The Immobility of the Novel

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1.

Baudelaire begins his extraordinary *The Painter of Modern Life* (written 1859; published 1863) by surveying “delightful coloured engravings of the last century”—in particular, a “series of fashion-plates dating from the Revolution and finishing more or less with the Consulate” (Baudelaire, 1-2). What’s exemplary about these “sketches of manners,” as he calls them, is their “apparent frivolity,” the way the artist captures the rapid movement of “external things” (bodies, clothing, horses, dogs) with an “equal speed of execution” (Baudelaire, 4). The “genius of the painter of manners is of a mixed nature, by which I mean that it contains a strong literary element,” Baudelaire asserts; “Sometimes he is a poet; more often he comes closer to the novelist” in his preoccupation with “the passing moment,” the “daily metamorphosis of external things” (4), the “beauty of circumstance” (1).

I will return to this alignment of the eighteenth-century caricaturist with the novelist. At the end of his virtuosic reading of Baudelaire’s aesthetics in “Central Park,” Benjamin muses that the “*Fleurs du mal* have certainly gained in stature through the fact that Baudelaire left no novel” (54). And I’m going to suggest that if Baudelaire *had* left a novel, it would look something like Burney’s *Camilla*—a text composed, like those sketches of manners, between the Revolution and the Consulate. For now, however, I want to linger a little longer on Baudelaire’s depiction of the caricaturist as a “*flâneur*,” “almost an Englishman in virtue of his love for aristocratic elegance” (5). The caricaturist is also a “convalescent,” a “child,”
a “dandy”—beings linked by an “excessive love of visible, tangible things, condensed to their plastic state” (9). “The convalescent, like the child, is possessed in the highest degree of the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial” (7), Baudelaire explains; “Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs form and color” (8): “A friend of mine once told me that when he was quite a small child he used to be present when his father dressed in the mornings, and that it was with a mixture of amazement and delight that he used to study the muscles of his arms, the gradual transitions of pink and yellow in his skin, and the bluish network of his veins. The picture of external life was already filling him with awe and taking hold of his brain. He was already being obsessed and possessed by form” (8).

It seems as though Baudelaire’s image of the dandy—a creature in love with externality, with a materiality conceived, paradoxically, as pure form—ought to have something to offer queer theory’s recent materialist turn. I’m thinking of Jonathan Goldberg’s Seeds of Things; the New Materialisms and Queer Ecologies collections; the roundtable in GLQ on “Queer Studies, Materialism, and Crisis”—even Lee Edelman’s No Future, whose Lacanian commitments mean that his materialism—the materialism of the signifier—is quite distinct from the muscles and veins of Baudelaire’s “external life.” What Edelman calls “s Keithomosexuality,” for example, scorns “belief in a final signifier, reducing every signifier to the status of the letter and insisting on access to jouissance in place of access to sense, on identification with one’s sinthome instead of belief in its meaning” (37). The sinthome, he explains (quoting Zizek) is “literally our only substance” (36), but
“substance” here points not to matter but to an “antithetical grounding, whereby the structure of Symbolic reality rests on what also serves to negate it, informs the process of signification by which the subject strives to make sense of itself in the face of . . . an internal limit . . . encountered in the sinthome’s, and in the sinthomosexual’s, senseless jouissance” (36). Jouissance is what “persists beyond the (biological) cycle of generation and corruption, beyond the “way of all flesh”” (48). And in persisting beyond biology, jouissance persists as an engine, and a model, of subjectivization rather than bodily morphology.

