

LIVING

IRVING GOH

ON

AFTER

FAILURE

AFFECTIVE STRUCTURES OF MODERN LIFE

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*To those who have failed
and continue to fail,
and who blame no one and nothing else except themselves,
living or otherwise*

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EXSCRIBING A DARK CARE OF THE SELF OF FAILED EXISTENCE

EVE SEDGWICK'S *A DIALOGUE ON LOVE AND*
ÉDOUARD LEVÉ'S *SUICIDE*

The Failure of Care

What the previous chapter reminds us is not only that we exist in a world of others but also that this world is where others fail equally, if not more. It is in the face of such a world that we sometimes see only a world of failures, a world where there can be little hope in alleviating our own sense of failure, a world that offers little comfort to our failures. Seeing a troubling or troubled world of failures, it might even reinforce our pessimism of there being no escape from the sense of failure. Leaving aside the problem of failure for just a little while and to take into account this world of others, we heed once again Jean-Luc Nancy's insight that existence is always already coexistence and, correspondingly, all ontology a co-ontology: in our existences, there are not only others who come into presence in this world alongside us but also others who have had come before and others who will come after. Even at moments when we want to retreat from the world, when we want to drift silently at the margins of the world, we can never stop the world from encroaching or imposing, and intruding, upon us. Even when we just want to quietly dwell in our own failures, we can never block out the noise of the world, and this is what the previous chapter on Cusk's *Outline* trilogy

has underscored. This is existence as *ek-sistence*, as Nancy would say too after Heidegger, where the prefix *ek-*, signifying outside, marks how we extend beyond our selves, beyond our carefully conjured subjectivity, in our being-in and/or being-with the world; but it also serves, we would add, to remind us how the outside world is constantly infringing upon our interiority in our daily existence. Put another way, as long as we accept reality—and perhaps nothing is more real than living on after failure while still tarrying with failure—we will have to accept the fact of us knocking against the real world and vice versa. In this regard, and to reiterate, there will always be elements in the real world that will constantly remind us not only of our failures but also the failures of others; oftentimes, they will even make us focus on the latter, making us attend to them more so than ours. The fact of a co-ontological *ek-sistence* thus also compels us—especially those of us who are humbly mindful of others—at times to care for others, placing others before us, giving voice to them while bracketing our own thoughts and feelings about our very sense or experience of failure.

Some might see the deferral to others as an Asian disposition or reflex, a naturalization of Confucian ethics that teaches selflessness as a virtue, which has no doubt become an ideology undergirding Asian societies for many centuries. Yet, as Michel Foucault has highlighted for us, such an erasure of the self also has a long history in Western culture. In the “Technologies of the Self” seminar held at the University of Vermont in 1982, which extends from the 1981–1982 *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault pointed out that 1980s Western culture and society still predicated themselves on two major strands of thought that had driven Western civilization: Christian ideology, which presented itself as a paradigm of morality that demanded a certain renunciation of the self, and theoretical philosophy from René Descartes to Edmund Husserl, which placed a premium on knowledge rather than care of the self. The respect for “external law” during that time, too, as Foucault saw it, was a further expression of moral deference to others.¹ The idea of a care of the self then was seen as incongruent with social, cultural, and intellectual codes, if not “immoral.”² Any care of the self then had to take a back seat—and not for the first time in history. As Foucault reminds us, Socrates and Plato’s reading of the Delphic oracle of “know thyself” (*gnothi sauton*) always meant a quest for a knowledge of the self and hardly ever a matter of a care of the self (*epimelēsthai sautou*). To Foucault’s observations on the reservations toward a care of the self in the late twentieth century, I would also add French thought’s own ethical project since the late 1960s of affirming others and differences, which

was strongly promulgated by Foucault's peers and/or predecessors such as Emmanuel Levinas, Hélène Cixous, and Jacques Derrida, including Foucault himself, and which saw its wider political reach in more global feminist and postcolonial movements, especially from the 1970s onward.

A care for others, however, can prove a real challenge to its sustainability. The spirit of altruism wears thin, or any endeavor at an "aneconomical" ethics—as Derrida calls the form of absolute giving that does not expect anything in return, which he sees as necessary but at the same time acknowledges its impossibility—becomes intolerable, when the self that has been asked to give receives incommensurably less, when the self sees one's supposed privileges seemingly diminish or "replaced" in the face of rising "identity politics" by minority groups. As Freud had already cautioned, greater violence will only erupt from the disenfranchised self when one's interests are repressed. And erupt it did, as we have seen in the hate crimes of recent years: the mass shooting at the gay club Pulse in Orlando in 2016, the synagogue shooting in Pittsburg in 2018, the shooting of female Asian American spa workers in Atlanta in 2021, the racially motivated grocery store shooting in Buffalo in 2022, etcetera. All these, in a way, are no doubt extreme violent pushbacks against any endeavor at respecting others and differences. Without justifying (and definitely not excusing) any of these hate crimes, these expressions of extreme violence may nevertheless be symptomatic of how a self might snap when one perceives too much pressure mounting on oneself to care for others. Aside from taking into account hate crimes perpetuated typically by those who also presume a sense of entitlement (which is to say, they would hardly care for others), we must nevertheless acknowledge that care can cut both ways: a show of care for some can no doubt be perceived by others as a carelessness toward, or even disregard for, them: "Our cares can perform disconnection," as María Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us.³ Thus, in the serious case of hate crimes where an ethical care for others can indeed create violent political rifts leading to fatal casualties, in less severe situations, our care for some can generate jealousy or envy in others, leading them to read our care for others as an abandonment of them, hence letting them drift away from us. Or, as Hil Malatino sees it, "We are often triggered by one another in the act of caring but nevertheless need one another, in both specific and abstract ways, to get by."⁴ In whichever case, one must recognize a certain violence of care.⁵

The violence of care can be articulated in another way: care fatigue. For advocates of hate crimes, it is seeing how care is distributed to others that becomes tiresome to them. But even when care is well-intended, given ei-

ther willingly or by vocation of choice, especially in the case of caregivers for the sick, the old, or the dying, it can bring about both physical and emotional exhaustion. “Too much care can be consuming,” as Puig de la Bellacasa will say, following decades of scholarship by Marxist feminists on care work by female labor; care fatigue can smother, if not denigrate or negate, any sense of self, individuality, and even personhood for the caregiver.⁶ I do not need to remind readers that this is what effectively comes through in Cusk’s trilogy for the narrator as other characters pile their stories of failures on her while barely demonstrating any genuine interest in hers. The danger of care is that it can be so overwhelming that too little space is left for any care of the self. This problem of care has been made especially acute by the COVID-19 pandemic, where medical/health workers and social workers have worked incessantly for at least two years, caring for highly and/or fatally contagious patients despite serious burnouts and in spite of unjust discrimination or ostracization by others. To say the least, real material and even psychological care for these workers—not to mention commensurate remuneration for their labor—have not been sufficiently forthcoming or available. As the Care Collective has pointed out, such a “crisis of care” or the systemic shortcoming of care apparatuses in society has in fact already been in place decades prior to the pandemic because of the dominance of neoliberal capitalism. The “market logic” of the latter, in the words of the collective, “has meant systematically prioritizing the interests and flows of financial capital, while ruthlessly dismantling welfare states.”⁷ Consequently, it “normalizes endemic care deficits and abject failures to care at every level by positing them as necessary collateral damage on the road to market-oriented reforms and policies.”⁸ Careless about care, especially (and cruelly) during a serious global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic where both the vulnerable and unwealthy patients and the medical and social care workers who attend to them need critical care, this “market logic” has only continued to exploit the long history of the devaluation of care—partly through its past relegation to the undervalued female workforce and the bias against care work as “unproductive” or rather unprofitable in order to “consistently subject [the work of caring and care workers] to less pay and social prestige.”⁹

At the same time, though, Puig de la Bellacasa and the Care Collective have also noted a putting to work of a normative “care” of the self by neoliberal economics, one that, as we have mentioned in our chapter on flopping and Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, effectively leaves us to our own devices to remain physically and mentally healthy only so that we continue to be able to maintain our keep. In Puig de la Bellacasa’s words,

