in order to advance, an academic conversation.[23] Like Fineman, that is, Gallop finds the anecdote compelling because it is both a bit of conversational reality, and a bit of the historical real; it promises an academic mode capable of theorizing and interpolating its own interruptions. "Anecdotal theory," that is, is "about trying to bring the unpredictability and responsiveness of the flesh into writing"; it is about introducing the world of material contingency into the otherwise controlled space of writing.[24] Like Fineman, Gallop turns to the anecdote as a way of redirecting the impingements of contingency back into the conversation without end—of in fact turning these impingements to account. This, Simpson reminds us, has been the characteristic turn of the academic postmodern.

Lacan's remarks are worth revisiting, partly because they rehearse, even while theorizing, some of the difficulties of the real in the conversation which stretches from London to New Wye.[25] In describing the anecdote as a "seductive opening" Fineman is

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[23] Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 15, 11, 157.

[24] Ibid., 164.

[25] Ibid., 11.55. The real is one of the triadic categories of the human mind that Lacan developed in the last half of his career: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. For the most comprehensive and inventive discussion of the "real," see Chapters 5-6 in Lacan's

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Seminar. See, also, Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Jaanus Maire, eds., *Reading Seminar XI* (New York: SUNY, 1995) which includes Fink's "The Real Cause of Repetition," 223-30; and Alan Sheridan, "Translator's Note," in Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), vii-xiv. My (radically condensed) discussion, above, is from Lacan's treatment of Aristotle's *Physics* in his *Seminar XI*. The term "*tychic*" is Lacan's appropriation of the Aristotelean dualism, translated, of "*tuché*" and "*automaton*," which Aristotle seems to have intended as the difference between what is "appropriate to agents that are capable of good fortune and of moral action" and "chance events that take place in the natural world at large" (see Bowie 102), but which Lacan identifies as the difference between the symbolic "chain"—a discipline, enabling but also deterministic—and that which lies behind and beyond it: the *tychic* real. The "tychic real," Lacan says (somewhat oracularly), is that which *seems* to violate the necessity of the symbolic chain, the events which happen *as if* by chance.

By what we translate as the "real," Lacan came to mean—as a number of commentators have pointed out—two things, which, for consistency, some modern translators preserve as the difference between "the real" and "reality." The "real," usually written as "*réel*," is that which lies outside the logical syntax of the unconscious, outside the totalizing set of language. It is the unknowable thing in itself before it is organized by the mind. What Bruce Fink (as one example) translates as "reality"—Lacan's *réalité*, or Kinbote's "human reality"—is what the real looks like after it is first

thinking of Lacan's seminar on the "touch of the real," the "*tychic réel*" (the root is "*tuché*")—the "real" that "touches" the subject. The real is never—for Fineman, Gallop, or Lacan—directly representable in discourse. It is "unassimilable," "apparently accidental," illogical, disruptive, inhuman; it slides away as soon as it is put into words. The "touch" of the real is therefore an impingement of random contingency into the logical play of grammatically structured symbolic space; words can only gather up the traces which the real has left; it is marked, in other words, by the experience of something having been missed. The story which relates such a "touch" is therefore the attempt to record and to contain in words something that seems to have happened "*as if by chance*"; it is an encounter which is psychoanalytically figured as "trauma," etymologically, a "wound." It is the site both of pleasure and pain, a space where the flesh enters into writing. And so it is, at least for the psychoanalyst, the *tychic réel* that opens up the

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structured by the mind. As Fink puts it (in *The Lacanian Subject*), "canceling out the 'real,' the subject creates 'reality'… language brings things into existence (makes them a part of human reality), things which had no *existence* prior to being ciphered, symbolized, or put into words" (25). As Lacan points out, this formulation is indebted to Kant; it is what is left of German epistemology after the challenge of the unknowable noumena, the *Ding-an-sich*. In order for a thing to have "human reality," it must be organized into the totalizing whole of language; this "whole," however, to harness the latent pun, is a record of the "holes" of the real that it can asymptotically *assume*, but never crack. See Fineman: the anecdote is a double intersection, a "formal play of anecdotal hole and whole" (73).

conversation in the first place, for the kinds of traumas which it implies are what would cause someone to seek out the psychoanalyst at all.[26]

Lacan's mostly theoretical discussion of the real exemplifies the problems of discussing something which categorically eludes speech; when misdirection and repetition fail him—when various strategies of attempting to catch the real "as if by chance" are finally inadequate—he therefore does what Boswell or Nabokov would anticipate him doing: he turns to an example. In fact, he turns to an anecdote, an elaborated interpretation of Sigmund Freud's interpretation of a dream. A father, whose son has just days before died of a burning fever, leaves an elderly neighbor to stand vigil over the body while the father sleeps in the next room. Something goes wrong—a candle falls while the elderly watcher dozes—and the father, still sleeping, begins to dream. The rest of the anecdote, as Lacan retells it, goes like this:

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[26] Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 55. This (radically condensed) discussion is from Lacan's treatment of Aristotle's *Physics* in his *Seminar XI*. The term "*tychic*" is Lacan's appropriation of the Aristotelean dualism, translated, of "*tuché*" and "*automaton*," which Aristotle seems to have intended as the difference between what is "appropriate to agents that are capable of good fortune and of moral action" and "chance events that take place in the natural world at large" (see Bowie 102), but which Lacan identifies as the difference between the symbolic "chain"—a discipline, enabling but also deterministic—and that which lies behind and beyond it: the *tychic* real. The "tychic real," Lacan says (somewhat oracularly), is that which *seems* to violate the necessity of the symbolic chain, the events which happen *as if* by chance.

