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Nudism, multiple personality disorder and the hi-rise novel

1 nudism

There are at least one hundred thousand 'social nudists' where I live, '0.7 % of the Australian population...spread...across a continent,' according to Magnus Clarke, the author of *Nudism in Australia* (Clarke 1983: 11). 'The total figure,' he continues, 'may amount to the population of a sizeable city' (Clarke 1983: 11).

The anonymity of this image (a city of nudists, abstracted from their multiple networks of place and circumstance, hovering, as it were, in thin air) is appropriate, given the anonymity of nudism itself. This is apparent in the ground level experiences Clarke proceeds to describe. 'As nudists themselves observe, when they take off their clothes they shed external existence in both practical and symbolic forms' (Clarke 1983: 12). The relative anonymity of class among social nudists lends a certain democracy to their gatherings, while the first-name only rule in operation at most clubs helps to maintain this. Yet the homogeneity of nudist affiliation does not stop here. In such a state of collective undress: 'a more meaningful egalitarianism becomes possible: one without even regard to age or sex' (Clarke 1983: 13). Clarke underlines the paradoxical nature of this last claim: if nudism allows an egalitarianism beyond gender oppression, it means that sexual difference disappears from social interaction in precisely those circumstances in which one would expect it to be most apparent.

It is not simply the tradition of desegregated toilet facilities at nudist gatherings (Clarke 1983: 250) that makes this the case, as rather something about the socio-historical texture of sexual desire itself. Desire slides through language. From 'bustles, to bras, to minis,' clothes serve as the ever-changing 'symbols of sex,' the language for sexual exchange and interaction, our indices to wealth, power and lust (Clarke 1983: 21). In divesting themselves of such signifiers, shedding 'external existence in both practical and symbolic forms,' nudists are literally divesting themselves of sexuality itself. At least, this is according to Clarke's informants. As one of them ("Mary") puts it,

it is the titillation of various clothes that makes someone sexually attractive. Mother Nature usually knows when you should be aroused sexually and it is not at a nudist club.
("Mary" in Clarke 1983: 233)

The taboo on male erections at all the clubs further underlines the difficulties that the patriarchal organisation of sexual desire has in such locales. Which is as much as to say, with Clarke, that the 'achievement of this nudist egalitarianism' is really quite radical. Here men and women are truly equal.

I have explored the political dimensions of Clarke's analysis because I think that his text offers an insight into the desexualised discourses of modernity itself. When Clarke defines social nudists as 'those who prefer to be naked in appropriate situations in the company of others of both sexes, not all of whom are personally known to the individual' (Clarke 1983: 11), he depicts the sort of 'community in anonymity' which Benedict Anderson sees as the hallmark of the modern nation (Anderson 1991: 36). Anderson argues that feelings of national identity are fundamentally imaginary. For, such is the size of contemporary nations that it is literally not possible to know all one's fellow nationals personally. To feel one with them, you must imagine yourself as a homogenous and replicable member of an abstractly conceived community, feeling one with an anonymous mass, who themselves feel one with you. Hence Clarke's city of nudists, hovering abstractly over the Australian continent.

Of course Clarke's demographic data aims at the statistical being of nudists, whereas Anderson is far more concerned with the way his subjects think. Anderson's ultimate reference here is to Hegel, who claimed that the spirit of the modern lies in 'the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence', a vision of collective identity Hegel summarises as ' "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I" ' (Hegel 1977: 110). Clarke's researches are not quite on the multiply self-reflexive level of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Yet if the perfectly democratic *I that is We* equivalence characterising the Hegelian 'world-mind' has any relevance here, it's in the fact that you would have to live in a nudist colony to believe in it. Where else is social life so representational, so democratic, so divested of sexual difference?

2 the hi-rise novel

Hegel is a nudist, now that we have your attention...

I want to usher you in to *The 14th Floor*, a novel-in-progress set entirely on the fourteenth floor of various buildings in a city like Sydney or Melbourne or both. This cross-section is intended to offer to investigation a sociospace, as in Tolstoy or Dickens, only here hi-rise and rather more twisted. The ten characters whose minds I enter into are named, as in algebraic logic, **a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, I, and j**. They all live, work, relax, read novels and interact on the fourteenth floor. Now part of the reason for the theoretical excursus above is that I, like any novelist, have to engage in a necessarily sociological operation to work out just how my characters exist and inter-relate within the environment I have set them. That's why I am reading Hegel. The other reason is that the novel begins in a nudist colony.