“Neoliberal governance has made . . . caring for *the self* a pervasive order of individualized political morality.”¹⁰ On the one hand, this has only created a new worry, which is the stress of resiliency and which demands the hasty recuperation of the individual as a high-functioning subject of this very political economy instead of fostering real rest and healing of the body and mind. On the other hand, this order has also translated itself into an immensely profitable “self-care” industry, the benefits or luxury of which, and the time for which, are affordable only to the rich. Meanwhile, the rest of us, because given the stressful imposed need to “care” for the self for which we actually have not much financial resources or the luxury of time, are, as the Care Collective has highlighted, “less able to *provide* care as well as less likely to *receive* it.”¹¹ “We have,” the Collective reminds us, “for a very long time, been rendered less capable of caring for people even in our most intimate spheres, while being energetically encouraged to restrict our care for strangers and distant others.”¹² At best, or actually worse, we are made only to “rearticulate and reorient our caring inclinations toward ‘people like us.’”¹³ In other words, if there are care communities, they are largely comprised of those of similar socioeconomic classes, those who can buy into the “hype” or “current commodification” of care.¹⁴

I recall that French thought from the late 1960s till the '80s had tried to break with any sense or order of an exclusionary homogeneity. The Care Collective undoubtedly also seeks to counter such a homogeneity with a more encompassing or inclusive global politics of care, where none is left behind in any care economy. Puig de la Bellacasa's endeavor to think about care bears a similar spirit no less.¹⁵ And perhaps echoing French thought's “aneconomic” thinking about care with differences in mind, she would state that care “cannot be enacted by a prior moral disposition, nor an epistemic stance, nor a set of applied techniques, nor elicited as abstract affect.”¹⁶ In other words, for her, care cannot discount, disregard, or be abstracted from the particular or empirical situatedness in which it is needed: specific cares must be given or catered to each specific case, even though the technics of some of these cares have not been practiced or thought of before, and they surely must not be given as an afterthought following some moral calculation. (Or, according to the editors to the volume *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*: “Care is always a response to the particularity of someone's circumstance that requires concrete knowledge of the situation, entailing imaginative connection and actions on behalf of their flourishing and growth.”¹⁷) The attention to the specific situatedness of care, I believe, allows Puig de la Bellacasa to sidestep a certain failure in French thought in fostering a

more universal acceptance of the ethicopolitical project of affirming and respecting others and differences. That failure might be because of French thought's insistence (as mentioned in our introduction) on a structural and hence impersonal mode of thinking, which can indeed come across as unfeeling and which can place the notion of otherness in an abstract horizon, which in turn can have the unintended effect of obscuring the other's corporeal and affective particularities, thus further foreclosing any real care for it.¹⁸ Picking up from John Dewey, Puig de la Bellacasa would insist, however, that thinking can always have the potentiality for a mindfulness of others, hence a dimension of care.¹⁹

And yet, as I have already forewarned about the violent danger that can possibly entail from the fatigue of caring for others, thought must be equally mindful to maintain the very delicate or fragile, if not precarious, balance between a care for others and a care for the self. But even without thought, given care fatigue, and given that everyone/everything needs care, there will be moments when a care of the self—other than the ideological and/or commercialized “self-care”—becomes inevitable or even necessary.²⁰ Foucault had noted that there was indeed such a turn toward a care of the self in the Hellenistic period that followed the era of Socrates and Plato. According to Foucault, this turn was signaled by a particular writing practice through which there was the recognition that “the self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity.”²¹ The question of writing will be critical for the kind of care of the self with which we will be concerned in this chapter, and I will say more about this soon. For now, and just to stay with the Hellenistic writing practice, Foucault observed how it paid “attention . . . to nuances of life, mood, and reading.”²² Put in more contemporary parlance, it was concerned with the self's “ordinary affects,” to borrow Kathleen Stewart's phrase. Or more simply, it was attuned to common everyday life, an attunement that could be as banal as noting down ordinary routines rather than proceeding with a view of pedagogical ends, as was the case with texts produced in Socrates's and Plato's time. This is also not to mention that in the latter epoch, it was the case too that only the elites had the luxury to think about a care of the self. By contrast, in the Hellenistic period, as long as one knows how to write, a care of the self predicated on writing could more democratically be available to anyone. And yet, for Foucault, the conversion toward a care of the self in the Hellenistic period was not exactly comprehensive. As he argues through a reading of Marcus Aurelius's letter of 144–45 to his teacher Fronto, the question of sexuality, along with other forms of existence such as the self in sickness or madness,

were after all bracketed from the exercise of a care of the self at that time.²³ From such a reading, Foucault envisioned a reanimation of the discourse on the care of the self with a particular focus on the self's deviant sexual desires. This would constitute for Foucault a revolutionary conversion that would allow for the articulation of a self, or even selves, that could potentially defy heteronormativity, and his texts of the period between 1981 and 1984 were no doubt formative of a revolutionary queer conversion toward a care of the self that dared speak the truth of one's sexual desires and practices. It is not the interest of this present book to chart the development of this Foucauldian trajectory, but allow me to just say that it is very much in our present century that written discourses on such a care of the self have really come to the fore and proliferated in literary and/or theoretical domains, especially in the genre that has lately come to be known as "auto-theory," with celebrated examples such as Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*.

In this chapter, I want to elucidate a darker or even more perverse care of the self, one more radical than Foucault envisioned and accomplished by writers such as Preciado and Nelson. In a way, Puig de la Bellacasa also has an ambitious or radical end in sight for her thinking of care. She wants care to "disrupt the status quo and to unhinge some of the moral rigidities of ethical questioning"; she wants care to be "a critically disruptive doing that can open to 'as well as possible' reconfigurations engaged with troubled presents."²⁴ For Puig de la Bellacasa, "troubled presents" include nonhuman and nonorganic entities that she perceives to even deserve the value of care as much as humans do. The care that I want to talk about here, even though it returns to the human self, is even more troubling or messier than Puig de la Bellacasa would want it. I am speaking about a care of a self that seeks its extinguishment, a self that desires an exit from existence. Let it be said at the outset that such a care, not surprisingly, barely promises anything positive; its outcome is hardly recuperative; it can even head toward "bad" endings in normative terms. Yet I would argue here, through readings of Eve Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love* and Édouard Levé's *Suicide* and *Autoportrait*, that such a care is necessary for those who feel that their existence is essentially, irreducibly, or hopelessly a failed existence, either because of an underlying but undeniable sense of ontological failure or because of bodily failures.

In other words, I want to consider this dark care of the self a genre flailing in response to demands of care to be given to others—the care for their stories of failure, the care for their positive or optimistic worldviews, the care to not inconvenience them. (Or, to recall the previous chapter, such a care

of the self might even be considered the gesture of the Neutral, where what is at stake is to make manifest the existence of the one who had cared too much about, or for, the world but now needs to turn the attention to oneself.) Care in this case, I would say, is “a nonnormative necessity” way more radical than Puig de la Bellacasa would allow care to be.²⁵ And this care can only be given to oneself by oneself, because no existing morality—normative or otherwise—can possibly allow it, not to mention that legally such a care coming from others can amount, in many places, to the crime of assisted suicide. To borrow Puig de la Bellacasa’s words again, and to bring them beyond the semantic contour she has circumscribed for them, this is care “as an everyday practice that refuses moral orders that reduce it to innocent love or the securitization of those in need.”²⁶ This care needs a complementary, or even supplementary, genre too, and the other genre that is also flailing here is one that is more conventional—that is, one according to which we understand genre in its classical sense.²⁷ It is a genre that Foucault had already underscored that could accompany his idea of a care of the self: writing.²⁸ More specifically, though, it would be a writing that attends to the desire for the exit, if not the very exit itself, of existence. To understand such a writing, I will borrow Nancy’s term of “exscription,” but like how I mobilized Puig de la Bellacasa’s phrase of “nonnormative necessity” to describe my dark, deathly care of the self, I will take its meaning further than that for which Nancy had intended.