> The reality… Freud describes thus: *Dass das Kind an seinem Bette steht*, that the child is near [the father's] bed, *ihn am Arme fasst*, takes him by the arm and whispers to him reproachfully, *und ihm vorwurfsvoll zuraunt: Vater, siehst du denn nicht*, Father, can't you see, *dass ich verbrenne*, that I am burning?[27]

He dreamt it, and woke to find it true; the body of his son was burning, set on fire by the fallen candle. Part of what this anecdote records, and this is what Lacan insists he wants us to notice, is that it is not the "real" that wakes the father. Even in the first instantiation of what has become an anecdote, the real is only what is missed. The real child is burning in the next room while the father continues to dream. A burning child can be slept through. Instead, it is the all-too-real "reality" of the child *figured* in the dream—in Lacan's words, "*in* the dream, another reality"—which wakes him.[28] It is not the touch of the candle, that is, that centers the father's trauma. And it is not a logic of soft compounds and applied heat, of combustion and light and burning flesh, which will allow the father to make sense of the burning of his son. Nor, in fact, does this even allow him

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[27] See Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 59, and Sigmund Freud, "The Psychology of the Dream Process," in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, vols. 4-5 of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 26 vols., James Strachey, ed. and transl. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 5.509-10. The italics are Freud's, repeated by the transcriber of Lacan's seminar.

[28] Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 58

to make sense of the burning fever which killed the son in the first place—though it possibly recaptures much of the symbolic weight of that prior, all-too-real burning. Instead, it is the dream, having caught up the echoes or traces of the real event—which wakes the father, and it is to this anecdotalized "reality" to which the father will return; it is the oddly human, strangely real cry of his son that is the only partly-understood, traumatic marker of the "touch of the real."[29]

That the dream is recording a real event is partly signaled by the atavistic verb "*verbrenne*"—that descendant of the Gothic strong verb "brinnan"—which substitutes the sonic touch of "burning" to the ear for the actual burning of the child. The "cry," Lacan tells us, is "a firebrand."[30] But this substitution is not quite adequate to the real towards which it points. The real is only exactly what is "prior to the assumption of the symbolic," what cannot be expressed directly in the world of words.[31] So *verbrennen* is a

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[29] This passage in Lacan's *Seminar* receives an extensive and sensitive treatment in David Lee Miller's *Dreams of the Burning Child: Sacrificial Sons and the Father's Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 176-190. Miller takes up Freud's relation as an invitation to a broad history of filial sacrifice in western culture. He points out that Lacan slightly misremembers, or misreads, Freud's anecdote; in Freud's version, the child in the next room is a child, neuter—"das Kind"—which Lacan remembers as a son.

[30] Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 59.

[31] Sheridan, "Note," xi. Also see Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 276. Lacan continues: "It is the world of words that creates the world of things—

linguistic contrivance which erases as much as it records, not a "rupture," but an "experience of a rupture." It works not by being the record of the thing itself—not by recording the burning itself or even the sensation of being burned—but as the record of the memory of having already missed the opportunity to intervene. The "real" knowledge that the son is burning is contained in a paradoxical envelope: the father is only able to see because he imagines an encounter with his son who insists that he "can't… see." The father dreams his son asking him—pleading with him—"*Vater, siehst du denn nicht*… *dass ich verbrenne*" as a way of thematizing the fact that he, the dreamer, has already missed the event, is in fact missing the event as he dreams. Indeed, he has *twice* missed it: the burning son recalls the cruel burning of the child in a fever, which the father was likewise powerless to stop. In its perfected form, this anecdote therefore creates an effect similar to experience of the event which it misses. The "cry is a firebrand"; "of itself it brings fire where it falls—and one cannot see what is burning, for the flames blind us to the fact that the fire bears on the *Unterlegt*, on the *Untertragen*, on the real."[32]

It is characteristic of Lacan's style, as he approaches the real, to hover obsessively around what he calls "most cruel point of the object." Repetition is one of Lacan's "four

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things which at first run together in the *hic et nunc* of the all in the process of becoming—by giving its concrete being to their essence, and its ubiquity to what has always been: κτῆμα ές άεὶ."