This sort of thing might explain why the editors of New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics invoke a desire for a “more materialist queer theory” (48) that would move away from a privileging of language, discourse and the subject by attending to matter’s “immanent vitality” (107). And yet, the new materialism doesn’t so much give up on the idea of the subject as extend indices of subjectivity to matter: “For materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter,” we are told, “an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (136-41). This tendency to agentivize and subjectivize matter is evident in Queer Ecologies as well: both volumes share a phenomenological orientation focused on links between “perception, ontology, epistemology, politics, and ethics” (White, 343)—in other words, on how humans think, perceive, know, and act in relation to the non-human world. The editors’ Introduction to Queer Ecologies makes this quite explicit: “queer ecology” has to do with “an ongoing relationship between sex and nature that exists institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically, and it is our
task to interrogate that relationship in order to arrive at a more nuanced and effective sexual and environmental understanding” (5). That “our” reveals a kind of allegorical impulse at the heart of these ostensibly materialist projects: matter is the vehicle pointing to a more meaningful (and thus less banally material) tenor: discourse and its institutions, including—perhaps especially—the institution of queer theory itself. And this impulse is formalized in the three sections organizing Queer Ecologies: 1) “discourses of sexuality and nature, focused on the naturalization of particular sexual behaviors in the midst of the rise of evolutionary and sexological thought in the early twentieth century”; 2) “ways in which historical and contemporary formations of natural space have been organized by changing understandings and agendas related to sexuality”; and 3) “ways queer-identified scholars and others have envisioned a nascent ecology in a variety of literary, philosophical, and pedagogical projects” (6).

The title of the special issue of GLQ that houses the roundtable on queer studies and materialism—“Queer Studies and the Crises of Capitalism”—reveals that in this instance materialism is historical materialism, and the matter that matters is capital. Beginning from the claim that “Marxist and historical-materialist methodologies undergird the foundational texts of the study of sexuality” (3), the volume “turns its attention to the set of crises defining the period we understand as neoliberal capitalism, the long wave of recessions and dispossessions stretching from the 1970s to the present” (2). At one point during the roundtable Heather Love distinguishes her own interests from the volume’s dominant mode of analysis, describing herself as concerned with a “queer tradition that focuses on the lived experience of structural inequality,” and suggesting that this might position her “at the margins of a discussion that focuses on capital (rather than
class as a dimension of social and psychic life)” and that in any case she has “less to say about crisis [and hence utopia] than about making do and getting by.” The moment goes by quickly, but as it does it captures the conflicting semantics of queer materialism.

Setting aside for now the post-structuralist materialism of someone like Edelman, contemporary queer materialism might be divided into two strains: one is historicist in its orientation (the *GLQ* issue), the other vitalist (*Queer Ecologies; New Materialisms*); queer historicism has an antipathy to form and formalism (which operate under the terms “norms” and “normativity”); queer vitalism to matter to the extent that matter is understood in mechanistic (that is, formalist-teleological) terms. Baudelaire is interesting to me because his “erotology” (as Benjamin calls it) helps one think a thought that queer materialism ought to be good at thinking but is not: the idea of sex and sexuality as form.

2.

What Baudelaire likes about the art of the eighteenth century—the art of Bonnet and Descourtis, but his insights hold for Hogarth, Rowlandson, Gillroy, and Stubbs as well—is the way in which an attention to the morphology and kinesis of animate and inanimate objects “reduces” the object to its constitutive armature. All “objects,” says Baudelaire, have a “living style”—a “gait, glance and gesture” (14). Thus Corot, for example, can be said to trace “the principal lines of a landscape—its bony structure, its physiognomy, so to speak” (15). But this is not to say that natural objects are anthropomorphized, accorded a fullness usually reserved for human being; rather human beings, human bodies, are hollowed out in the manner of Hogarth’s ornamental pelvic bones in the *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) (figure 1),
condensed to “general colour and . . . silhouette, the arabesque of contour” (16).

[Baudelaire seems to know his Hogarth, whose project in the Analysis is to persuade readers to “consider objects scooped out like thin shells,” so as to discern the beauty of “hollow forms” over “solid bodies.”]