Dark Narcissism

As mentioned, the care of the self with which we are dealing here is darker in tenor. Perhaps inevitably it also implicates a form of narcissism, as do all cares of the self, although I will underscore here that it will be a somber and, again, perverse narcissism in our case. Now, the phrase “perverse narcissism” might recall a problematic understanding of narcissism that Freud identified during his time. In the essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (1914), Freud notes of “psycho-analytic observers . . . struck by the fact that individual features of the narcissistic attitude are found in many people who suffer from other disorders—for instance, as [Isidor] Sadger has pointed out, in homosexuals.”²⁹ According to this skewed view, queer narcissism involves libidinal cathexes no longer being distributed to others out there in the world but flow back entirely into the ego, leading to a certain “end of the world” condition for the narcissist in the sense of extracting the latter away from the world of others.³⁰ In this regard, the narcissist refuses, or

fails to acknowledge, the co-ontology that connects each and every one of us in the world. More than a century later, and certainly with the benefit of an immense and growing archive of queer texts and theories, this point is easily debunked today. Indeed, the aforementioned *Testo Junkie* and *Argonauts* would testify that there are cases where the queer self does not shy away from the endeavor to negotiate with the heteronormative world, with either a queer community (in the case of *Testo Junkie*) or a queer family unit (as in *Argonauts*). In any case, against the homophobic pinning of narcissism to queer subjects, Freud wants to recuperate narcissism from its pathologizing as a queer “disturbance.”³¹ For Freud, this involves recognizing that not just queer subjects but all of us have a “primary narcissism”: there is “a primary narcissism in everyone.”³² This is how narcissism “would not be a perversion, but the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature.”³³ As Freud argues, “primary narcissism” can be traced back to childhood “auto-eroticism” or “early state of the libido,” but it becomes repressed through processes of socialization as one internalizes the moral codes of (heteronormative) family and social institutions.³⁴ Through the latter, one imagines an ego ideal, which is really “imposed from without,” and precisely through which there is the “departure from primary narcissism,” if not its sublimation, by which there occurs the “instinct’s directing itself toward an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual instincts.”³⁵ According to Freud, though, one could revolt against the repressive mechanism of the ego ideal “out of the subject’s desire . . . to liberate himself from all [the familial and social] influences, . . . and out of his withdrawal of homosexual libido from them,” which would suggest a reclaiming of “primary narcissism.”³⁶ According to Freud, too, the narcissistic love-object could be “what he himself is (i.e. himself),” “what he himself was,” “what he himself would like to be,” or “someone who was once part of himself.”³⁷ In whichever case, “the aim and the satisfaction in a narcissistic object-choice is to be loved”³⁸ or, in terms of the concern of this chapter, to be cared for.

As said, though, we are seeking a *darker narcissism*, one that is no less ontological, and for this I would suggest Ovid’s Narcissus story to be more instructive than Freud’s libido theory. If Freud’s take on narcissism builds on, and moves away from, one with a homophobic perspective, turning to Ovid might even be a more radical move since Narcissus is very much the queer subject. Narcissus is attracted to, and desired by, both males and females. Yet he never yields to any of them because of an unwavering pride in his own beauty. It could be said that Narcissus’s way of going about his life

as a pococurante seducer is an art of living that takes care of his self's sexual desires and pleasures, albeit in solipsistic ways. This sees to his rejection of Echo, making her flee to the caves where, with "unsleeping grief,"³⁹ her body wasted away, leaving her with nothing except her voice. As if in line with poetic justice, there is no happy ending for Narcissus either. His eventual demise could be attributed to Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, when she grants the wish of one of Narcissus's spurned admirers for Narcissus to likewise never attain his beloved. However, prior to Nemesis's intervention, Tiresias had already foretold that Narcissus can live a long life only on the condition that "he knows himself—not."⁴⁰ (There is no doubt a semantic distance between the Latin original of this utterance—*si se non noverit*—and the negative form of the Greek *gnothi sauton* or "know thyself," but it is nevertheless interesting to note that already in Ovid, prior to Foucault, there is a caution against knowledge of the self.) Narcissus's fatal "know himself" moment arrives when he realizes that the reflection in the pool, that "singular boy" whom he desires so much, that "immaterial hope" with which he is obsessed, is none other than himself.⁴¹ The image, unlike the Freudian ego ideal, is not a repressed self excavated from Narcissus's past; neither is it an object of sublimation since it is not a desexualized other—in Ovid's tale, Narcissus does make himself sexually attractive and available to the image. Instead, the image is a part of Narcissus's always present self that he had never known or encountered before, apparently altogether different from any image of himself reflected in other pools.

What Narcissus comes up against, then, can be said to be the "not-I" or "not-me" that nevertheless is still very much part of the self. And it does appear that Narcissus practices some form of care of the self obsessed with this not-I or not-me: a perverse care no doubt, for it involves ignoring his hunger and fatigue. He is willing to let his existence slip away while obsessing over his image:

neither his hunger nor his need for rest
can draw him off; prone on the shaded grass,
his insatiate stare fixed on that false shape,
he perishes by his own eyes.⁴²

And even after he knows that the image is essentially his own, there is still no abandoning this form of care for the obsessed self: he remains prone on the ground, the body still in pain from yearning for the image and now grieving over the impossibility of ever attaining it.⁴³ As the story goes, this is

how “he dissolves, wasted by his passion.”⁴⁴ In my reading, there is another more desperate and potentially fatal gesture on Narcissus’s part: his desire “to plunge / his arms into the water.”⁴⁵ Certainly, it is but a “shallow pool” and one would hardly drown just by diving into it.⁴⁶ However, given that Narcissus’s goal was to embrace the image, to be with the image, it would not be surprising if he would renounce coming up for air again should he be able to grasp the image in one of his dives. Besides, upon recognizing his own image, Narcissus also says that “death is no grave matter” and looks toward death, since he is convinced that it is “in death” that he and his image will “merge as one.”⁴⁷

Narcissus’s plunge thus goes further than “the plunging view” (*la vue plongeante*) that Foucault had identified as another element of a care of the self. Not unlike Narcissus’s staring into the image at the pool’s edge—that is, languishing in a position between life and death—“the plunging view” according to Foucault is one that is adopted “at the point where one is at the edges of life and death, where one is at the threshold of existence.”⁴⁸ At such a point, one deliberates on whether “to kill oneself or continue to live.”⁴⁹ This is the point of symmetry between suicide and living on. In Foucault’s view, the plunging view acknowledges that while there are “a thousand scourges of the body and the soul, wars, banditries, death, and sufferings” on earth, there are also “all the splendors” in this very same world, and this very reckoning encourages one to keep one’s gaze “on this world” rather than on another (above, typically).⁵⁰ This is how the plunging view actually has an optimistic horizon, leading one away from any melancholic or depressive view of existence toward a perspective that is hopeful and committed to living on.

In contrast to Foucault, I want to take into consideration here the pessimistic side of the symmetry—that is, the plunging view that precipitates into suicidal ideation if not the act of suicide itself, thus pushing the plunging view deeper into the dark recesses of existence. I would like to think that adopting this dark plunging view constitutes no less a care of the self, and this is the lesson gleaned from Narcissus’s story, where we have a care of the self that heeds the self’s desire to depart from existence, a care that is willing to renounce life.⁵¹ Such a consideration takes into account that some of us, especially those of us whose sense of existence is cut deeply by an unshakeable sense of failure, we who feel life to be largely a failed existence, oftentimes without reason, do desire a departure from existence, a real out of ek-sistence—this time literally living out the *ek-* of existence. Some of us see, understand, feel, and accept such a desire as an irreducible part of ourselves: a part of the self that, as said in the introduction, no talk therapy, no

cognitive behavior therapy, no psychiatric or pharmaceutical intervention can ever absolutely dispel. For us, to be attentive to this part of the self, to allow it to articulate the desire of this ek-sistence, to articulate all the struggles and failures of ek-sistence, would be a real care of the self, a freedom of being in this world, no matter if what is being opted for or looked toward is an exit from this being. No doubt, attention to all this generates a rather depressive discourse of a care of the self. Yet, as Timothy Morton has said, “Trying to escape depression is depressing.”⁵²