[32] Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 56, 59.

fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis," the one that signals the touch of the real.[33] The father, that is, repeats the trauma once in the dream—a repetition, indeed, already of the burning fever—but then returns to it again and again. This is what makes it an anecdote in the first place—the repetition of the event in a story, or, more precisely, repetition of the experience of *missing* the event. But the response to trauma is not limited to the individual. It is corporate; it stitches its way between the conversations which it traumatizes. Lacan envelops an anecdote, a story of a dream, in an analytic reverie, and returns to it, over the course of this analysis, three or four times. Of course, Lacan did not dream this dream; he is repeating an especially striking anecdote which he encountered in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Nor did Freud, himself, dream it; he only heard it from a student, who in turn heard it from a lecturer, who perhaps heard it from an analysand—if, indeed, it wasn't only made up. "Its actual source," writes Freud, is "unknown."[34] What is demonstrable—from the record of the anecdote itself—is that each of these conversants adopts the same anecdote and incorporates it into a new conversation for a new end. The anecdote which Lacan uses to make the distinction between human "reality" (which is symbolic) and "the real" (which is missed) is the same anecdote (he says so himself) which Freud had deployed in order to demonstrate wish-fulfillment in the dream-process. Neither, of course, is particularly interested in the real father, or the real son who was burned. This is only the event which each of them had missed. In fact, each of them might be said to be principally interested in summoning up

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[33] The title of Lacan's *Seminar XI*.

[34] Freud, "Dream Process," 5.509.

the burned child only by way of advancing a conversation about something else—the "real," wish-fulfillment, or whatever. Analysand, lecturer, student, Freud, Lacan (and stenographer of Lacan's seminar and even myself): the anecdote's conversational career is a corporate response to that trauma which the anecdote, itself, sponsors; it is an academic response to contingency, seeking to recuperate the traumatic effect of the real, to recover and to make fireproof the compensatory conversation. And so, says Fineman, so on and so forth.

This essay returns, now, to the anecdote with which it began—to Johnson musing over his cat—not by way of providing a Lacanian reading of Boswell's *Life*, but, in the tradition of Joel Fineman, by way of providing a Boswellian reading of Lacan's *Seminar*. It is precisely because of the apotropaic work of conversation that Boswell and Johnson would have sympathized with the philosophical stakes of Lacan's discussion. For Lacan summons up a trauma, and then spends the rest of a Paris afternoon—February 12th, 1964—attempting to make sense of it, to knit it back into the academic conversation of the seminar room. This is a conversational form which Boswell and Johnson helped invent.[35] Indeed, Nabokov's iteration of Boswell's anecdote returns us explicitly to the

[35] The conversation which stretches from Freud's student's lecturer's analysand's dream to Lacan might be thought to be participating in the tradition of "good conversation" which Lawrence Lipking argues is an "eighteenth-century legacy." See Lipking, "Inventing the Eighteenth-Centuries: A Long View," in Leo Damrosch, ed., *The*

historical conditions of this conversational form; both the anecdote and the kind of conversation it "comprises and refracts" emerge from a tension particular to the kind of London town-life that Boswell's anecdote itself explicitly conjures up. A return to Johnsonian conversational practice, then, is in order precisely because a memory of the kinds of tensions built into the Johnsonian style, and even the historical critical understanding of that style, persists in conversational practice. As Leo Braudy puts it, "Johnson's career is instructive not least because his attitude towards the relation of literature and life and the proper function of critical discourse still so influences our own."[36] Put differently, the history of Johnson's cat-shooting anecdote—from Johnson to Nabokov, from London to New Wye—traces in small a history of polite conversation, even as it passes through such monolithic theorists as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

Johnson's style was part of a much larger tradition with social implications greater than Johnson's own claims for it. As Lawrence Klein reminds us, the Johnsonian form of discursive politeness was only one articulation of a remapping of the spaces of academic thought underway in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, shifting "what [was] called philosophy from certain locales… to resituate it in new ones."[37]

Profession of Eighteenth-Century Literature: Reflections on an Institution (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993): 24.

[36] Leo Braudy, "Varieties of Literary Affection," in *The Profession of Eighteenth-Century Literature*, 36.

[37] Lipking, "Inventing the Eighteenth-Centuries: A Long View," in Leo Damrosch, ed., *The Profession of Eighteenth-Century Literature: Reflections on an Institution* (Madison:

Joseph Addison, for example, had seen his self-appointed task as bringing philosophy "out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and Coffee-Houses"[38]; the Earl of Shaftesbury saw his job as introducing philosophy into the space of the gentlemanly conversation, into drawing rooms and carriages in the park. While Shaftesbury and Addison phrased their work as the education of linguistic style and habits of deportment, they were effecting a demographic

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University of Wisconsin Press, 1993): 37. The conversation which stretches from Freud's student's lecturer's analysand's dream to Lacan might be thought to be participating in the tradition of "good conversation" which Lawrence Lipking argues is an "eighteenth-century legacy" (24). Leo Braudy, in "Varieties of Literary Affection," agrees: "Johnson's career is instructive not least because his attitude towards the relation of literature and life and the proper function of critical discourse still so influences our own" (Damrosch, *Profession*, 36). Neither Johnson nor Boswell would have accepted Lacan's vocabulary, not least because they did not think in terms of a subconscious, and certainly not a subconscious which is (Lacan tells us) "structured like a language." Yet Johnson and Boswell would, I think, have understood Lacan's response to the curious anecdote he himself relates. It is precisely because of the apotropaic work of conversation which I have sketched out above that Boswell and Johnson would likely have sympathized with the philosophical stakes of Lacan's discussion.

