

Autobiographical Bodies

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It could be a doorstep, a paperweight; a telephone directory, or a diary. It could be a “book” if its one-thousand-odd pages had found a publisher back in 1974. (But they didn’t.) And so it remains static and singular—categorically, but not materially, dead. Searching for the word we might call it to make it safe—this unpublished, peripheral object—I’m going to say it’s a manuscript. In Dodie Bellamy’s *The Letters of Mina Harker*, the epistle-maker is nicknamed MS, code for “Manuscript”: a textual body, living through ink and paper, she is “her own scandalous invention.”¹

The same could be said of Clive R. Curtis, the unknown author of the unknown novel *Sparrow’s Kneecaps*, its first volume given the self-referential subtitle: “A Novel—totally nonfictional.” This manuscript has been manhandled and is moth-eaten, its type dirtied across different decades. Curling forward and back is the red front cover, repaired beyond recognition. The back cover has a hole in its heart. Scribbled above this rip is Clive Reginald Curtis’s London address written at a forty-five-degree angle: a mixture of looping letters and squared-off capitals. A torn monochrome page adhered to the manuscript’s middle repeats: FRAGILE PLEASE HANDLE WITH CARE.²

Marguerite Duras would have considered Clive’s manuscript, with its jagged spine and jagged syntax, an isolated body of what she called “virtual literature.” “Published literature,” she wrote, “represents only one percent of what is written in the world. It seems worthwhile to talk about the rest, an abyss, a black night out of which comes that ‘bizarre thing,’ literature, and into which almost all of it disappears again without a trace.”³ *Sparrow’s Kneecaps* is a cryptic archival object and a novel in one. Locked into a latent state of anticipation, the object’s anonymity enables an imaginative reading, and writing, of gossip.

Sparrow’s Kneecaps is autobiography made fragile by the context of fiction. Clive cuts into the self and carves it, mixing confession with novelistic invention in spiraling, uncensored syntax. William Burroughs once told the poet-artist Jeff Nuttall that the way to make cut-ups was to “establish a schizophrenic relationship with a typewriter”⁴—a promise Clive attempts to fulfill. In this novel of “autobiographical anecdotes,” Clive looks to “smother [the page] with type” to “reach [his] aim of 55,000 words.” Word count hereby becomes an indication of lexical prowess, and morphemes are made numerical. Seemingly out-of-control, the writing multiplies itself; raw, atavistic, unclean—a merging of life and language. As Duras writes (in the book called *Writing*): “Writing comes like the wind. It’s made of ink, it’s the thing written, and it passes like nothing else passes in life, nothing more, except life itself.”⁵

As the typed documents of his past are shuffled into the red compendium (everything from psychiatrists’ notes to publishers’ rejection letters), Clive’s naked body is transcribed as text itself. The tissue paper facts are exposed as sheer and unruly when transplanted into the space of the novel. This urge to “memoirize” reminds me of Alexander Trocchi, ventriloquizing as the

character Joe Necchi in *Cain's Book*. Joe is a drug addict working on a Hudson River boat, but also the writer of the book we are reading:

—*The facts. Stick to the facts. A fine empirical principle, but below the level of language the facts slide away like lava ... and if I find it difficult to remember and express, and difficult to express and remember, if sometimes words leap up, sudden, unnatural, squint and jingling skeletons from the page ... I suppose it is because they take a kind of ancestral revenge upon me. ... No doubt I shall go on writing.*⁶

A flag of literary protest, *Cain's Book* was first brought out in Britain by avant-garde publishing renegade John Calder in 1963, and was swiftly met with an obscenity trial on account of its depiction of sex and drugs. Meanwhile, Clive was gorging on these banned books in an act of sleazy excess: he reads like he types, then vomits it back at the page in a kind of disorderly barf speech.