(Figure 1, Hogarth, Analysis of Beauty, Plate 18, figures 5 and 6)
The Painter of Modern Life is centrally an account of the work of Constantin Guy (1802-92), a minor artist best known for his sketches of Parisian prostitutes and the beau monde, and for a series of engravings documenting the Crimean war. Among the latter are images of Turkish “tumblers of the ‘third sex,’” none of which I’ve been able to locate but about which Baudelaire observes: “never has Balzac’s comical expression [from Sarrasine] been more applicable than in the present instance, for beneath this throbbing, trembling light, beneath the agitation of these ample garments, beneath the blazing rouge on these cheeks, in these hysterical, convulsive gestures, in these floating, waist-long tresses, it would be difficult, not to say impossible, to guess that virility lay hid” (22). Indeed, it is impossible to guess that anything at all lies inside Guy’s shapes. A quick glance at some of the sketches helps one see what Baudelaire means by describing Guy’s “synthesizing and abbreviative” aesthetic, his “marking of the salient or luminous points of an object” (15) as arising from a “need to see things broadly and to consider them above all in their total effect” (15). Human subjects receive no more differentiation (and often quite a bit less) than folds of drapery or the characteristic postures of vehicles and quadrupeds: each is captured instantaneously in the rectilineal propriety of a top hat, the vertical plunge of a gown, the delicacy of an uplifted hoof or foot.
Guy is a particularly lyrical chronicler of the dandy, a creature subjected to the “despotic” “doctrine of elegance and originality” which imposes on men of energy the demand: “Perinde ac cadaver!” (28). The motto comes from Ignatius Loyola’s Letter on Obedience, which tells Jesuits to “obey like a corpse in all matters but sin,” here invoked as an emblem of the dandy’s immobility and indifference: “the dandy’s beauty consists above all in an air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved” (29), a coldness marked in the “way of wearing a coat or riding a horse” (29). Woman too is a “stupid” idol in Guy’s hands, a “general harmony” constituted by the “muslins, the gauzes, the vast, iridescent clouds of stuff in which she envelops herself . . . the metal and the mineral which twist and turn around her arms and neck” (30). Nor it is a problem for persons to be subsumed by objects. “What poet . . . would venture to separate [woman] from her costume?” (31), Baudelaire asks; they are an “indivisible unity.” “Fashions should
never be considered as dead things. . . . Rather they should be thought of as vitalized and animated by the beautiful women who wore them” (33). Similarly, women’s “use of rice-powder, so stupidly anathematized by our Arcadian philosophers, is successfully designed to rid the complexion of those blemishes that Nature has outrageously strewn there, and thus to create an abstract unity in the colour and texture of the skin, a unity which, like that produced by the tights of a dancer, immediately approximates the human being to the statue” (33).

This paen to the garishly painted face (the face that does not try to look natural and whose hyperbolic artificiality is paradoxically a mode of severe abstraction), to the vacuous outline of the human form, leads into a penultimate section on “Women and Prostitutes,” where Baudelaire argues that “each human being bears the distinctive stamp of his trade” (36)—“trade” standing in for something like the kinesis and morphology of habitual actions that make human animals indistinguishable from those objects, like Guy’s carriages, which the essay describes with equal enthusiasm. In a chapter on “The Military Man,” Baudelaire suggests that in addition to each age having its own “idiomatic beauty” (earlier he has said that “each age has a deportment, a glance and a smile of its own” [13]), the same is true of different professions, which derive their “external beauty” from the “moral laws” to which they are subject. What Baudelaire means by a “moral law” is a kind of bizarro Kantianism—a formalism of motivity in which bodies and beings are shaped from the outside by what they do and what they wear: call it “frivolous purposiveness.” Thus in Guy’s portraits of soldiers one encounters a “uniformity of expression which is created by suffering and obedience endured in common:
Trousers tucked into incarcerating gaiters, greatcoats besmirched with dust, stained and discoloured—in short, the entire equipment of these men has taken upon itself the special personality of beings . . . running the gauntlet of extraordinary adventure" (26). Clothing is once again animated by the creature who inhabits it, but this is not in any simple sense personification; for that creature is herself a mere material substrate for the morphological textiles made in her image.