[38] Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 5 vols. Donald F. Bond, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1.44.

and even ethical revolution—defining spaces of London intercourse.[39] So while the explicit territory of politeness was one of manners and delivery, it had broader cultural implications bound up in remapping the demographics of academic participation. Johnson's Fleet Street Literary Club, and even his drawing room at 17 Gough Square, were located on the faultlines of these broader transformations in the rules of philosophical discussion; for these figures, politeness represented a rhetorical solution to a sociological crisis, a set of rules invented to govern modes of address in a rapidly expanding academic agora.

Such institutions as Samuel Johnson's Literary Club, or his *Rambler* essays, may therefore best be thought of as seeking "processes within the babble, diversity, and liberty of the new discursive world of the Town that would produce order and direction."[40] But Johnson's style does not end here; as numerous critics have noticed, his work is marked by nothing so much as a tension between regularity and diversity, order and interruption. As linguist Carey McIntosh puts it, Johnson's conversation is characterized by a "high style," a reflection of his "wisdom"; this is exemplified by his *Rambler* essays. However,

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[39] Indeed, politeness was also an exclusive discipline; see Thomas Woodman's *Politeness and Poetry in the Age of Pope* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), who argues that "attention to politeness had a powerfully defensive as well as a positive side" (22). Politeness was socially exclusionary; it was also a way "to paper over the cracks" (23) of a potentially fragmentary and violent culture.

[40] Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12.

Johnsonian conversation also vocalizes the "low style" of the urban masses, a resource which incorporates the reality (or its effect) that only "the Town" can provide. This idiomatic "low style," McIntosh observes, is full of "low words" that "figure in Johnson's down-to-earth 'clinchers.'"[41] It is the town that politeness seeks to exclude, but it is also the town that provides the opportunity for the "young gentleman" to be "running about… shooting cats"; the town is exactly what the Johnsonian conversation invites in to substantiate it. Finally, McIntosh remarks, it is precisely this risky stylistic gesture towards particularity which marks Johnson "as a human being more fully alive than most people are, more closely in touch with reality."[42] Such a "fully alive" conversation without end—and the fully alive person who participates in it—would therefore seem intimately to attend on the threat of the conversational death. This is what McIntosh calls Johnson's "touch with reality"; it is something like what Lacan calls the "touch of the real"; and it is the essence of Johnson's rhetorical style continually to import these moments of the real in order to master them.[43]

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[41] The scare-quotes are McIntosh's, though he could almost be quoting (anachronistically, of course) Simpson, *Academic Postmodern*¸ 53. See Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700-1800: Style, Politeness, and Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 108.

[42] McIntosh, *Evolution*, 106-7.

[43] Also see Fredric Bogel's discussion in *Literature and Insubstantiality in Later Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pages 173-194, and particularly 189.

Johnson, who saw himself as a "very polite man," insisted that the "influence" of politeness "upon the manners is constant and uniform, so that, like an equal motion, it escapes perception. The circumstances of every action are so adjusted to each other, that we do not see where any error could have been committed, and rather acquiesce in its propriety, than admire its exactness." [44] Johnson traced this style of politeness—with its emphasis on uniformity, on the suppression of mechanical "motion"—back to a single historical source: Sir Francis Bacon's "Short Notes for Civil Conversation," which first appeared, posthumously, in 1648.[45] These "Notes," like Johnson's remarks, limit themselves to describing desirable habits of speech; conversation, for Bacon, is best delivered with an "easy and natural" manner, with "no appearance of labour, constraint, or stiffness."[46] For Bacon, politeness is immediately a matter of how ideas are delivered; it is a governing aesthetic which operates on "manners," rendering them invisible. Lurking under this discourse about uniformity are hints, however, that this short paper on style is seeking, both in its performance and as its project, to propose a conversational mode apt to Bacon's larger project. While a few specialists might recognize Bacon as an innovator in conversational style, he is of course popularly and politely recognized as the pioneer of inductive reasoning—of the close look at real things to provide opportunities

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[44] Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, vols. 3-5 of *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 16 vols., W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 4.161.

[45] Boswell, *Johnson*, 4.236

[46] Francis Bacon, "Short Notes for Civil Conversation," in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, James Spedding, et. al., ed., 15 Vols (London: Longman, 1857-1874), 13.310.

for academic discussion. Indeed, induction was no less central to Bacon's understanding of conversational praxis than it was to his scientific method. Meaningful conversation, according to the "Short Notes," is grounded in the judicious use of what Bacon called "circumstances" or "apophthegmes"[47]—brief stories, compact to themselves, which insist on their historicity, what he called the "kernel" of their own historical truth.[48] These "circumstances" record not the "words," but the "deeds," of men, "whereof history doth properly receive and retain in memory," and, according to Bacon, they are therefore to be not just the foundations of good historical writing, but of meaningful conversation in general.[49]

Bacon left a notebook full of such "circumstances"; he jotted them down as one of his last, and, as he saw it, most important projects: the cultivation of good conversation. Such "circumstances" or "apophthegmes… serve"

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[47] In the very "Short Notes" themselves, Bacon only hints, by way of negatives, the function and exercise of circumstances; "to use many circumstances, ere you come to the matter," he writes, "is wearisome; and to use none at all, is but blunt" (13.310).