The angsty writer in Clive is in a constant tussle with his underground competitors: he is a literary leech, looking to feed on as many avant-garde writers as possible. *Sparrow's Kneecaps* thus contains a thousand other pamphlets and paperbacks in what comprises a frenetic splurge of contextual material: first he lists “the magazines ‘Books & Bookmen,’ ‘The London Magazine,’ ‘Ambit,’ and ‘Penthouse,’” before enumerating—without shame—the following publications and periodicals, as well as the destinations to buy them:

He then hitchhiked up the A40 to Indica, Better Books, University Bookshop, and Foyles, and spent £150 of his £312 before tax for that period on the paperback revolution... An article in the ‘News of the World’ informed him of the ‘Underground,’ the Indica bookshop, and the ‘International Times’ underground newspaper, and from the second of these Curtois purchased numerous invaluable ‘little magazines’ and San Francisco beat poetry from America ... The Calder & Boyars Ltd. avant-garde literature series, plus American publishers Grove Press, New Directions, etc., etc., introduced him to avant-garde fiction. Calder & Boyars were discovered from an advert in the Avant-Garde edition of The Times Literary Supplement, some five years previously whilst I was modelling at the Chelsea School of Art (incidentally, Miss Anne Quin was my modelling secretary at this school before she became famous; the day she left a doorkeeper died of arsenic poisoning!); and Grove Press was introduced to me by the butch-lesbian ... Burroughs I read about in The Times Literary Supplement and bought from Better Books when I was sleeping rough in the grounds of a Surrey Art School in their greenhouse...

Relentless in its unedited parataxis, this passage performs the material excesses of the bookshop shelf. It also sets the historical scene, exposes a cast of characters, and reveals Clive to be a literary performer even while surviving on ten shillings a week. Clive, MS, you scandalous invention: what can your diary-fiction tell us about avant-garde publishing in 1960s London? Written within a history outside of what is known, *Sparrow's Kneecaps* indexes the secrets of a literary past. Like the Necchi/Trocchi of *Cain's Book*, Clive's narrator exhorts himself “to accept, to endure, to record”⁷ his surrounding milieu, unabashedly plucking people and paperbacks from the typewritten streets of London.

1964: Three shops knocked together made the paperback section of Better Books. Its owner Tony Godwin had recently devised a sly process of epistolary exchange, in which he and his friend Lawrence Ferlinghetti (owner of City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco) traded otherwise banned books across the Atlantic. The poet Bill Butler was appointed as manager first; then Miles, who later founded the underground newspaper *International Times*, took over once Butler moved to Brighton to open The Unicorn Bookshop, and when Miles left, the sound poet Bob Cobbing stepped in. Cobbing was the founder of Writers Forum, a small press based in North London that published concrete poetry in loose-leaf publications such as their magazine *And*, as well as individual artists' chapbooks.

The doors of Better Books welcomed not only the anonymous Clive. The network of artists, poets, publishers, and filmmakers that made work, or bought work, within its walls and infamous basement—which after a fire in late 1964 was used for Happenings and Cobbing's Cinema 65—included such figures as Gustav Metzger, Charles Marowitz, John Latham, Barry Flanagan, Jeffrey Shaw, Trocchi, and Nuttall. Many of these artists featured in the environmental exhibition *sTigma*, an abject assemblage of polyester dolls, filthy panties, sanitary towels and used condoms that inhabited the corridors and corners of Better Books. A diary entry of Nuttall's, written with the same kind of quotidian attention as Clive's confessions, paints a curious picture of the bookshop's faces:

October 1965. There is a special peculiar atmosphere to these Better Books functions, a sort of curious mixed atmosphere, part Quaker, part Anarchist, part decadent. The crowd usually consists of idealistic figures in publishing, up and comings, amiable potheads, one or two celebrities, and a rash of kids of all three sexes.⁸

I wonder if the Quaker that Nuttall is sketching is the bearded and bespectacled Allen Ginsberg. The Beat poet had come to London in May of that year, following his deportation from Czechoslovakia, and he soon announced his willingness to read for free at Better Books. His performance there sat between poetry and painting (to use the title of a 1965 exhibition at London's ICA), with Warhol gorging on it from a front-row seat.