Baudelaire has been rather consistently described as anti-materialist, but this makes very little sense to me, and is a mistake deriving from the presumption that to be a formalist is not to be a materialist. This is not a mistake Benjamin makes, whose brilliant exegesis of Baudelaire’s erotology in the Fleur du mal focuses on the importance of the skeleton to Baudelaire’s aesthetics: “L’Elégance sans nom de l’humaine armature’ (Elegance without name of the human armature)” (Benjamin, “Central Park,” 36)—or in other words, an aesthetic that distills the human to its armature, to a basic morphological shape, a pure form that no longer registers as what we call human being. Benjamin links this stripped-down, skeletal being to Baudelaire’s revitalization of baroque allegory, a “transfixed unrest” (38) or “petrified unrest” (40) isomorphic with the life of a flâneur and “the formula for the image of Baudelaire’s life, a life which knows no development” (40). Other lives lived without development are that of the lesbian and the prostitute—in the latter instance, woman as mass-produced article (40), in the former, she who represents the “protest of ‘the modern’ against technological development” (39). This protest against development (or what Edelman might call futurity), Benjamin says, is also the “Majesty of the allegorical intention: destruction of the organic and living” (41).
The “lesbian woman carries spiritualization (Vergeistigung) into even the womb. There she plants the lily-banner of ‘pure’ love, which knows neither pregnancy nor family” (43).

A resistance to (re)-productivity is likewise found in figures of male impotence: “under this sign the forces of production are brought completely to a standstill” (47). Benjamin moves here to a fascinating, epigrammatic insight: “The tempo of the flâneur is to be confronted with the tempo of the crowd. . . . It represents a protest against the latter. Cf. the fashion for tortoises around 1839” (47). Like Baudelaire’s dandy, “The flâneur protests with his ostentatious languor (Gelassenheit) against the process of production” (47). And like the dandies of The Painter of Modern Life, the flâneurs of the Fleur du mal “perinde ac cadaver”:

“Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it also from the inside” (51). Benjamin persuasively argues that Baudelaire’s attack on progress is an attack on the organic, and yet he also insists that this is not a transcendental critique—a claim that requires us to distinguish between materialism and organicism, to think of Baudelaire’s aestheticism and formalism as a kind of materialism.

3.

Burney’s 900-page novel might seem very far indeed from the rapidly executed sketch of manners Baudelaire extolls. But his account of caricature as simultaneously precise and departicularizing is one way of understanding her “editor’s” cryptic promise that the text that follows will “trace nature, yet blot out personality” (7). Moreover, Camilla is filled with “stupid” idols engulfed in clouds of
muslin, and what is less remarked upon, with dandies—five professional bachelors in a form that conventionally contains only one, men whose immobility threatens to derail the juggernaut of Burney’s marriage plot. Indeed, the entire plot of the novel turns on the actions of Sir Hugh Tyrold, a man rendered sedentary (and, it is implied, impotent) “from the consequence of a wound in his side, occasioned by a fall from his horse” (10), an injury compensated for with a walking stick he holds “to be worth any arm in Christendom, except for not being alive” (129). Julie Park has noted Burney’s obsessive fascination with female automatism, and it is true that Camilla’s cousin Indiana is called a “beautiful automaton” (191) and a “beautiful doll” (221), and that Camilla’s own participation in the romance plot frequently renders her lifeless: “the tender passion has terribly flattened her” (366). But it is in fact Sir Hugh for whom being doll-like is something more than mere simile. Camilla literally “metamorphoses” him “into a female, accoutering him with her fine new cap, while she enveloped her own small head in his wig; and then, tying the maid’s apron round his waist, put a rattle into his hand, and Eugenia’s doll upon his lap, which she told him was a baby that he must nurse and amuse” (18). And this alteration is more diverting to Sir Hugh, we’re told, than anything “since his fall from his horse” (18).

Sir Hugh’s tutor, Dr. Orkborne is a comic virtuoso of queer immobility: in one episode he stands cogitating at the stop of the stairs amidst a “general hubbub” (628), and when a waiter is sent to fetch him for dinner, the servant reports that “‘He says if he mayn’t be let alone one single minute, it will be throwing away all his morning. I can’t say I know what he means, but he speaks rather froppish’” (629).
Twelve hours on he finally notices he is hungry, and is informed that “it was impossible to keep dinner waiting all day, for people who chose to stand whole hours upon a staircase” (632). During a later “affray,” we are informed that Orkborne “had kept his place in defiance of all sort of inconvenience, either to himself or others” (668)—a stasis most explicitly in defiance of norms of heterosexual courtesy that should have him escorting the governess Miss Margland to safety. His “unheard-of inattention,” however, combined with his “not knowing what to take care of a lady to a coach meant,” means that he stands “resolutely still, till she was forced, in desperation, to walk on alone” (668).