[48] In the introduction to the *Apophthegmes,* Bacon writes: "They serve to be interlaced in continued speech. The serve to be recited upon occasion of themselves. They serve if you take out the kernel of them, and make them your own" (13.327). Bacon anticipates the language of psychoanalysis—see, for example, Abraham's *The Shell and the Kernel*.

[49] Bacon, *Works*, 6.201.

> not for pleasure only and ornament, but also for action and business; being, as one called them, *mucrones verborum*, — speeches with a point or edge, whereby knots in business are pierced and severed. And as former occasions are continually recurring, that which served once will often serve again, either produced as a man's own or cited as of ancient authority.[50]

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[50] This is from *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623), which Bacon intended to be the first part of his unfinished, expanded *Advancement of Learning*. The translation that I quote here appears in a note to Speddings "Introduction" to Bacon's *Apophthegmes* (13.327-28n). A glance at Bacon's original Latin, however, is instructive: "Neque apophthegmata ipsa ad delectationem et ornatum tantum prosunt, sed ad res gerendas etiam et usus civiles. Sunt enim (ut aiebat ille) veluti *secures* aut *mucrones verborum*; qui rerum et negotiorum nodos acumine quodam secant et penetrant; occasiones autem redeunt in orbem, et quod olim erat commodum rursus adhiberi et prodesse potest, sive quis ea tanquam sua proferat, sive tanquam vetera" (Bacon, *Works*, 2.219). Spedding's elegant translation perpetuates the academic task implicit in Johnson's own style: it makes Bacon's Latin polite by excluding its violent reality. A less felicitous but more literal translation of the pertinent passage—my own—helps reveal the special status (signaled in part, apparently, by his italics) Bacon proposes for apophthegms, with their violent and even traumatic potentials; they are "*mucrones verborum,*" the "axes or swords of words, which cut and penetrate knots in affairs and negotiations with their points." Apophthegmes, Bacon tells us, puncture; they wound and penetrate.

Half a century before they were called by their current name, Bacon was theorizing the anecdote; by "circumstance" and "apophthegm" it becomes clear that Bacon meant something like a small bit of history imported into the conversation to give it reality. Their very repetitive usefulness—things which can "serve" in conversation once, and again as "former occasions" recur—marks the particular logic of the anecdote. It marks, that is, the effect of the real, what Spedding translates as the apophthegm's "point or edge," which is used for "piercing and severing." Bacon's formulation of the apophthegm therefore contains the kernel of Johnson's understanding of the use of anecdotes in civil conversation—and it is to this kernel that Johnson alludes in his remarks.[51] Bacon's late work likewise informs Boswell's *Life of Johnson*; in the final

[51] It is part of the history of the anecdote, and its incorporation into the conversation, that Bacon insists that one should use neither too many or too few circumstances (Bacon, *Works*, 13.310), where Boswell, in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, records Johnson "fancy[ing]" that "mankind may come, in time, to write all aphoristically, except in narrative; grow weary of preparation, and connection, and illustration, and all those arts by which a big book is made. If a man is to wait till he weaves anecdotes into a system, we may be long in getting them, and get but a few, in comparison of what we might get" (Boswell 5.39). Of course, this is exactly what Bacon, fearing that his collection of anecdotes would be lost with his death, had provided in his *Apophthegms*.

gesture of his "Introduction," Boswell turns explicitly to Bacon to qualify his biographical method.[52]

Put differently, the Literary Club was working through a tension built into Bacon's double-imperative to turn to "circumstances" even while avoiding the appearance of "labour, constraint, or stiffness." As Johnson imagines the relationship in the *Rambler*, anecdotes provide moral instruction; "whether," the Rambler opines, "we read as enquirers after natural or moral knowledge, whether we intend to enlarge our science, or increase our virtue," we trace these ends through the "circumstances" of "particular lives."[53] "Circumstances" is Johnson's word, but he might as well be quoting Bacon. He is certainly thinking of it in the Baconian sense, not of the "words," but the "deeds" of men, of "apopthegms," or, as they came to be called, "-anas." Such a circumstance is what opens up the timelessness of Johnson's ethics by gesturing to the accidents of history in the reconstructed terms of history's own coming-into-being. It

[52] Boswell paraphrases Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), that it is "more honour… to take the wise and pithy words of others, than to have every word of his own to be made an apothegm [sic] or an oracle" (Boswell 1.34). Boswell's pairing of "pith" and "wisdom" in some senses exemplifies the uneasy tension between the conversation and its anecdotes that I am tracing out here.

[53] Johnson, *Rambler*, 3.320. Biography "realises the event however fictitious, or approximates it however remote, by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate" (3.318-19). It is, in this way, another technology of the real; it "realises the event" by stitching together timelines.

allows Johnson's timeless moral laws—the symmetry of which marks them as the logic of the academy—to map themselves back on time.