Ek-sistence: Eve Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love*

A depressively narcissistic care of the self can even be found in Eve Sedgwick, whose theoretical/scholarly project is to bring some kind of uplifting relief to the field of literary criticism, which has had for a long time been burdened by a disciplinary practice grounded in what Paul Ricœur calls “a hermeneutics of suspicion.” As we all know now, Sedgwick has revealed the “deep pessimism” (in the epistemological sense rather than an ontological or experiential one) of this practice, seeking to balance it out with what she calls, following Melanie Klein, “reparative reading” where instead of the anxious need to expose imminent “bad surprises” everywhere through a generally apocalyptic lens, the aim is to elucidate possibilities of pleasure and nourishment (and Sedgwick cites Foucault’s “care of the self” on this), optimism, hope, and love.⁵³ The pendulum swings to the pessimistic shade, however, when it comes to writing about the self that perceives itself not to have been successful in various ways or situations, the self whose body has fallen susceptible to illness or disease (or the self with a failing body), the self whose mind has not been able to rid itself of the negativity of things. The discourse on a dark, depressive narcissistic care of the self thus writes itself out in Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love* (1999). No longer the conventional scholarly/theoretical text with which Sedgwick’s oeuvre is filled, *A Dialogue on Love* is mostly a memoir of her recuperative process with her therapist Shannon Van Wey to treat her depression in the wake of her breast cancer diagnosis. Taking on a hybrid form of prose, poetry, and notes written by Shannon, *A Dialogue on Love* seeks to make sense of both Sedgwick’s experiences in therapy and her relationship with her therapist. On the one hand, then, it is a text written by a body that is, like Narcissus, in pain. As the narrator says of her body, it is one that is “bursting out of my / eye sockets with pain.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, a narcissistic self-absorption is clear for all to see, through both her relationship with her therapist and when the sessions

touch on her childhood. During the latter, Sedgwick recounts her struggle to feel adequately loved by her mother, constantly frustrated by not being the “favorite daughter” in comparison to her sister Nina.⁵⁵ Sedgwick reiterates this desire to be the most well-liked with her therapist: she wants to be “truly *exceptional among his patients*” and even often wonders if he is in love with her.⁵⁶ To feed this narcissism, she asks a lot of Shannon’s time and attention, which she admits is aimed at taking Shannon away from his wife.⁵⁷ And if Shannon evaluates her as “transparently narcissistic,”⁵⁸ and even though this evaluation comes after Shannon is made to understand that he “completely missed” recognizing Sedgwick’s personality as “demonic, powerful, and unique (in an anomalous sense),” such a claim about Sedgwick here in this text is hardly contestable.⁵⁹ And despite Shannon’s failure to recognize Sedgwick’s exceptional personality, the sessions with Shannon, for Sedgwick, “let [her] indulge that desire . . . to *show oneself to be loved*,”⁶⁰ in contrast to past sessions with other therapists where she only felt “a particular impasse . . . wedged so firmly between them.”⁶¹

Sedgwick’s sessions are no doubt occasions for the self that wants to be the “favorite daughter” or the “exceptional” patient to come to be loved. Yet, with regard to *A Dialogue on Love* as a whole—that is, as a text or discourse that sees to a care of the self—there is another self at stake: a self that desires the darker ek-sistence as mentioned earlier, which is to say, a self with the “wicked thought” of wanting to die.⁶² For Sedgwick, this self is ineradicable. In fact, it structures her being; it constitutes her “ontological problem.”⁶³ To be sure, it is a “problem” only in the eyes of psychology and psychiatry. Otherwise, as *A Dialogue on Love* attests, this self is what Sedgwick desires to sustain. This is why when she postulates that the mark of successful therapy might be when she would “stop feeling the want of being dead,” she immediately regrets such a possibility, reasserting that this very feeling is “such a deep, old fact about [herself],” suspecting that being freed from the desire for ek-sistence “could be a *terrible* index of what might change.”⁶⁴ That no therapy will be able to dispel or dissolve such a self becomes rather evident toward the end of the text, when Shannon believes that Sedgwick “is experiencing a change in her relationship with death—somewhat that it is a simple fact, not that it waits soon for her, or that it is something she seeks.”⁶⁵ However, Sedgwick has a quick rejoinder that states that “one of the main ways [she is] using Shannon is as an excuse to be more withdrawn,” by which the “return to [her] unskilled, unsociable demeanor feels just right,” and that “there were something true, or vital, in all that old shyness.”⁶⁶ In other words, the self that wants out of existence is that which Sedgwick

wants to see remain through and after therapy. It is this self that she wants to see unraveled in *A Dialogue on Love*; this is the self for which the text is a care. Thus, when Sedgwick says at the end of the text that “I love that his care for me was not care for *me*,”⁶⁷ we must recognize that the latter “*me*” is the self with “the longing for death.”⁶⁸ And this “care for *me*” can be in effect only as the written text or discourse that is *A Dialogue on Love*; this care cannot be provided by anyone else or by some external psychotherapeutic intervention. The text is where the self that seeks an exit from the world can be articulated, where such a desire can be expressed, where all the affects of failed existence and/or failed ek-sistence can be inscribed. Through this text, then, Sedgwick can stay with her “groundstone” of sadness,⁶⁹ through which she can say to herself, if not her other self:

“That’s enough. You can

Stop now.”

Stop: living, that is.

And *enough*: hurting.⁷⁰

While the text offers a space within which she can comfortably or reassuringly say (to herself), “You don’t need to live anymore,”⁷¹ it also records no less her sense of failure in not dying, in not being able to “die at the right time” as Nietzsche would say, despite or in spite of the desire to exit life.⁷² Sedgwick calls this a “different failure” from the failure to feel really alive, but it does not stop her from feeling already dead.⁷³ This is why she will, while looking back at an incident where Shannon unknowingly retraces a path she had taken earlier, consider herself a spectral being, which is also that “*me*” for which Shannon can never care.⁷⁴ In all, *A Dialogue on Love* carves out a textual space in and through which it is possible to express the truth of longing to die or feeling already dead. Put another way, it serves as a space of *parrhesia*—another term Foucault highlights in discourses on the care of the self in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Yet the *parrhesia* in *A Dialogue on Love*, in bespeaking the brutal honesty of wanting to see to the extinguishment of the self, is clearly more radical than daring to speak the truth of one’s deviant sexual desires as Foucault wanted it. In this regard, the discourse on a care of the self in *A Dialogue on Love* can hardly deliver any pleasure or happiness that Sedgwick might want to bring to surface in her theoretical thinking.⁷⁵ One will indeed be hard-pressed to elicit from this text any real hope or optimism that Sedgwick seeks for “reparative reading.” Otherwise, one could say that *A Dialogue on Love* bears a “cruel optimism,” except it does

not keep faith with the promise of the capitalist good life as outlined by Berlant. Instead, it perversely believes in another chance, another day, for ek-sistence. It extends, as Sedgwick says, “the thread for the labyrinth,” which, to be sure, does not lead one out of the labyrinth but keeps one deeper and even more lost within it.⁷⁶

Exscription: Édouard Levé’s *Suicide*

Given both the memoir dimension and the poetic—hence creative or fictive—elements of *A Dialogue on Love*, one could no doubt call it an “autofictional” text, if not, as I have done elsewhere, a text of “auto-thanato-theory.”⁷⁷ Yet, to better correspond to the trajectory of ek-sistence in such a discourse on a darker care of the self, perhaps Nancy’s term of “exscription” [*excrit*] is more apt. As indicated by the morphological stem *script*, one could rightly guess that the term has something to do with writing, though it has to do with something more *and* less than writing as we know it—that is, writing that we see scribbled or printed on the page. From Nancy’s early eponymous essay in *Une pensée finie* (1991), through *Le sens du monde* (1993), to *Corpus* (2000), one could say that exscription is writing that is both the trace of sense *and* on the trail of sense. It is a matter of sensing—and this includes reading, as we will see—sense that gives us a sense of our existence in the world. To be sure, this sense is not henceforth exhausted in us, as if we were its terminal point. Instead, sense is always already traversing (out into) the world, which thus allows our existence to make sense to others. Furthermore, Nancy also understands this sense in all its senses: not just common sense, or intelligible sense, or even nonsense but also sense that can never be captured by these registers, which nevertheless, again, traverses all of us, coming from and going in all directions beyond our determinations. Exscription is very much in the order of the latter sense, surpassing common-, intelligible-, and nonsense, yet not excluding them at all but can subtend them too. (We have suggested in our introduction how the irreducible sense of failure can be understood in this sense too.) According to Nancy, such a sense is coextensive with the constant movement of existence in its very transitivity: it is the sense of ourselves exist-*ing*, pushing our bodies forward, extending us beyond the stubborn weight and formal limits of our corporeal bodies. It is also the sense of us *ex*-isting—that is, as already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, our existence as always a movement to the outside, as ek-sistence, always outside of, or exiting, any supposed essence, sending existence back to its proper exist-*ing*.