The novel’s most committed dandy is Sir Sedley Clarendel, whose self-conscious investment in sculptural stillness is reinforced by the way in which Burney has Mrs. Arlbery describe him in a mode of ekphrasis: “how he sits at his ease there! Amusing his ridiculous fancy with every creature he sees. Yet what an elegant posture the animal has found out! I make no doubt he would as soon forfeit his estate as give up that attitude” (74-75). “He has not sufficient energy to make use of his powers,” she explains to Camilla, and “has therefore turned fop from mere wantonness of time and of talents; from having nothing to do, no one to care for, and no one to please” (365). His “pretended torpor” is not, she insists, “supine insipidity” but a “secret labour how next he may call himself into notice.” (401). Eventually the plot will give Sir Sedley something to do (a point to which I will return), but in the meantime Mrs. Arlbery imagines defacing and maiming his features, so he will learn that “to appear and be admired is not the same thing” (365).
Sir Hugh’s one-time heir Clermont Lynmere is likewise an “unmanly fop,” whose beauty registers as “effeminacy in its lowest degradation” (569) and about whom one character reflects: “I always hated pert boys’” (665), “I hate daintiness; especially in boys” (666). Like Sir Sedley, Lynmere is often described as moving in a “negligent” manner, “under an appearance of mingled assurance and apathy” (577). When Sir Hugh tells him that he’s been “forced to take up with an heiress” (Sir Hugh has shifted his estate to Camilla’s sister Eugenia, and betrothed her to Lynmere as compensation for the loss), he explains that “to the end of making all parties happy, I’ve had her brought up in the style of a boy, for the sake of your marrying her.” Lynmere replies, “recovering from a yawn”: “what have I to do with marrying a girl like a boy? That’s not my taste, my dear sir, I assure you” (592). “I’d as soon marry the old Doctor himself! and I’m sure he’d make me as pretty a wife” (579).

It is clear that Lynmere’s lack of desire for women, and for Eugenia in particular, stands in the way of the novel’s comic (that is, heteronormative) resolution. And this obstacle is reinforced by Eugenia’s disability, especially the disfiguring limp caused by Sir Hugh and which renders her like him and other queer men in her compromised motility. When she was a child, Eugenia had been exposed to smallpox through Sir Hugh’s negligence, who overcompensates by trusting her “to nobody but himself” on the sea-saw he has constructed for her amusement. “Yet no sooner was Sir Hugh elevated, than, becoming exceedingly giddy, he involuntarily loosened his hold of Eugenia, who fell from his arms to the ground,” and we are told that “This diversion was short, but its consequences were long” (27). Eugenia
develops smallpox and survives profoundly scarred, and the fall makes her “grow up with one leg shorter than the other, and her whole figure diminutive and deformed” (33). The narrative emphasis upon Eugenia’s disability, and its sadism, is quite unique in the history of the English novel. Lynmere is responsible for the most devastating metonymy, calling Eugenia “‘that wizen little stump’” (569). “‘You’ve brought that limping little body with you again’” (85), observes another character, who later describes her as “not much above the dwarf as they shew at Exeter Change” (280). A group of “market women” ask, “‘why Miss, do you walk upon your knees?’” (285), and children mock, “‘O come! come! look!—here’s the little hump-back gentlewoman!’” (305). The good-natured Mr. Westwyn says that for his part, “‘That little one, there, with the hump, which I don’t mind, nor the limp, neither, I like vastly,’” but acknowledges that his son Hal “won’t take to her. A young man don’t much fancy and ugly girl. He’s always hankering after something pretty’” (776). Eugenia’s response to this abuse—to her ritual expulsion from the marriage plot—is to vow “immoveably to remain at home” (287; emphasis added).