In deploying the anecdote for its double work, Johnson's conversational gambits were often deliberately disquieting; he was known for his "desire to shock and upset," especially in the service of demonstrating a point.[54] If his first example missed, he would employ a second, more striking one. As Oliver Goldsmith claimed, "there is no arguing with Johnson; for when his pistol misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt end of it."[55] Bacon's *mucrones verborum*—the swords of words—for Goldsmith become a pistol, which Johnson wields to sever argumentative knots. The sponsoring anecdote which forms the epigraph to *Pale Fire* is just such a conversational weapon—either the pistol-shot, or, perhaps, the butt end. Johnson rehearses this anecdote about the young

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[54] John A. Vance, "The Laughing Johnson and the Shaping of Boswell's *Life*," in *Boswell's* Life of Johnson: *New Questions, New Answers*. Vance, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 204-27, here 212.

[55] Boswell *Life* 2.100. Editor George Birkbeck Hill, in a footnote to the *Life*, provides a counterclaim with a remark by Joshua Reynolds: "After the heat of contest was over, if he had been informed that his antagonist resented his rudeness, he was the first to seek after a reconciliation." See Robert Leslie and Tom Taylor, *Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds: With Notices of Some of His Contemporaries*, 2 Vols. (London: Murray, 1865), 2.457, qtd. in Boswell, *Johnson*, 2.100n1. It should perhaps be mentioned that the second half of Goldsmith's name turns up explicitly in the name of Kinbote's institution: Wordsmith College.

gentleman because it signally proves through circumstance what he knows to be ethically true in general. He shoots it off not just to develop a point, but to provide the nugget of reality which will clinch the argument in his favor. It is impossible any more to know what rhetorical point Johnson meant this particular anecdote to clinch: possibly it was meant to illustrate the moral deserts of a profligate life; possibly the ends of poor breeding; maybe simply one episode in a life of a dislike for animals. What is clear is that it comes at the end of a narrative, with a certain cogency and direction—"Sir, when I heard of him last," he remarks. Behave as this young gentleman has behaved, Johnson insists, you too will end up running about town shooting cats.

But then something peculiar happens. The casual mention of the cat-shooting, which should only be a way of clinching a discussion, insists—scandalously—on its own all-too-real reality. For what Johnson has discovered is a bit of the real he was not looking for, caught in the webwork of his own conversational effects. Johnson is suddenly reminded that Hodge, after all, is a real cat, whose feline tissue is subject to receive a real bullet in the way that the tissuey, textualized cats of the anecdote only serve to receive the rhetorical bullets of an ethical discussion. What kills the conversation is a signifier—"shooting"—that summons up a real bullet in an onomatopoetic echo that can trigger an overpowerful response in Johnson's mind; it punctures the idea of Hodge at the same moment that it explodes in the drawing room. It is an insistent cry—"shooting," then "shot," "shot"—the repetition of which signals the touch of the real. Like the bullet it represents, like the effect of the bullet it gathers up in its traces, the word itself opens with the palatal fricative /S/ and closes with the impact of the alveolar stop /t/; the narration of the shot aurally comprises the passage of the bullet and the closure of speech

that it portends. The word is a bullet, an atavistic holdover as old as the written language in which it is caught up (and probably older), and it of itself traumatizes the drawing room and the conversation it contains.

Johnson's "reverie" is his reaction to this suddenly realized trauma, a conversational body going into shock. He talks to himself, closing the circuit so that the contingencies of an insistent real (its effect) can almost be overwhelmed by his own rhetorical power. He silences, or attempts to silence, the bare signifier of "shot" under the claims of the interline rhyming "not," erasing it—through a rhetorical trick—in the subordinate half of a crippled couplet "Hodge shall *not*/ be shot." In this way, as a way of subordinating the problem of the bullet back under the aesthetic of politeness, Hodge can "circulate… bulletproof" in the armor of the grammar which prestuctures Johnson's own deeply grammatical mind.[56] Out differently, Hodge himself was never in danger. It is not Hodge, exactly, that Johnson is reminded of, for Hodge does not even seem to be in the room. Instead, as more than one critic has observed, it is a narrative of Hodge that the bullet threatens to kill, a fantasy of a sealed academy that Hodge represents, as a kind of attendant domestic spirit: Hodge as an icon, as Johnsonian critic William Siebenschuh argues, of an "image of Johnson" himself.[57] For Johnson, protecting Hodge (the idea, or even the word "Hodge") is the same thing as protecting a conversational form from the

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[56] Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 300.

[57] William Siebenschuh, "Dr. Johnson and Hodge the Cat: Small Moments and Great Pleasures in the Life," in *Fresh Reflections on Samuel Johnson: Essays in Criticism*, Prem Nath, ed. (Troy: Whitston Publishing Company, 1987), 398.

dangers of the cat-shooter that he, himself, has conjured up. As Michael Siedel puts it, Johnson's reaction "reveals the subjective impulse to close off death from life, to avoid the invasions of violence that can shatter insular visions and obliterate domestic security… The power of Johnson's concerned mind cannot admit the seepage of contingency into his own reality."[58] The bullet is not meant for Hodge; it is meant for Johnson.

The Johnsonian conversation might be thought to exist only to find these traumatic openings by way of filling them; at its most successful, the conversation is killed by the very effects upon which it depends. The death of Hodge, that does not happen, is replaced by the death of the conversation, that does. So, too, in a broader sense, the *Life of Johnson* is not about Johnson. As William Dowling points out, what remains of Johnson in Boswell's *Life* is only an "objectification and enlargement of Boswell's own perception of his hero," the "timeless" history of Boswell's sense of his representative figure.[59] Boswell's anecdote of Hodge, then, is representative of his larger

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[58] Michael Siedel suggests what I take to be the key structural correspondence between the epigraph and the matter of *Pale Fire*—this response to the trauma of the real—though his concern, ultimately, is mostly with diagnosing Kinbote's dementia. See Seidel "*Pale Fire*," 837-855.