This sense of exist-*ing*, precisely because of its constantly transitive aspect, never waits for us to make sense of it, not especially for us to scribble down our sense of it. No matter how agile our minds, how dexterous our writing technics, this sense by and large escapes our meaning-making or signifying capacities and strategies at the moment of its passage, and after, too, as is often the case. In other words, all our attempts to inscribe it generally fail on two counts: failing to inscribe it at the very moment it passes and failing to inscribe it in a precise and comprehensive (or even total) manner. Not all is lost, though. As long as we are committed to writing, or, more simply, as long as we write, we never fail to trace a sense of the sense of exist-*ing* or ek-sistence. As Nancy writes in *Corpus*, “Exscription passes through writing,” except that exscription is the “outside-text” (*hors-texte*) of every writing.⁷⁸ This “outside-text,” according to Nancy in his early articulation of exscription, is but “the being of existence,” and this must be understood precisely as ek-sistence as outlined previously. And ek-sistence finds its trace in writing because the latter, “in inscribing signification, . . . exscribes the presence of that which withdraws from all signification.”⁷⁹ In other words, writing can paradoxically bear the trace of that which escapes all that writing seeks to circumscribe; there can be an exscription or “outside-text” in every writing. Exscription, then, is also ek-scription, meaning it slips outside, if not writes itself outside, of every signifying process, in tandem with ek-sistence; or else, subtending all inscription or signification, it names or recalls ek-sistence. Or else, to put it in terms of the topic of care that is the concern of this chapter, exscription takes care of ek-sistence through writing.

It is in *Corpus* that Nancy further gives a bodily dimension to ek-sistence, and he makes clear that this body, even though it is still ours, is different from the visible, material body that gives weight to our endeavors in granting substance or essence to our subjectivity, individuality, Being, or any other appellation we conjure to think ourselves as fixed, complete, permanent, and hence representable in our own terms. To be sure, the body of ek-sistence is never completely separate from the visible, material body, but it is stretched out from the latter to ek-sistence. It is through Nancy’s explication of ek-sistence in terms of bodies where we find Nancy saying that exscription bears a “double failure.”⁸⁰ This “double failure” marks, first, our inability to articulate and inscribe, in a timely manner, the body that escapes fixed presence and representation, this *other* body that is still our very own body but has already extended itself beyond the formal, material, and visible limits of physical presence in its ek-sistence. The second failure is that

we are in fact not able to silence this *other* body of ours. Not being able to represent or even articulate this *other* body, we cannot, however, not feel its presence. We fail to leave it be, as if we could be indifferent to it, as if we could put it aside and not be disturbed by its absent presence. Something—a body—always cries out to us, even though we cannot see or grasp it, even though we fail to find the exact words for it; it cries out in and through our writing. We always fail to silence exscription.

Despite Nancy's pronouncement of the "double failure" of exscription, I suspect he still brackets a sense of failure, particularly the sense of failed existence—one that fails to continue wanting to exist, one that seeks a literal out of existence as in Sedgwick's ek-sistence, as seen earlier—in his elucidation of existence through exscription. He seems to want to overcome this particular failure that motivates the corresponding dark ek-sistence through his undeniable insistence, not unlike Gilles Deleuze, on affirming life and/or the continuation of life in existence throughout his philosophical writings. He does not quite follow ek-sistence through to its end, in other words. Certainly, Nancy in elucidating exscription would consider the "body sending itself out" (*être s'envoyant*); the body "always on the point of departing, in the imminence of a movement, of a fall [*chute*], of a distancing [*écart*], of a dislocation," "a suffering body," the body of "fatigue," the body that "expels itself" or is "expelled," and the body that registers its "degradation . . . up to its paralysis."⁸¹ However, Nancy does not expand exscription to include the body that is burning out, totally exhausted, if not exhausting itself, not only by ordinary failures but also *by existence itself*: the depressed, anxious, cata-tonic body; the insomniac body; the body fumbling, in shame, shattered; the body abandoning all wills to live on, to struggle on, to be resilient, to pick itself up after it has failed, fallen; the body just desiring to disappear, to fade out, to extinguish itself; the body either having done with its pains, or else the body that has learned to live with its pains, to accept its pains, to accept them as but part of itself;⁸² the body that, like Sedgwick in *A Dialogue on Love*, really wants *out*—a real out—in or through the *ek-* of ek-sistence; the flopped or flopping body; the body crying out mutedly; the body that undoes itself (*se désœuvrer*); the suicidal body; the body that is indeed a black hole, which, to borrow Nancy's words, is the body as "a star that extinguishes itself and collapses into itself."⁸³ These are bodies that no philosophy against suicide (Camus), no philosophy combatting for the affirmation of life (Deleuze), no philosophy of sense of existence that establishes life as unsacrificeable (Nancy), no psychoanalysis, and especially no talk therapy can console or talk out of their affective states. Not even pharmaceuticals. Not even all the

love in the world (Woolf).⁸⁴ Not even the other fellow bodies of failure: here, Nancy is precise in saying that for a body that “rejoices [*joui*] in pain,” this rejoicing is but an “unshareable sharing” (*impartageable partage*).⁸⁵

All the above bodies, like any other body that Nancy considers, certainly do not stay silent, despite or in spite of the fact that they actually tend not to inscribe all the sensations or affects accompanying their failures in writing. They nevertheless cry out for care; they seek a care of itself, a care that is undoubtedly as dark as the one in Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love*. This is why these bodies exist/*ek-sist* no less as exscription. In a way, this also means that they demand a particular mode of reading, and Nancy has given us an indication of the approaches to such a reading. In the earlier iteration of exscription, Nancy proposes a mode of reading that is not committed to any commentary of a text, “neither seeking nor positing to interpret, signify.”⁸⁶ In the later *Corpus*, he will say that if it is possible to read exscription, it will be a kind of reading that has nothing to do with “deciphering”; instead, it will be a matter of “touch and being touched.”⁸⁷

But how exactly do we touch, and how are we touched by, the bodies of, or in, exscription? According to Nancy, it has to do with “feeling the weight” (*être pesé*) of the “infinitesimal expenditure of some grams” of these bodies.⁸⁸ And this, in line with Nancy’s philosophy of touch, must be done with tact. In other words, touching here involves touch that knows how to withdraw itself, touch that knows not to touch too much, if not touch that we can say proceeds with care.⁸⁹ In a way, there is already tact on the part of bodies in exscription, since they step away from signification, withdrawing from any full and fixed presence in writing on the page; they also certainly do not make it an imperative for anyone to read or decipher them. Tact or a careful touch, on the part of the reader of exscription, then, perhaps entails some form of reserved hermeneutical interpretation, if not a resistance against, “paranoid reading,” which, as Sedgwick tells us, only displays the reader’s ingenuity for close reading or which mimics the underlying idea in the text at hand in order to reiterate it as a “strong theory” that typically claims to explain everything, or which preemptively closes off any “bad surprise” that might pose as a pushback against itself as a “strong theory.” I would go further here to say that this tact might even refuse a “reparative reading” as Sedgwick would want it, only if such a reading means imposing upon all the senses and affects of failure a recuperative horizon. Perhaps, then, it is a mere matter of listening to, and letting resound, the pain that inheres in writing or language, as Werner Hamacher tells us in one of his last unfinished and posthumously published texts.⁹⁰ It is to be sensitive or

attuned to the lingering pain of bodies of failure in exscription, the pain of existing passing through ek-sistence, as we have done with Ovid's Narcissus story and Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*. After all, there can be muscle memory in language or writing, and Nancy recognizes this as much when he says, "If I write, this strange hand [of my body in ek-sistence] has already slid into my hand that writes";⁹¹ and muscle memory no doubt also includes sensations of pain.