If queerness is associated with immobility, Burney conversely describes heterosexual desire in the language of animation: “animated regard” (117), “animated admiration” (128). Mrs. Arlbery sees Edgar as inanimate in his failure to pursue Camilla: “‘look but at that piece of congelation that nothing seems to thaw!’” (460), she laughs: “‘I languish, I own,’ cried she, ‘to see that frozen youth worked up into a little sensibility’” (483). And she predicts that because he is a “watcher,” Edgar will end up an “old batchelor, with endless repinings at his own lingering fastidiousness’” (482). But if animation is requisite for proper heterosexuality, being
animated is also *entirely catastrophic* in *Camilla*. The novel is full to bursting with the collateral damage of human motivity. There are no fewer than seven accidents involving horses and carriages, the most devastating of which is the melee that finally gets Sir Sedley off his handsome ass. As Mrs. Arlbery’s horses barrel down the side of Mount Ephraim, Camilla lets go of the reins and is about to be thrown out of the carriage when Sir Sedley, “at the visible and imminent hazard of his life,” momentarily stops them so she can disembark safely, after which they continue down the hill, dashing the phaeton, and themselves, “to pieces” (404). Although Sir Sedley has injured one of his knees, and one of the servants is “considerably hurt,” although “fragments of the phaeton were strewed upon the road; [and] one of the horses [lay] dead at the bottom of the hill; and the other was so much injured as to be totally disabled for future service” (405), the scene’s felicity is initially emphasized: “the exertion and humanity of Sir Sedley seemed to restore to him his own,” and “His natural courage, which he had nearly annihilated, as well as forgotten, by the effeminate part he was systematically playing, seemed to rejoice in being again exercised” (404).

But if Sir Sedley is restored simultaneously to masculinity and “humanity” in this scene, and in his subsequent epistolary courtship of Camilla, the costs of normativity are high. In the midst of an exchange of love letters, “Molly Mill, with a look of dismay, burst in upon them, bringing, with the answer of Sir Sedley, news that Tommy Hodd, by an accident he could not help, had rode the horse she had borrowed for him of the under-groom to death” (555). Animal harm looms large in *Camilla*: there is the chapter called “The accomplished Monkies,” in which the
creatures are beaten by their master with a stick until they howl, a sound “not more stunning to the ear, than offensive to all humanity” (430). And there is the episode of the “learned bullfinch,” who sings “various little airs, upon certain words of command,” and where the command, once again, is accompanied by violence: when asked how he trains the creature to perform, his owner says, “‘By the true old way, Miss; I licks him’”: “‘everything’s the better for a little beating, as I tells my wife’” (492).

Burney’s alignment here of physical violence and marital felicity brings satiric pressure to bear on the marriage plot and the desideratum of animation that underwrites it. When Sir Sedley responds by asking how one beats such a delicate creature without harming it, the man admits: “‘sometimes they be so plaguy sulky, they tempt me to give ‘em a knock a little matter too hard, and then they’ll fall you into a fit, like, and go off in a twinkle’” (493). But he defends himself by saying, “‘They’re mortal cunning. One’s forced to be pretty tough with ‘em’” (493)—a truism that in his mind applies equally to birds and women. Sir Sedley promptly purchases the vulnerable bird, redeeming it from certain death and giving it to Camilla as a token of his interest and affection. But Camilla’s “delicacy” over what she perceives as the inappropriateness of the gift means that although she is “enchanted to see the little animal relieved from so painful a life, [she] hesitated not a moment in resolving to refuse its acceptance” (494) and thus consigning it to the tragic fate it had temporarily avoided.

If these are the costs of heternormativity, Burney seems to say, then queer immobility is a clear, even ethical alternative. Baudelaire’s queer “protests with his
ostentatious languor against the process of production” (47), and one finds in Camilla’s dandies a similar protest—in this case against the very things one associates with Burney and the form she helps to develop: reproduction, conjugation, the marriage plot as such. And if this weren't obvious enough to readers, the name of the horse sacrificed to Sir Sedley’s brief flirtation with masculinity and heterosexuality? Tom Jones.

4.

When I began I thought I was going to argue that queer theory ought to be more engaged than it is with “thing theory,” and with related lines of enquiry such as ecological criticism and animal studies (hence my obsession the idea of the flâneur-as-tortoise). Elizabeth Grosz’ work is one way this might go, her elaboration, in The Nick of Time, of a neo-Darwinian feminist and queer theory attentive to “Biological organization, whose morphological structures engender the variety of life in all its forms” (Elizabeth Grosz, The Nick of Time, 1). But Baudelaire’s interest in morphology is not, in the end, like Grosz’s, committed as it is to stasis, to a ruthless resistance to change, development, progress—including models of temporality and becoming that preoccupy Grosz and other new materialists (vitalist- and historical-materialist alike).