A hi-rise nudist colony. At this altitude, with full size savanna land photo-wallpaper all around, a Cambrook™ tea urn on a nearby trestle table, and next to nothing else, **a**, who is a professional thief, is trying to come to terms with today's dilemma *viz.* how do you pick pockets in a nudist colony? It is **g**, a psychiatrist, who is writing this. The style is clipped, clinical and perverse. The reason **g** is now writing is that the ten characters

are also the ten authors of the book. Characters are encountered on a two-fold level, as both author and protagonist. So now **d**, a transvestite who writes in the horror genre, takes up the story of **a**'s predicament, before the narrative shifts to **e**, another psychiatrist. **e** writes situation comedy. He proceeds to describe how **a**'s persistent and tormenting erectile failure finally disappears here in the one place, given the taboo on male erections, in which it would actually be of use. **a**'s eyes widen in fear.

The story is taken up by **f**, who avails herself of a Wittgensteinian / psychotic reading of all that is the case within this state of affairs to describe **b**, a nineteen-year-old student radical eating a banana in the nudist club solarium. **b** is planning an attack upon social justice Christianity for her next politics tutorial. The action moves to a psych ward, where **g** presides and threatens to withhold his authorisation of **d**'s sex-change unless she starts acting like a woman *all the time* - no slacks in the consulting room! As for **d**, **d** is terrified that the psychiatrist will discover that she, back as a young man, used to do money-shots in porno films, an occupation in fact not dissimilar, at least in terms of décor, to nudism itself. All this is preliminary to the central focus of the novel, a Neighbourhood Watch Meeting, featuring all ten characters and based on Plato's *Symposium* (Plato 1980). There is a reference to Kafka's **k** in all this, only in my novel the characters end at **j**, a chef interested in psychotic cookery. **k** is reserved for the reader wandering through the uni admin block, the psych ward, the nudist colony, the twisted world of the novel, and seeking whatever it is one reads novels for therein.

Can you see why I need a bit of theory to help me out here? For how do you describe the inside and outside of ten different characters, and the concretely abstract hi-rise realm in which they are set, without some theory of how the individual fits within a society? The problem, however, which the social sciences raise for the novelist, is that they tend to picture society as an entity composed of so many like-minded units: the city of one hundred thousand nudists, the *Imagined Community* of self-identifying subjects, the *I that is We*.

It is part of education, of thinking as the consciousness of the single in the form of universality, that the ego comes to be apprehended as a universal person in which all are identical. (Hegel 1942: 134)

The problem here is not that my characters are so clearly different: for **a - j** could simply represent ten different universal or exemplary character types: the exemplary thief, the exemplary nurse, the exemplary reader even. The social sciences can certainly theorise difference on this level, as Clarke's ability to abstract an *I that is We* city of nudists from the broader Australian social fabric indicates. This is what I call 'the nudist model of subjectivity': the bounded bodily ego and its supposedly unitary identity. Whereas the issue for me is that these ten characters are all housed within my own head. I wake up every day and wonder what **e** will do, how **j** will describe it, and what citations **h**, a bisexual librarian, will adduce to the event. The dialogue between my characters may well be fictional, but the fact of the matter is that I need to think in ten different ways - that is, I need to think as ten different people - to produce it. For the reality of my project is that there are ten of me. That being the case, the question for me is no longer how does an individual fit within a society, as rather *how does a society fit within an individual?*

This question, and the creative experiences inspiring it, are going to lead me to a rather unusual perspective on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel's philosophical *bildungsroman* (with only one character). For the ego is not simply a dialectical part of the social whole, particular and universal, each telescoping in and out of each other. The ego is a multiple of characters, a full dinner-table inside your own head. The novel, along with stage-drama and opera, draws upon this very multiplicity, indeed serves as a privileged site for its expression.

3 multiple personality disorder

So, I want to move from nudism to multiple personality disorder, the polar opposite thereof. The *DSM-IV* (which is to say the American Psychiatric Association's most recent edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* [APA 1994]), defines Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) as the possession of at least two distinct personalities, any one of which will alternately take control of an individual's thoughts and actions: *The Three Faces of Eve*, to cite the popular late fifties novel / case report on one (or rather three) such individuals (Crickley and Thigpen, 1960). Frequently confused with schizophrenia, the disorder was further popularised in the 1970s through the book and film of *Sybil* (Schreiber 1973), who was possessed of sixteen personalities, and then in the 1980s, through Trudi Chase's 'autobiographical' *When Rabbit Howls* (Chase 1988), which, with over 90 authors, inspired me with the idea for *The 14th Floor*. Now, part of the reason I am citing all this psychiatric and popular literature is that I, like any novelist, am searching for an appropriate form for my novel, for the form will serve as my answer to the question posed above: *How does a society fit within an individual?* The other reason is that the novel begins in a nudist colony and shifts to a psych ward.