[59] I quote Dowling as a relatively recent critic working in a sophisticated way on an older, well-known position. See William C. Dowling, *Language and Logos in Boswell's* Life of Johnson (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981), here 162; but also Donald Greene, "The Development of the Johnson Canon," in *Restoration and Eighteenth Century*

narrative and historiographic project.[60] The central fact of the *Life of Johnson*, which it longingly and painfully imagines as its end and object, is the death of Johnson that Boswell missed. Boswell was, in fact, in Scotland, while Johnson was dying of in London. What Boswell offers instead are anecdotes. But, as the trend of this argument should by now make clear, even a first-hand account would exhibit the same apotropaic urgency. "When we see," Dowling continues, "that neither Boswell nor his imaginary audience exists except as they are projected by his narration, we arrive at the reality, the one reality on which the *Life* ultimately insists, of narration as discourse, discourse as language existing solely as language."[61] This is what Kinbote means by reality, what

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Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 407-427; and Richard Schwartz, *Boswell's Johnson: A Preface to the Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

[60] Such an anecdote contains, "*in nuce*…the terminological structure" of the narrative as a whole. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952), 59. Burke (61) anticipates Fineman (72): "Once we have set seriously to work developing a systematic terminology out of our anecdote, another kind of summation looms up."

[61] Dowling, *Language*, 138. The death of Johnson is the central fact of the *Life of Johnson*, though, of course, it appears at its end. It is its end and object, which shapes and predetermines it in all its aspects—from its opening gesture, to build a "suitable monument," to its final paragraph, which reads like an eulogy—from epigraph to epitaph, in other words. Instead of writing the fact of the death of Johnson, however—medical reports, or whatever, which were available—Boswell returns it to an extended discourse

Lacan means by "*another* reality… in the dream." It is not Johnson's death which is at

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constructed among the now straying members of the Club. He quotes William Gerard Hamilton:

> He has made a chasm, which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up.— Johnson is dead.— Let us go to the next best:—there is nobody; — no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson. (Boswell, *Johnson*, 4.420)

The puncture of his death ("— Johnson is dead.—") bears the marks of the real—of the "real" that has already passed on its way. The death of Johnson is an opening of form, an opportunity and demand for conversation, a "chasm" which can never be filled up. The *Life of Johnson* both reproduces and inhabits this opening. It is a response to the latent invitation that Hamilton himself voices. Hamilton claims that "no-one puts us in mind of Johnson"; Boswell responds by making the entire nation "think Johnson." He has "Johnsonized the land" (Boswell, *Johnson*, 1.13).

It is in the context of Hamilton's and Boswell's remarks over Johnson that Stephen Greenblatt's remarks on Joel Fineman resonate most strongly. In the paratextual matter of *The Subjectivity Effect* Greenblatt writes: "There was, quite simply, no one like him, and his death is an absolute loss. But the essays collected here continue to function as provocative anecdotes, introducing unsettling openings into our comfortable narrations."

stake, but Boswell's ability to keep him alive in his *Life*. And it is, to risk a bit of speculation, possibly for this reason that so many of the great theorists of the anecdotal form—Bacon, Boswell, and Fineman, among others—have taken up the anecdote in the last years of their lives: what the anecdote promises, uniquely, is a form which bridges the impossible real with the arcadia of the conversation without end.

It is worth mentioning, by way of conclusion, that *Pale Fire* takes its title from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, that long, obsessive play about its eponymous misanthrope. "The moon's an arrant thief," Timon opines, "And her pale fire she snatches from the sun."[62] Timon would seem to be offering us a mimetic theory of art—of art as a derivative mirroring of an impossibly bright original: art as the moon's reflection of the sun. This position has been treated at length by such scholars as Beatrix Hesse, who finds the artistry of *Pale Fire* to subsist in its reflexivity—*Pale Fire* as drawing attention to its incorporation, and fleshing-out, of "Pale Fire." Likewise, Kinbote, who spends his last days in a sort of low-rent hermitage polishing his commentary to "Pale Fire"—Nabokov hinted elsewhere that these Notes would comprise Kinbote's last act—would seem to rediscover Timon's own misanthropy; Kinbote, that is, rails from his "Timonian cave."[63] But the practice of Kinbote's notes—indeed, the very fact that Kinbote seems to imagine himself as reliving Timon's prior moment of seclusion—calls for a sensitivity to the recuperative work of literary study, to what we might call its figural dimensions, or what Joseph Roach invites us to call the "Orphic"

[62] William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens* (IV.iii.438-440)

[63] Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 39.

depth of human experience: art as not merely reflective or reflexive, but as a compensatory lament which returns obsessively to the sites of inaugural traumata.[64] Think of Orpheus, who twice loses Eurydice: once from an asp-sting on his wedding-day, and again when, leading her from Hades, he too-soon glances back. Caught already in the repetitive to-and-fro of life and death, the Bard of Rhodope thereafter confines himself to repeating that backward glance. Hovering around the cruel point of her vanishing, he composes endless laments of his loss. As with Orpheus, so too with Boswell, or with the father in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Such an art constructs its living, moving present out of a series of backward glances; it invites death into a conversational present.[65] Not reflexivity, but repetition is its governing logic.