It is more like Edelman’s sinthomosexual in the form of Ebenezer Scrooge, whose enjoyment in his own misanthropy “betrays the logic of such a refusal, the exquisite pain of a negation so great that he almost seems to rebuff the very warm-bloodedness of mammalian vitality, as if, like a textbook-perfect example of the death drive according to Freud, he aimed to return to the icy, inert immobility of a
lifeless thing” (44). Edelman argues that queers have an “ethical burden” to “inhabit the place of meaninglessness associated with the sinthome; to figure an unregenerate, and unregenerating, sexuality” committed to rejecting the “culture of forms and their reproduction” (48). Edelman thus links formalism with reproductivity, and queerness with a kind of bare life, a radical, irreducible particularity “‘without character or form’” (37), the “template of a given subject’s distinctive access to jouissance” (35), the “node of senseless compulsion on which the subject’s singularity depends” (38).

As I’ve said, this doesn’t appear to me to go far enough toward abandoning the language of the subject, and is quite distinct from Baudelaire’s morphological typology. Edelman has in a salutary way detached queerness from identity, but only by way of an even more profound investment in particularity. Baudelaire’s queerness is likewise committed to irreducibility, but an irreducible materiality that is paradoxically also abstract and formal, and which might offer us a new direction for queer theory, a direction, as Baudelaire and Benjamin understood, that necessarily passes through the eighteenth century, a period in which typology itself takes new forms.

I’ve argued that if Baudelaire had left a novel it might look like Camilla. But if that doesn’t work for you—if, like Catherine Moreland in Northanger Abbey, you have never managed the slog through Burney’s text—it might also look like a novel we tend to see as a more perfect version of the form, of the novel as form: Emma. Austen herself knows Camilla inside and out, and indeed has a very similar account of the novel to the one I have just offered. Consider the following extended exchange
in chapter seven of *Northanger Abbey* between Catherine Moreland and John
Thorpe—an exchange that brings together Thorpe’s cruelty to horses, *Camilla, Tom Jones*, and the woman writer’s ambivalent relation to the form that is her (ostensibly sexed) milieu.

Are you fond of an open carriage, Miss Morland?”

“Yes, very; I have hardly ever an opportunity of being in one; but I am particularly fond of it.”

“I am glad of it; I will drive you out in mine every day.”

“Thank you,” said Catherine, in some distress, from a doubt of the propriety of accepting such an offer.

“I will drive you up Lansdown Hill tomorrow.”

“Thank you; but will not your horse want rest?”

“Rest! He has only come three and twenty miles today; all nonsense; nothing ruins horses so much as rest; nothing knocks them up so soon. No, no; I shall exercise mine at the average of four hours every day while I am here.”

“Shall you indeed!” said Catherine very seriously. “That will be forty miles a day.”

“Forty! Aye, fifty, for what I care. Well, I will drive you up Lansdown tomorrow; mind, I am engaged.”

“Have you ever read Udolpho, Mr. Thorpe?”

“Udolpho! Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do.”

Catherine, humbled and ashamed, was going to apologize for her question, but he prevented her by saying, “Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since Tom Jones, except The Monk; I read that t’other day; but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation.”

“I think you must like Udolpho, if you were to read it; it is so very interesting.”

“Not I, faith! No, if I read any, it shall be Mrs. Radcliffe’s; her novels are amusing
enough; they are worth reading; some fun and nature in them.”

“Udolpho was written by Mrs. Radcliffe,” said Catherine, with some hesitation, from the fear of mortifying him.

“No sure; was it? Aye, I remember, so it was; I was thinking of that other stupid book, written by that woman they make such a fuss about, she who married the French emigrant.”

“I suppose you mean Camilla?”

“Yes, that’s the book; such unnatural stuff! An old man playing at see-saw, I took up the first volume once and looked it over, but I soon found it would not do; indeed I guessed what sort of stuff it must be before I saw it: as soon as I heard she had married an emigrant, I was sure I should never be able to get through it.”