Following Ginsberg's basement poetry readings, plans were quickly made for a large-scale event that would bring American and European avant-garde poets together in once city, and place their work in conversation. The International Poetry Incarnation took place at the Royal Albert Hall on 11 June 1965. Filmed by Peter Whitehead, this heavily mythologized event pulled poetry apart from the page: words were there to be spat and sung, and sliced into society. (There were daffodils everywhere: yellow, even amid the sixties cigarette smoke.) Ginsberg sang with his Indian cymbals before shrouding himself in women and foliage; Harry Fainlight fought the hecklers; Ferlinghetti, Trocchi, and Michael Horovitz all read too; and Austrian poet Ernst Jandl's performance was as guttural as the spectators' roars. (A mimeographed resurrection of his June reading, *mai hart lieb zapfen eibe hold*, was published by Writers Forum in November 1965.) The Finnish concrete poet Anselm Hollo, as well as Ginsberg, also read from Writers Forum typewritten booklets, the typewriter being the object of the times, especially for our man

Clive: “I’ve been thinking of going for a walk with the typewriter, to Harrow-on-the-Hill, and lie in the grass to add a few pages to the novel.”

Ditto for the drugged-up, diarizing Trocchi, in whose writing the typewriter structures our position toward the place in which he and we find ourselves—the space of the novel. The many sensory allusions to the typewriter teasingly suggest the novel’s means of production, as well as its narrative; for example: “They had heard the noise of the typewriter during the afternoon and that was sufficient to arouse their curiosity. It’s not usual for a scow captain to carry a typewriter.”⁹ Character and author merge through the image of the typewriter, and its technology as a verbal machine—“the robot goes on writing, recording, unmasking himself, exposing him or herself through language itself.”¹⁰ Trocchi, as writer, processes and mediates the life of Alexander Trocchi via the character of Joe Necchi: it is an intimate exposure of life, disguised in the texture of its prose.

The Brighton-born writer Ann Quin was a typist too—she was there at the International Poetry Incarnation, just round the corner from her day job as secretary at the Royal College of Art. But their archive has no record of her—it was a professional position after all; she was a typing automaton, not a typing author. The reality was that, like Necchi the scow captain in *Cain’s Book*, or Clive the life-model in *Sparrow’s Kneecaps*, Quin edited, eroticized, and rewrote her life as “novel.” She mined the use of the typewriter for her own transgressive ends.

In *Sparrow’s Kneecaps*, Clive recounts while in the bath a fantasy of a conversation he had with Quin—strangely asexual—in which he mocked her “over her plebeian origins in public!” She had been his modeling secretary at one time, as he freelanced his way naked through the art schools of London while moonlighting as a writer in a metropolitan attic somewhere, much like Quin. It was at 62 Redcliffe Road, surrounded by failed starts and fag-ashed manuscripts, that Quin wrote her first novel, *Berg*, named after the painter Adrian Berg, (who she had a crush on).

Along with the Poetry Society and the ICA, the editor of *Ambit* magazine, Martin Bax, also corresponded with Clive, but only on account of the manuscript’s problems, as a letter, dated 10 July 1970 and stuck to one of the book’s pages, describes: “Your piece will probably be in the number of *Ambit* which appears on July 15th but it may have to be held over till October.” The extract he speaks of was never published, an archival memory not retrievable from the catalogued stacks. By summer 1970, Ann Quin had already been featured in the pages of *Ambit*. Built on the episodic, her fourth and final novel, *Tripticks*, began as a short story that won first prize in a creative writing and drugs contest sponsored by the magazine. In the notes to “Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy,” the tenth chapter of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, J. G. Ballard (fiction editor of *Ambit*) describes how Lord Goodman threatened legal action against them for such a prize, despite Quin’s drug-of-fiction being the oral contraceptive.¹¹

Tripticks is a cut-up document of Quin’s time in America during the late 1960s, when she stayed at the D. H. Lawrence Ranch in New Mexico as part of a literary award she had won. In the novel, she translates the peyote of Placitas into a body of conjoining texts, restless in their fractured composition and schizophrenic imagery. It was also during this stay that she struck up a relationship with the Beat poet Robert Sward, both sexual and creative. Together they wrote

through their trips, which are subsequently realized by Quin as the hallucinatory sexscapes of *Tripticks*:

*A fluid dance, and all our limbs flowing into, out, through, until I had no idea whose hands, breast, leg I touched, or was touched by ... When fantasy has the weight of fact; and fact has the metaphoric potential of fantasy ... A certain rhythm, a nervous montage. Trips not on established trails. A series of spectacular switch-backs. Domes and carvings, arches and flying buttresses.*¹²

The novel is reminiscent of the voiced impression, as Quin confessed to her threesome adventures in an interview from 1972: “Everybody fantasises about making love with a stranger, and when you’re in bed with two people, you know, at the same time you don’t know, whose hand it is, or whose mouth, and this is extraordinarily exciting.”¹³ The biography is the prologue, but fiction then kicks it away, reframes it in a distracted syntax of momentary clauses, elemental images, and bodily tics.

It might seem surprising that a publishing culture interested in printing “stuff which is incomplete, tentative, naïve, idiosyncratic”, and therefore divorced from established literary forms and narrative content, would produce novels with the autobiographical body at their heart.¹⁴ Life-writing, a literary tradition obsessed with storytelling progression, seems an unlikely genre for a literary counterculture looking to break the power lines of linear language. But not when it is occupied and appropriated by the event of writing. The autobiographical texts that haunt the histories of the London avant-garde are wayward documents of the real: memoir is performed, and then disavowed, in the composition and form of the text.

For the London underground of the 1960s and 1970s, the diary was an intimate form to be owned, then rebelliously detoured. The artist-writer Ian Breakwell began writing his *Continuous Diary* in 1965, a polyphonic document of autographic inscriptions, type, collage, and photography. By shaping his life into something paper and pliable, shifting and unstable in its form, Breakwell exceeds biographical “truth” with the making of art. Like Breakwell’s multimedia memoirs, or Quin’s fragmented novels of confession, *Sparrow’s Kneecaps* too points to a surprising strand of linguistic invention that was “happening” in the London literary avant-garde: biography as verbal experiment. As a marginal textual object, Clive’s manuscript is both a social document and a diary, an exposé of his location and a raw unveiling of himself—the dirt, the masturbation, the grime—in a language just as raw. This is not just text, akin to the cold conceptualism of the time; it is text *with* body. *Sparrow’s Kneecaps* performs the act of fiction making: it is a novel that documents its own becoming, tracing the interior and exterior worlds of its author. A paper object, it is subversively plastic insofar as it is an *artificial* catalogue of the real: an expression of transgressive formal intent, not faked verisimilitude. And so, as life nestles beneath the surface of the syntax, and language bends biography, the facts evade our touch. Clive Curtis: a scandalous invention all along.

Alice Butler

¹ Dodie Bellamy, “The Letters of Mina Harker,” in *High Risk: An Anthology of Forbidden Writings* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1991), p. 233.

² The British artist Elizabeth Price picked the manuscript up at an East London market for £10—its penciled price a mark of its time travel. It was exhibited alongside a video work of hers in the 2013 group exhibition *Relatively Absolute* curated by Gareth Bell-Jones at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridge, England; the show put as much focus on the fuzzy background shuffle of research as on the works produced by the participating artists. (with funding support from Arts Council England, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Henry Moore Foundation).

³ Marguerite Duras, cited in Joe Milutis, *Failure* (London: Zero Books, 2012), p. 4.

⁴ Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: Paladin, 1971), p. 246.

⁵ Marguerite Duras, *Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 45.

⁶ Alexander Trocchi, *Cain’s Book* (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2011), p. 5.

⁷ Alexander Trocchi, *Cain’s Book*, p. 24.

⁸ Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, p. 147.

⁹ Alexander Trocchi, *Cain’s Book*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Alexander Trocchi, *Cain’s Book*, p. 55.

¹¹ J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 145.

¹² Ann Quin, *Tripticks* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009), p. 64.

¹³ John Hall, “Landscape with Three-Cornered Dances,” *The Guardian*, 29 April 1972.

¹⁴ John Rowan cited in Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, p. 161.