A hi-rise psych ward. At this altitude, in white lab-coat, copy of Deitsch and Meyer's trusty *Clinician's Handbook* (Deitsch et al 1996) in hand, **g**, the head psychiatrist is subjecting **d**, who wants a sex-change, to a battery of self-report tests. It is **e**, another psychiatrist, who is describing this. **e** finds psychiatry pretty silly. Only he's been on his best behaviour ever since **c** caught him behind the mirrored observation room with... To assess personality psychiatrists typically rely upon the *MMPI-2*, the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory* (Ben-Porath et al, n.d.), which subjects one to a series of 567 self-reference statements (e.g. 'I believe that cancer is a horrible disease') to which one can answer 'True' or 'False', the sum total of which responses can then be tabulated and codified into a formula like the following: '7*2'1'8-+:35#0 to the right of #9' (Deitsch and Meyer 1996: 292). That is a personality. Only MPD mucks it all up. It is impossible, Deitsch and Meyer note, to expect any particular MPD pattern to emerge from the self-report test battery, because the results will simply reflect the personality, **a** or **c** or **j**, answering at the time. MPD cannot be detected by the *MMPI-2* because the presupposition of such a test is the idea of the unified and bounded bodily ego. An ego responsible for its own self-reference. That is a personality. Now, considering how well known it is that **g**, as a junior intern, was officially reprimanded for staring at the nurses' breasts every time he addressed them, **e** finds this self-report regime all a bit absurd.

Of course the idea that the ego might speak the truth - true or false and in all consciousness *I believe that cancer is a wonderful disease* - of its own psychopathology is itself so absurd as to be almost psychotic. **d** is not psychotic because if she was it would have been picked up on the *MCM-*

I's 'Thought Disorder Scale'. Luckily there is no such scale for detecting ex-male porn actors. **d** is a smoker. **g**, still attempting to calculate whether to authorise **d**'s sex-change or not, considers that statistically more women than men smoke so that for **d** to be a smoker is a point in her favour. Only she could be a malingerer. A whole literature exists on the topic of 'malingering', that is, answering dishonestly on your self-report test. Further differentiated into 'fake-good' and 'fake-bad' responses, malingering is, according to Deitsch and Meyer, 'in truth an act, not a mental disorder' (Deitsch and Meyer 1996: 412). **d** remembers to cross her legs. Will **g** realise that she is now 'fake-good?' The *MMPI-2* won't tell him, because the act of pretending on your self report test, the act of acting other to yourself, apparently has nothing to do with your personality. Just like MPD itself, the act of acting is off the scales, because the only real person is the unified and self-spoken ego. For we have arrived back at the nudist model of subjectivity, only this time from the inside, *via* psychiatry.

c is a nurse, whose marriage, for better and for worse, is collapsing. **c** takes up the narrative. Now as part of her professional duties, **c** runs training sessions for the Mental Health Volunteers' training sessions and is trying to hold it together, which requires a certain acting in itself. **d**, meanwhile, has volunteered to work with the psychotics because she, anxious not to be suspected of malingering, wants to be seen publicly to be acting like a woman. Whereas **c** just wants to weep. But who are you when you act at being other than yourself? Listen to Crickley and Thigpen, clinicians and authors of *The Three Faces of Eve*, as they attempt to comprehend their subject's ability to change style, expression and even appearance to usher in another of her three personalities. 'Talented and well-trained actresses,' they write

are reported to be able to summon tears at will when their parts require that they weep. It is doubtful if ordinary volition unaided can bring such tears. Is it not more reasonable to believe that the process is indirect, that such an actress has the means to summon into her awareness some emotional component or shallower representation of the real feelings that might cause one to weep? (Crickley and Thigpen 1960: 57)

Whereas **c** needs to summon up the real feelings that will cause her to hold it together. Who are you when you play at being someone else, if not another side of yourself? That seems to be what Crickley and Thigpen are saying, on the basis of their therapeutic work with *The Three Faces of Eve*. It is **f**, a psychotic, who is writing this, because psychotic thinking is rigorous enough to maintain the parallel between **c** and **d**'s self-reflexive ability to act as other to themselves and the MPD Eve's unreflexive ability to do so. In both instances one observes an ego possessed by a multiplicand of distinct alters, that is a society of faces within the one individual.