As its epigraph signals, *Pale Fire* repeats the project of conversational recuperation initiated with Johnson's anecdote about the London cat-shooter; it, too, is a book about stopping bullets. Kinbote and Shade are having a conversation in New Wye—the quiet town of Wordsmith College—when a bullet emerges out of the illogical real and drops the slightly graying poet John Shade dead. Johnson's unnamed cat-shooter re-emerges as Nabokov's Jack Gray, an inmate escaped from the Institute for the

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[64] Joseph Roach, "Performance: The Blunders of Orpheus," *PMLA* 125.4 (2010): 1078-86.

[65] Brian Boyd has gone so far as to insist that *Pale Fire* is the product of two extended episodes of communion with the dead: Kinbote with Shade, and Shade (or Kinbote) with Shade's daughter, Hazel. See Boyd, *Nabokov's "Pale Fire": The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2001).

Criminally Insane. He shoots Shade by mistake; it is a case of mistaken identity. But it is Kinbote's project to demonstrate that Jack Gray is in fact Jack Gradus, a hitman from a supersecret Zemblan assassination squad bent on murdering Kinbote himself. Kinbote's presumptuous task is to locate Gradus's asymptotic approach in the fact of the poem itself, to rewrite "Pale Fire," not as the swansong of Shade's tragically short life, but as the proof and formal opening of his own reverie. Kinbote's critical apparatus therefore inhabits the opening of form that the bullet creates; it is the death of the author which becomes the opportunity for over three hundred pages of notes, an entire *Life*, which is his own.[66] Just as "Pale Fire" takes the death of Shade's daughter as its opportunity for nearly a thousand lines of verse—posed in Johnsonian couplets—reflecting on Shade's own life and art, so *Pale Fire* takes the death of Shade as the opportunity for a long, elegant reverie over Kinbote himself. Indeed, it is the work of these notes to provide not the "real" which Kinbote feels is lacking from the "Poem," but, instead, the human "reality" which is lacking from the touch of the bullet.

Still, what is at stake is not exactly Kinbote's fiction of himself, constructed in the tragedy of a New England poet; it is a fiction of himself in an academic conversation. The anxiety, here, is not just about Shade, about the possible death of Shade; it is that Kinbote, as he imagines himself, only lives in the fantasy that Shade has the potential to

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[66] Kinbote, Nabokov tells us, "committed suicide… after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem" (*Strong Opinions*, 74). Kinbote's final claim—"My work is finished. My poet is dead" (300)—is the joined parallel halves of the coupled return of the death of the academic conversation.

help him realize—a reverie of himself as King that he expects Shade to write in a Zemblan epic. It is appropriate therefore that Kinbote, after his friend is suddenly shot dead, is left holding the manuscript of the Shade poem. What he is holding is his vision of himself: himself at the center of his "web of the world."[67] One author (Johnson) dead from a self-inflicted wound, and another (Shade) shot in a case of mistaken identity; a child frozen in a lake and another dead of a burning fever: *Pale Fire*, like Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (like Shade's "Pale Fire" or Lacan's Seminar XI) is really the long and anxious eulogy of its editor: biography as autobiography, and vice versa.[68] Its work is to prove that a death is an effect of a conversational paradox, to recuperate the death of Shade as the opening of a conversation without end.

From Bacon to Shade—Oxford to New Wye—the public sphere has always been as much about the openness of public access (Habermas's *offentlich*) as it has been about the openness of bodies and subjects to public experience, with all its illogicality and randomness. The public sphere is public inasmuch as it is, in Mark Seltzer's words, "a public that meets in the spectacle of the untoward accident": a young gentleman, for example, shooting cats. Such a pathological public sphere—the world of Johnson's cat-

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[67] Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 289.

[68] Indeed, more than one commentator has noticed resemblances between Kinbote and Nabokov himself—*Pale Fire* as, that is, a backward glance to the mistaken murder of Nabokov's father by an assassin sent after someone else. See for instance Priscilla Meyer's remarks in *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).

shooter just as much as the world of the Literary Club—might be summed up this way: "sociality and the wound have become inseparable… a sociality that gathers, and a public that meets, in the spectacle of the untoward accident and in an identification with the world insofar as it is a hostile place—the pathological public sphere."[69] Seltzer's work seeks to account for a taste for representations of overt trauma—gatherings at car crashes, movies about serial killers, and so forth. But a close look at the conversational legacy of Boswell's Johnson suggests that this sort of public pathology, the social turn towards trauma, is in fact endemic to our characteristic conversational form; polite conversation, the conversation of openness, is not so much a substitute for violence as it is structured by its own vexed relationship to contingency—quotidian trauma rerouted as the constitutive opening of academic conversation.

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[69] Seltzer, "Wound Culture: The Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (1997): 25.