To be sure, pain abounds no less in Nancy's discourse on exscription. The writing of bodies, according to Nancy, is "without anguish, perhaps, but not without pain (or trouble [*peine*])."⁹² Pain renders the material body undeniable. As Nancy continues to say, the "limit of pain" is what "offers an intense evidence" of the body, of "the body in sorrow" (*le corps en peine*).⁹³ But he will also write further on: "Pain does not present itself as meaning. We are in pain for we are *organized for meaning*, and its loss hurts us, hollows us [*nous entaille*]. But no more than lost meaning, pain does not make meaning of loss. It is only sharpness, the burn, misery."⁹⁴ This seemingly implies that the pain that Nancy seems keener to acknowledge and elucidate is more an epistemological pain than an experiential one: we are in pain primarily only because we fail to construct a legible system of knowledge of bodies in exscription, to ascribe meaning—through signification, through the inscription of common and intelligible sense—to the bodies in exscription, whose departure or "loss" is but a secondary pain for us.⁹⁵ But, to reiterate, there are indeed other real pains beyond the pain that follows from our (failed) will to make meaning, pains that cut deeper into our sense of existence and push us toward a real out of ek-sistence. There are affects of these other real pains, of pains resulting from more personal failures, each of them different in themselves, no less registered or traced out in exscription. In this respect, I would like to think that exscription is also the memory of such pains: it brings up the pain in our existence, in our ek-sistence.

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Such an exscription can be found in Édouard Levé's *Suicide* (2008). Levé is no major French writer, but he did receive some posthumous attention with *Suicide* because of the circumstances surrounding its publication—namely, the fact that it was published in the wake of Levé taking his own life ten days after submitting the manuscript to his editor. At this point, I underscore how the institutional culture of close reading methods, still dominant today, is always accompanied by the paranoia of committing intentional fallacy, hence generally averse to allowing the fact of Levé's life or extratextual

biographical information (if not, Levé's *hors-texte*) to influence or affect any reading of *Suicide*.⁹⁶ Yet, in light of what we have learned from Nancy on exscription, I would argue that taking into consideration the fact of Levé's exiting existence can be critical for understanding *Suicide*. Besides, Levé's earlier *Autoportrait* (2005) seems to allow for such a consideration of *Suicide*. Yet *Autoportrait* actually problematizes any reading of *Suicide*. The narrator in *Autoportrait* will say, "I do not write narratives. I do not write novels. I do not write short stories. I do not write plays. I do not write poems. I do not write detective fiction. I do not write science-fiction. I write fragments."⁹⁷ *Suicide*, however, is not composed of fragments.⁹⁸ How, then, do we make sense of *Suicide*? On the surface, *Suicide* is a text about, and addressed to, a childhood friend of the narrator's who committed suicide at the age of twenty-five. The text attempts to make sense of this suicide, which the narrative does by assuming the friend's point of view on life. Yet, as the narrator recognizes, this task is doomed to fail since there can never be "good reasons" for understanding such an act.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, something does get written. And one could ask: Why write on? Why leave something written (out) if the narrator knows it is a failed project from the start?

As I see it, the manuscript is written—or, rather, it is necessarily written—because of the irresistible and irrepressible force or affect of exscription that is taking place through the narrator's ek-sistence. We can sense the latter if we recognize the uncanny resemblance between the friend and the narrator himself. That the narrator is actually not much different from the friend becomes more evident if we take into account *Autoportrait* here. Supposing that both narrators in *Autoportrait* and *Suicide* are the same, which then entails that *Autoportrait* arguably gives us a sense of the narrator in *Suicide*, we can assume the latter to be, like the friend, an insomniac body, an evasive body that shies away from new social groups, a body that feels difficult to be loved by both others and itself,¹⁰⁰ a body that feels alone in the world despite the love of others, a body that has difficulty feeling happiness, a body that is fearful of getting old, a body that refuses to pathologically reduce itself to being ill, a body resistant to psychoanalysis and psychiatric and/or psychological interventions, a body that feels some strange affinity to tramps (*clochards*), to the unhappy lot, to "those who have failed at everything, or succeeded at nothing."¹⁰¹ Both the narrator in *Autoportrait* and the friend are furthermore bodies that feel the pull of ek-sistence: bodies that, after a shower, feel separated from themselves, "relaxed to the point of being insensible"; bodies that subject themselves to intensive sport, running, expending themselves (*se dépenser*) to the point of "physical excess" such that in the

state of extreme exhaustion thereafter, what passes between the temples, the eyes, and the back of the skull no longer belongs to them; bodies that ask themselves if they were themselves.¹⁰²

More pointedly, the narrator in *Autoportrait* acknowledges that, having been tempted four times to commit suicide, he did attempt once. In this regard, it is not difficult to recognize in the narrator of both *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*, not unlike Sedgwick in *A Dialogue on Love*, one who has failed to die at the right time. Avoiding the narrow, probing, and paranoid vision and method of close reading (as any reading of exscription does as much as a “reparative reading”), I would then like to more tactfully posit the possibility of *Suicide* as exscription in the sense of *also* “exscribing” the body of the narrator, the body that wants a real out in ek-sistence, the body that believes in suicide to be able to calm, if not expel, “the painful agitation” of life.¹⁰³ Put more simply, *Suicide* is the text that allows the narrator to exscribe his ek-sistence through the recounting of his friend’s ek-sistence. Ek-sistence like the one in Levé somehow finds its way into writing; or else, the exscription of writing, or what Al Alvarez had once called “quasi-literary forces,” can constitute the propelling force of ek-sistence.¹⁰⁴ What remains for us to do, then, is simply to listen to this body in ek-sistence as it exscribes itself, to let it speak in its exscription, to be open to, and accepting of, all its affects, and perhaps even let it go, according to the dark abyss of ek-sistence. As exscription, this also means that we can only read or listen to the body in ek-sistence in either a belated or retroactive manner; we can read or listen to its affects only after the fact, as echoes, as reverberations that return only post-humously. Perhaps this is the least or even best care we can give to the selves seeking ek-sistence. To be sure, exscription, at least in the case of Levé’s, does not call out for any form of care by others. Exscriptions like Levé’s do not appeal for any intervention whatsoever from others; they do not need others to act on anything, except, as said, perhaps to give them space, read them, and recognize them as a legitimate discourse that takes care of the self of ek-sistence. And yet, even in this regard, it has to be acknowledged that exscription as such is not only a resonance of the sense and affects of failure, of a body that has failed to die at the right time, but also a mark of *our* failure to have read, listened to, and sensed those senses and affects at the moment when the body is flailing in failure to die at the right time.

- 118 Cusk, *Outline*, 160.
- 119 Cusk, *Outline*, 160, 15.
- 120 Cusk, *Outline*, 65.
- 121 Cusk, *Outline*, 41.
- 122 Cusk, *Kudos*, 118.
- 123 Cusk, *Kudos*, 118.
- 124 Cusk, *Kudos*, 98, 119.
- 125 Cusk, *Kudos*, 121.
- 126 Cusk, *Transit*, 118.
- 127 In fact, she is hardly treated better by fellow feminist writers. Sophia is clearly absolutely in awe of Luís's work while demonstrating little interest in Faye's, ignorant of the irony of her enunciation of "a saddening thought" regarding the failure of women, when they "get together," to "[advance] the cause of femininity." Cusk, *Kudos*, 132. Paola, Faye's editor in the country Faye visits in *Kudos*, even though, like Faye/Cusk, a solitary feminist, is guilty of giving preferential treatment to her male authors. She "lit up" and "leapt off her stool" (176) upon seeing one of the latter but does nothing of this sort with respect to Faye. And Faye's female TV interviewer, whom we have mentioned in an earlier note would also, like the male journalist/book reviewer, dominate the conversation, barely leaving little time and space to Faye. For Faye/Cusk, female/feminist solidarity is wanting. As Sophia, once again, would say: "Female truth—if such a thing can be said to exist," such as that of Cusk's true reflections on marriage and the modern family structure, "is so interior and involuted that a common version of it can never be agreed on" (131).
- 128 Cusk, *Kudos*, 232.