For with acting, as with novel writing, as with MPD itself, the manifold characters one summons up must come from somewhere within:

The psychological novel in general no doubt owes its special nature to the inclination of the modern writer to split up his ego, by self-observation, into many part-egos, and, in consequence, to personify the conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes. (Freud 1975a: 150)

That's Freud, outlining his theory of artistic creativity. For Freud there is a direct link between the child's phantasy play (*spiel* in German) among imaginary friends and the dramatic play (again, *spiel* in German) he will come to write for the stage twenty years later. It is the 'family romance' which one acts out in such scenarios: a nexus composed of the unconscious subject's ambitious and erotic wishes to better its place in the oedipal triangle, a triangle of characters internal to the subject him and herself (Freud 1975b). Such infantile phantasies, veritable 'works of fiction' according to Freud (Freud 1975b: 240), follow the subject through life to manifest in various sanctioned spaces: daydreams, jokes, mistakes and works of art among them. The mind is multiple - that's what Freud argues - and the novel, just like psychopathology itself, MPD for instance, serves to express this fact.

The 14th Floor serves to express this fact because it culminates in a Neighbourhood Watch Meeting. A hi-rise Neighbourhood Watch Meeting. **g** is chairing the meeting, for community is important to him. To **g**'s annoyance, his outpatient **f** is there as well. **f** is in vigilant attendance because **f** knows that if you don't keep watching, the neighbourhood could well disappear - quite a concern on the fourteenth floor. The psychiatrist and the psychotic are the only two characters who can take this all seriously. **a**, the thief, has decided to come along because it seems like such a good front. While **e** is there because **c** walked in on him while he was being seduced by a seventeen-year-old psychotic and he is terrified that **g** might find out. At such times, it is better to act like a good citizen. *An I that is We*. The romance starts to heat up because, due to an error caused by the very structure of the novel (the thirteenth floor is sometimes, remember, the same as the fourteenth), the Mental Health Volunteers training session has been scheduled for the same room as the Neighbourhood Watch Meeting. **c** insists that the meetings be run concurrently, mainly to get at **e**, who looks a bit like her husband. **b**, the student radical, whom we last saw eating a banana in the nudist club solarium, is a Mental Health Volunteer for the sake of social change. **b**, now wearing a low cut dress, likes social nudism, particularly the ban on male erections. She has already had four senior members of the club expelled. And now she is round a table where **a**, **c**, **d**, **e**, **f**, **g**, **h**, and **j** are trying to disentangle the Neighbourhood Watch Mental Health agenda. When **b**, in the midst of all this confusion, begins to bat her young eyelids at **e**, who is terrified already for his precarious position in the ward, given what **c** caught him doing behind the mirrored observation room, when **b**, who is only nineteen, moves to sit rather too closely thigh to thigh with **e**, the novel finally metamorphoses...

...back into the writing which **I**, a disembodied academic voice, presents in this current journal article. Now clearly there is a difference between an ego possessed by a multiplicand of self-reflexively distinct alters, none of whom see themselves as the same person, and the comparatively unified **I** of your average everyday neurotic. Yet the extreme that is MPD (the society of faces) is, **I** claims, simply one extreme end of a continuum which runs, at its opposite end, to ego-bounding and unifying participation in collectivist activities like social nudism or academic inquiry. Dramatic writing and practice, on the other hand, are much more on the MPD end of the continuum. That is why the author, named **I** in my book, which is also a murder mystery, is dead, and always has been. Repression may import a negative unity to the psyche, but it does nothing to alter the fact that the 'family romance', and the ego foundering thereon, is multiple, an *I that is We*, lacking a central defining identity, for as far the psyche goes, there is none. For we are all walking novels really, reading our way into the world

around us. That's why my novel, conceived as a remake of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, comes in the form of a multiple personality disorder, written by and about the multiplicand of characters **a - j**, with a few lacunae left for the reader to fall through (Footnote 1), namely psychosis.

Footnote (1)

k, on hearing this, falls right through the paper to end up at the abstract City of Nudists with which **I** began. The City of Nudists, hovering anonymously over the Australian continent. Imagine if, among those one hundred thousand bare bodies, there was one possessed of a multiple personality disorder. What clothing would he or she wear in private? And what sort of novel would they write? Some people, warn clinicians Deitsch and Meyer, are inclined to feign this disorder for the sake of media attention. That could be the definition of a novelist.

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