“I have never read it.”

“You had no loss, I assure you; it is the horridest nonsense you can imagine; there is nothing in the world in it but an old man’s playing at see-saw and learning Latin; upon my soul there is not.”

At this late stage in the essay I have neither time nor space to do this passage justice, except to say that if John Thorpe is an idiot (and he is), he is an inspired idiot whose sketchy reading practices enable him to hone in on what is important about Camilla: that its plot turns on “an old man playing at see-saw,” riding hobby-horses with children who are not his own because instead of hurting his horse (as Thorpe—manly-man in need of a wife—ruthlessly and repeatedly does) he has allowed it to hurt him.

Austen stakes out two genealogies for the novel form here: a male (and masculinist) genealogy stemming from the perfectly plotted Tom Jones, and a female (and, I would say, feminist) genealogy stemming from the ungainly and “unnatural” Camilla. Thorpe’s preference for the one over the other is made homologous with
his violent treatment of domestic animals, human and inhuman. The exchange continues:

This critique, the justness of which was unfortunately lost on poor Catherine, brought them to the door of Mrs. Thorpe’s lodgings, and the feelings of the discerning and unprejudiced reader of Camilla gave way to the feelings of the dutiful and affectionate son, as they met Mrs. Thorpe, who had descried them from above, in the passage. “Ah, Mother! How do you do?” said he, giving her a hearty shake of the hand. “Where did you get that quiz of a hat? It makes you look like an old witch. Here is Morland and I come to stay a few days with you, so you must look out for a couple of good beds somewhere near.” And this address seemed to satisfy all the fondest wishes of the mother’s heart, for she received him with the most delighted and exulting affection. On his two younger sisters he then bestowed an equal portion of his fraternal tenderness, for he asked each of them how they did, and observed that they both looked very ugly.

In an early example of free indirect discourse, we are led to understand that Catherine does “not like him at all”; and if her repudiation of this version of masculinity eventually keeps her from marrying Thorpe, it does not, of course, free her of the marriage plot altogether. Nevertheless, the marriage to Henry Tilney is every bit a “spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson,” and Gothicism and marriage comedy are sutured together as securely as loving Tom Jones means one will glance “carelessly at the foaming beast” that one has just beaten.

It is—formally as well as historically—a long way from Northanger Abbey to Emma. Yet if Emma is the paradigm of realist narration, it is striking how spare are its descriptions of literary persons, how seldom they emerge as anything more (or less) than swathes of color and shape. Harriet, we’re told, “was short, plump, and
fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features” (19). Emma exhorts us to notice Mr. Knightley’s “tall, firm, upright figure among the bulky forms and stooping shoulders of the elderly men” (255). Robert Martin is given the epithet “remarkably plain,” and although one might think that Emma’s refusal to grant him distinction is simple snobbery—young farmers “whether on horseback or on foot” (24) look essentially the same, she insists—Emma herself never comes into any more precise focus in the narrative, despite Mrs. Weston’s enthusiastic blazon: “Such an eye!—the true hazel eye—and so brilliant! regular features, open countenance, with a complexion! oh! what a bloom of full health, and such pretty height and size; such a firm and upright figure” (31). Can we tell from this what Emma looks like? She, too, it seems, is remarkably plain. And although Jane Fairfax is in contrast “remarkably elegant,” that elegance is signaled by a morphological regression toward the mean: “Her height was pretty, just such as almost everybody would think tall, and nobody could think very tall; her figure particularly graceful; her size a most becoming medium, between fat and thin” (Austen, 131).

I want to suggest, finally, that these moments of abstraction, of literally thin description—shape, outline, color—function as objective correlatives for the thinness of the novel’s queer marriage plot, a plot that “knows no development,” that ends precisely where it begins, with the heterosexual couple bisected by the awkward third term (if not third sex) of Emma’s incorrigibly inert, dandified father; a plot that is a sketch, in the manner of a painter of modern life, of “being possessed by form”—of being as form, and form as the shape that constitutes hats and horses, literary and phenomenal persons alike.