CHAPTER 3. EXSCRIBING A DARK CARE OF THE SELF OF FAILED EXISTENCE

Parts of chapter 3 appeared in "Exscription, or the Sense of Failure: Jean-Luc Nancy, Tecuciztecatl, and Édouard Levé," *MLN* 134, no. 5 (2019): 1080–97; and "Auto-thanato-theory: Dark Narcissistic Care for the Self in Sedgwick and Zambreno," *Arizona Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2020): 197–213.

- 1 Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 22.
- 2 Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 22.
- 3 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 78. "Cut" is also one of her terms for the dimension of care. And like Derrida who had taught us how responsibility can also be an irresponsibility at the same time—for example, being responsible for one person can actually renounce responsibility toward the collective, and vice versa—Puig de la Bellacasa will also say, "We cannot possibly care for everything, not everything can count in the world" (78).
- 4 Malatino, *Side Affects*, 153.

- 5 For Malatino, who is invested in thinking about care for trans subjects helping others with transition-related medical issues—that is, those committed to “mutual aid in the service of social justice” and who might be suffering from “frustration, annoyance, and mistrust . . . directed at both medical professionals and one another”—this recognition is insufficient. Malatino, *Side Affects*, 153. Responses will be wanting to the questions that entail from such a recognition: “How do we deal with the terms of in-frapolitical hostility that such situations inevitably produce? How do we mobilize the frustration that attends such work in order to effect change?” (153). These questions, which clearly touch on care at a larger collective or even institutional level, go beyond the concern and scope of this present work, however. (For some responses to those questions, I refer readers not only to the Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, which I will refer, but also to the volume Hamington and Flower, *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*.) If it is not already evident, I will be dealing with care at the strictly personal level, a certain care of the self.
- 6 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 85. Puig de la Bellacasa provides the other perspective, too, in saying that “care can also smother the subtleties of attention to the different needs of an ‘other’ required for careful relationality. It can be said then that it can also consume the cared for, leading to appropriating the recipients of ‘our’ care instead of relating to them” (85).
- Or we can cite Malatino again, who articulates care fatigue in terms of burnout. Following the work of psychologist Christina Maslach, Malatino writes that “burnout happens when one allows themselves to care too much, which is a prelude to being, in effect, used up, depleted, and exhausted by servicing the needs of others. It is not, on Maslach’s account, overwork that is the problem; rather, it is the affective responses and defense reactions that workers cultivate in order to survive overwork: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and *a sense of failure*, inadequacy, and reduced personal accomplishment.” Malatino, *Side Affects*, 138 (my italics). Malatino goes on: “It’s a labor-specific variant of Hell as other people, a rendering of folks in need on account of structural precarity as energy succubi, emotional vampires out to take all they can from a too-trusting, too-caring, too-empathetic worker” (139).
- 7 Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 3. I note here that many of the essays in the volume *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity* make similar observations to those previously on how thinking and practices of care have been threatened and diminished by the political economy of neoliberalism.
- 8 Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 9–10.
- 9 Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 3.

- 10 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 9. I note that Puig de la Bellacasa here draws a lot from Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.
- 11 Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 4.
- 12 Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 4.
- 13 Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 4.
- 14 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 11, 12.
- 15 Puig de la Bellacasa goes beyond the Care Collective's horizon because she wants to extend thinking about care to "beings other than human, in 'more than human' worlds," to "think of ethical 'obligations' in human-decentered cosmologies." Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 13.
- 16 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 90–91.
- 17 Hamington and Flower, *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, 6.
- 18 On the bracketing of feeling in French thought, see Terada, *Feeling in Theory*. On the placing of the other at an abstract distance, see, for example, LaCapra, *History in Transit*.
- On another note, as Wendy Anne Lee has pointed out, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature can also be infused by what she calls "insensibles"; for example, Melville's *Bartleby*, which is to say, literary characters whose traits include "unfeeling combined with inaction," whose "essential absence of emotion" paradoxically motivates in us readers a "narrative tenacity with which we try to reconstruct it." Lee, *Failures of Feeling*, 1, 7.
- 19 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 13.
- 20 I recall the earlier note where I have stated that Puig de la Bellacasa's primary objective in *Matters of Care* is to include nonhuman beings and objects within the domain of thinking about care and/or acting with care.
- 21 Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 27.
- 22 Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 28.
- 23 Foucault's reading of this letter was first introduced in one of the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures then reiterated in the "Technologies of the Self" seminar at the University of Vermont.
- 24 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 11, 12.
- 25 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 70.
- 26 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 90.
- 27 I mean this in the Derridean sense, whereby a supplement can be violent in terms of overshadowing, or even replacing, the main or primary material. See of course Derrida, *De la grammatologie*.
- 28 If the kind of writing that embraces a care of the self is inclined toward the recording of everyday routines and ordinary thoughts, as Foucault highlights in his *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures, he will not fail to remind us that ordinary thoughts also include meditations on death.
- 29 Freud, "On Narcissism," 73.
- 30 Freud, "On Narcissism," 76.

- 31 Freud, "On Narcissism," 88.
- 32 Freud, "On Narcissism," 88.
- 33 Freud, "On Narcissism," 73–74.
- 34 Freud, "On Narcissism," 76.
- 35 Freud, "On Narcissism," 94, 100. Bersani in *The Culture of Redemption* also has a critically nuanced reading of Freud's essay there, and he would suggest that Freud's formulations of the ego, primary narcissism or ego-libido, and the ego ideal in this essay would later be reiterated by Freud as ego, id, and the superego. Putting aside the libidinal economy of failed existences, which lies beyond the scope of this present work, we could no doubt articulate our high-performing culture of productivity and success as a superego imposing upon our ego, by which our id, which would rather see to our own breakdowns and wallow in debility or "inoperativity," would be repressed.
- 36 Freud, "On Narcissism," 96.
- 37 Freud, "On Narcissism," 90.
- 38 Freud, "On Narcissism," 98.
- 39 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.510.
- 40 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.449.
- 41 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.536, l.588.
- 42 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.564–67.
- 43 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.577, l.610.
- 44 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.633.
- 45 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.522–53.
- 46 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.582,
- 47 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, l.612, l.615.
- 48 Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 272 (my translation).
- 49 Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 273.
- 50 Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 273, 271.
- 51 This is arguably a more radical, if not literal, take on narcissistic "self-shattering" than Bersani would have it. According to Bersani's reading of Freud on narcissism, Bersani makes the claim that Freud has already suggested in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) that "the human subject is originally *shattered into* sexuality"—that is, "sexual excitement" must be understood "as both a turning away from others and a dying to the self." Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, 36, 45. Bersani continues: "The concept of narcissism can be thought of as an extension of that definition. It is as if the inherently solipsistic nature of sexuality—and its correlative indifference to object and to organ specificity—allowed for a development of autoeroticism in which the source of pleasure and, consequently, the object of desire became the very experience of *ébranlement* or self-shattering" (37). He elaborates further on: "Primary narcissism allows the infantile ego to be masochistically shattered with-

out being destroyed. It is perhaps the infant's best erotic defense against the eroticizing bombardments of his environment. Narcissism replays the shattering stimulations of that environment in the paradoxical form of a *structuralizing self-shattering*. . . primary narcissism is that ego's (nonethical) appreciation of its capacity to be sexually shattered" (40–41).

