

LOVE LANGUAGE

Felix Bernstein

The love letter kills the beloved and preserves the self
The beloved now exists only in our reverie

The suicide note kills the self and preserves the beloved
We exist now only in their reverie

The failed love letter never stops being overwritten
The successful suicide note never stops stopping

The love letter offers the beloved only sweet nothings, makes the beloved into sweet nothings, cuts up the lover into sweet nothings, traits of the lover become the lover but the tracks must be covered over and false tracks must be laid down to get the world off the lover's scent, so much so that the lover disappears into the letter, initials, abbreviations, cut-ups.

The suicide note stops being written when the love letter is taken up.

Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it—that is Life, is it not Dear?

These notions seem to stem from a Morbid Semiotics popularized by French post-structuralism — writing kills the “thing,” a shocking notion that signals vice and sadism.

Perhaps the most extreme articulation of Morbid Semiotics is Blanchot's claim that writing is a perpetual murder-suicide. Foucault adds that you cannot write while you are living, only in the darkroom afterwards, belatedly and nostalgically in hazy after-images, or else we write preemptively and prospectively, before any encounter. Strangely, he says the heterosexual only experiences desire through anticipation and the homosexual only experiences desire through retrospection. Perhaps, for the bisexual, foretaste and aftertaste are merged (the sexualization of *deja vu*).

For Kristeva, what makes us human is that we do not move on after a loss, a kill, a sacrifice but linger over the remains.

For Freud, the kill is inscribed as a totem, a unary trait that bonds the community, serving as a reminder to never repeat the kill whose violence founded our civilization.

For Wilde, we always kill the one we love — some with a sword, others with a kiss.

For Lacan, the count starts with the kill, a notch on our belt, mnemonically inscribing the void of absence into the symbolic. The slashed zero (Ø), a tally marking the first loss, produces the first trait in a chain of resemblances that will inaugurate our search for more of the same.

In 1969, a few years before she took her own life, Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik wrote, “With every word I write I remember the void that makes me write what I couldn't if I let you in.” A sentiment that consecrates and seals her Morbid Semiotics.

“If you speak about what is, it means that someone didn't come — not that they came.” (1963, *Diary*).

In her introduction to Pizarnik's *The Most Foreign Country*, Cole Heinowitz writes:

If the poet's object of desire stubbornly insists on appearing in the world, her words will condemn it to a state of death-in-language. Even memories must be destroyed for the poem to come into being.

Where the word is, the other disappears. Where the other is, the word disappears. An exclusive disjunction that requires a deadly choice: kill or be killed.

In the end, Pizarnik chose to terminate her words, sparing her beloved from any further murderous inscriptions but losing herself in the process.

A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer. (Dear Lorca)

—Jack Spicer, in his outlandishly rigorous theories, seems to offer a way out of Morbid Semiotics.

Words are what sticks to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem. They are what we hold on with, nothing else. They are as valuable in themselves as rope with nothing to be tied to. (Dear Lorca)

The word does not signify the ‘world’ but is rather a sticky barnacle that clings to the physical world. Word and world are not in a relation of signifier and signified, but rather of inscription and medium, which are compacted into a single palimpsest. Words are things which stick to other things like barnacles (implicitly words aren't exactly real things but vehicles that enable us to find real things).

SEND MAIL AND WRITING TO:

1080PRESS: 199 O'NEIL STREET KINGSTON, NY 12401

* Władysław Strzemiński's *Sun's Afterimage* (1948–49, oil on canvas, 73×61 cm).

Words have an autonomous materiality and physicality independent from any referent.

But also the opposite – words are useful only insofar as they rope real things into the poem. To cling to the word-in-itself is fetishistic, like being a stamp collector or being a nonsense poet caught up in wordplay.

Still, Spicer's metaphor of the word as rope and barnacle is one of adhesive overlaying not signification. Yes, the word seems to tie itself to a referent, but it does this through a material physics rather than cognitive linguistics. So neither the word nor the thing conquer one another – there is no murder-suicide, word and thing live together until they die of natural causes.

I yell "Shit" down a cliff at an ocean. Even in my lifetime the immediacy of that word will fade. It will be dead as "Alas." But if I put the real cliff and the real ocean into the poem, the word "Shit" will ride along with them, travel the time-machine until cliffs and oceans disappear. (After Lorca).

For Spicer, words are material things subject to decay, entropy, and rotting that live on in the poem till a physical death. The alphabetic corpse is a rotting sack of shit that will keep rotting until the end of time, flesh and letter and earth interpenetrate in a grotesque palimpsest.

We actually have not gotten far from Morbid Semiotics.

...

Let's start over –

For Blanchot, the Thing of love is killed by its inscription

For the Romantics (Freud, Hegel, Wordsworth, Clare), the first love is always already lost but can be reconstructed by the act of recollection, verbalization, and transference... we only find the first love in the eyes of the second love, the foretaste is the aftertaste of an always missing first taste.

The romantic theory does not, like Kant, foreclose the noumenal primordial ground to a mystical silence but forces the representative name to manifest the real in the symbolic.

"And all the charms of face or voice /Which I in others see /Are but the recollected choice /Of what I felt for thee." (The Secret, John Clare)

The romantic's re-collection of traces into the mold of the first love forces the stranger to conform to our lost ideal – but by lending our first love the name of our second love, we lose them both in the encryption of morbid letters. Every letter becomes a variation on a single theme.

Freud does not go far from Clare. Before transference, there is first love. When love is dislocated, love retroactively becomes the lost Thing of total enjoyment that every subsequent object will only approximate – these new object relations are called transference, or secondary loves. Rather than diluting the primal love, the secondary simulation purifies and elevates it. Loving is aping an ideal enjoyment that never occurred. Love like sex is mostly simulated.

The first love is canceled, re-presented, re-collected, and signified through the second love. An unspeakable love becomes spoken. The first Thing may never have existed but romantic desire is propelled by searching for the primal as if it were real.

The drive aims at recovering the Thing but gets off to readymade scraps found at hand. Each new object relation is another detachment from the Thing but also another opportunity to make-do with what remains. To savor what has been spared.

We lose track of our own primordial enjoyment but also miss the enjoyment we gave to our first love. New tracks must be laid down through a new chain of letters leading to a new source of love. You preserve a single trait of the first love and address yourself to a second love, who, however unrelated, bears that initial trait, which we cover over with the false tracks of the new lover.

Can there be a mark, not transferable, a third love, nonconsecutive, that encroaches on resemblance, that cuts across our feedback loops, a notch on the belt that we cannot retrace?

Maybe if we love the same person a third time, we'll be thrown into a moment that moves too fast to allow the relief of inscription, letters, and notes.

When a double suicide succeeds, we die in each other

When a double suicide fails, we die to each other

For the failure to succeed, we'd have to cease containing each other, cease being each other's doubles, and meet only in the modest overlap between two untouchable lives.

FELIX BERNSTEIN stages psychofictional scenes as lectures, essays, satire, and melodrama, using errant bodies of imagery and discourse to bore holes through crusty ideals. He is the author of *Burn Book* (Nightboat, 2016) and *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry* (Insert Blanc Press, 2015)

1080PRESS is a small poetry press located in Kingston, New York. Our books are available online through Asterism Distribution,