- 52 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 147.
- 53 See, of course, Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading." The quote on "deep pessimism" is on 138.
- 54 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 6. Subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated by page numbers in parenthesis in the main text.
- 55 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 123.
- 56 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 167.
- 57 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 125.
- 58 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 108.
- 59 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 101.
- 60 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 116.
- 61 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 6.
- 62 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 17.
- 63 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 15.
- 64 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 111.
- 65 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 184. I note here that the original quotation of Shannon's notes appears in capital letters.
- 66 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 197.
- 67 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 291.
- 68 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 96.
- 69 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 62.
- 70 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 69.
- 71 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 69.
- 72 See the chapter "Of Voluntary Death" in part 1 of Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which begins with the proclamation that "many die too late and some die too early," hence the dictum to "die at the right time" (97). The dictum also springs from Zarathustra's observation that "for many a man, life is a failure" (Manchem missrath das Leben), and so, dying at the right time would be to "let him see to it that his death is all the more a success" (97–98). There is clearly an overarching success narrative in relation to failure in Nietzsche, which we are resisting in our present work.
- 73 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 18.
- 74 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 219.
- 75 Neither can it pave the way toward a perfectibility of the self or the constitution of a true subject according to Foucault in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Instead, the discourse on a dark narcissistic care of the self

reveals what I have elsewhere called the *reject* in oneself, which I hear reverberate in Sedgwick's self-declaration of "I, the refusal / of a refusal" (150).

76 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 197.

77 I have recognized that *A Dialogue on Love* is not Sedgwick's typical theoretical writing. Nevertheless, I do believe it still can constitute an "auto-thanato-theory," by which I am also saying—and no doubt I can be charged with a "paranoid reading" here—that there is an underlying or irreducible element in *A Dialogue on Love* that problematizes Sedgwick's theoretical aim of a "reparative reading."

78 Nancy, *Corpus*, 14, 20. All translations from this text are mine. On another note, it is necessary to say more about writing in Nancy. Writing must not be restricted to its representational function. As in Derrida, writing must also be understood as the "archi-originary" trace or inscription that is nonsecondary and noninstrumental to voice; it is *not* a mimetic medium coming after voice. For Nancy, writing also goes beyond all signifying operations: "'Writing' indicates that which *distance itself from signification*, and for that reason, *exscribes itself* [*s'excrit*]. Exscription occurs in the play of a non-signifying spacing: that which detaches, in a way always anew, words from their meanings, and which abandons them to their extension" (63). Meanwhile, one is surely also mindful of Derrida's oft-cited phrase, "Il n'y pas de hors-texte," in *De la grammatologie*, where there is a clear refusal of any "hors-texte," in contrast to Nancy's argument above. The difference between Derrida and Nancy on the question of "hors-texte," not to mention that "hors-texte" is also at stake in Blanchot's *Le pas au-delà* (1973), is beyond the scope and concern of this present book, however.

79 Nancy, "L'excrit," 62. All translations from this text are mine.

80 Nancy, *Corpus*, 52.

81 Nancy, *Corpus*, 20, 31, 44, 52, 92.

82 I certainly do not forget that Nancy has written about his own body in pain after his heart transplant in *L'intrus*. There is even a moment of dark ek-sistence there when Nancy almost nonchalantly remarks, following an observation of one of his sons, that he takes on the countenance of a zombie in a horror film. Nevertheless, I still find that Nancy does not go far with this sense of ek-sistence. In a follow-up piece to *L'intrus*, titled "Dialogue Under the Ribs," he would say that it is more interesting to restart life.

I do not forget either that Scarry, prior to Nancy, has already written extensively about the body in pain in the eponymous *Body in Pain*.

83 Nancy, *Corpus*, 66.

84 I am referring to Woolf's work *On Being Ill*. I will make more mention of this work in another note in the following chapter.

- 85 Nancy, *Corpus*, 103. And again, Scarry has noted that while pain is definite, certain, and unequivocal for the sufferer, it might raise doubt in the other who is listening about this pain. As she puts it, "To have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt." Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 7. And in a vocabulary close to Nancy's here and ours on "shared unshareability," she will also say that "pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed" (4).
- 86 Nancy, "L'excrit," 60.
- 87 Nancy, *Corpus*, 76.
- 88 Nancy, *Corpus*, 83, 88. Perhaps we can also articulate the question of touch here in terms of that which we have been associating with failure as well: affect. As said earlier, affect is a matter of pressure and this infinitesimal pressing of bodies, even though it largely goes unnoticed, surely creates some sort of pressure between bodies. After all, as Nancy would also say, a body "weighs," and as such, "it presses against other bodies, just as other bodies do against it" (82).
- 89 On tact, see Nancy, *Corpus*, 85.
- 90 See Hamacher, "Other Pains." While Hamacher, in his "deconstructive" mode of thinking, refuses to make cries of pain "primal" to language, Scarry says, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned." Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 4.
- 91 Nancy, *Corpus*, 20.
- 92 Nancy, *Corpus*, 49.
- 93 Nancy, *Corpus*, 44.
- 94 Nancy, *Corpus*, 72. Or, in the words of Scarry: "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unshareability, and it ensures this unshareability through its resistance to language." Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 4.
- 95 I believe that playing down the more personal, psychic, or existential pain occurs also in the "Peine. Souffrance. Malheur" chapter in Nancy, *Le sens du monde*. There, pain and suffering refer to more general phenomena such as famine, evil, sickness, and so on, caused by some injustice somewhere in the world. To be sure, Nancy demands that thought be committed to combat these evils or injustices, but he is keener to instruct us not to see in them a deficit in the meaning of existence in the world, a deficit, according to him again, that afflicts us with an epistemological pain.
- 96 When such a reading is granted, it sometimes leads to what I see as an uncritical understanding of the text, as the novelist Zadie Smith has done in seeing in *Suicide* an "adolescent aesthetic" (*Harper's Magazine*, May 2011). Critchley, in his *Notes on Suicide*, gives it a more sympathetic read-

ing, considering it some form of suicide note worthy of philosophical inquiry.

97 Levé, *Autoportrait*, 50. Translations from this text are mine.

98 I note here that “exscription,” according to Nancy, is also of the order of fragments. As he writes in *Corpus*: “In fact, the fragmentation of writing, from where it takes place where it takes place (be it always and everywhere, or else through the exigency of ‘genre’), responds to a repeated instance of the body in—toward [*contre*]—writing” (21).

99 Levé, *Suicide*, 108. Translations from this text are mine.

100 While the friend in *Suicide* has a wife who loves him, which clearly does not change his decision to commit suicide, the narrator in *Autoportrait* says, “I love myself less than I have been loved. It surprises me that others love me.” Levé, *Autoportrait*, 12. Earlier, he would also say, “I don’t love myself. I do not dislike myself” (7). As I see it, all this only reaffirms my earlier point, following Woolf, that all the love in the world can never really talk the loved one out of wanting *out* of existence.

101 Levé, *Suicide*, 77.

102 Levé, *Suicide*, 91, 90, 83.

103 Levé, *Suicide*, 108. Also, I am taking up Nancy’s recommendation in *Corpus* on the way of reading exscription in terms of developing a corpus not of interpreted bodies, bodies that have been subjected to close reading, but one of bodies that are in fact already “announced, recorded, and repeated” (52) in writing, all but waiting for us to acknowledge them, list them.

On another note, I also add that other than *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*, Levé’s other written text *Œuvres* also constitutes some sort of exscription. This text is a list of *descriptions* of photographic works that the author conceptualizes but never materialized, a list of bodies observed either in a posed or natural state. According to Nancy, the body as photography is also a form of exscription: “A body, firstly, exposes itself as its photography.” Nancy, *Corpus*, 43.

104 Alvarez, *The Savage God*, 57.

CHAPTER 4. THE MELODRAMA OF FAILURE’S SHARED UNSHAREABILITY, SUICIDAL IDEATION INCLUDED

A version of chapter 4 appeared as “Shared Unshareability, Suicidality, and the Melodrama of Living on after Failure in Yiyun Li,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 69, no. 3 (2023): 539–62.

1 Cusk, *Outline*, 245.

2 Cusk, *Outline*, 246.

3 I have already noted in the introduction how this phrase echoes Scarry’s work on pain. I add here that we have in fact seen a similar phrase in the previous chapter: the “unshareable sharing” (*impartageable part-*