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Great Expectations: Incest and Incompleteness in Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*

Abstract: Often situated as a radical response to the late 1970s New York punk scene, the work of American writer Kathy Acker leverages an array of subversive literary techniques to actively interrogate extremely uncomfortable social terrain: profound violence against women, physical and emotional abuse, incest, disease and severe neglect. Many of her protagonists navigate through a continual proliferation of atrocities. Yet rather than situate her characters as victims, Acker instead inverts prescribed social scripts and proactively constructs narrative webs of deeply embedded critiques of patriarchal and sexual oppression.

By deploying a vast repertoire of forms – theatrical dialogues, drawings, dream maps, blatant plagiarism of canonical figures (e.g., Hawthorne, Mallarmé, Céline), fake translations – Acker paints a vivid and inventive picture of the apparatuses of control and manipulation, aggression and alienation. This essay seeks to examine how applications of logician Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem and cultural critic Nick Mansfield's ideas about "masochism as a theatrical space of power" elucidate Acker's watershed novel *Blood and Guts in High School* and examine the novel's critique of social and sexual power.

1. Prelude to a Kiss

Rarely in the landscape of American literature – or anywhere else really – has profound violence against women, physical and emotional abuse, abortion, incest, disease, pedophilia, severe neglect and terrorism been such a steady source of literary sustenance. But in the work of Kathy Acker, this is exactly the terrain where she situates her books. In novel after novel, her protagonists navigate through a continual proliferation of atrocities. Yet rather than posit her characters as victims, Acker aims to invert accepted social scripts and proactively constructs narrative webs of embedded critiques and deliberate provocation.

And critiques of what exactly? Critics like Catherine Rock or Susan E. Hawkins suggest Acker aims squarely at patriarchal and sexual oppression; Carla Harryman considers how Acker's narratives reclaim power through transgressive language and structure; Karen Brennan argues for a more nuanced (and somewhat ironic) inversion of a Freudian Electra complex; Michael Clune

sees Acker's use of incest as an extension of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's work on societal incest taboos, linking it with economic relations. What is clear is that Acker deploys a vast repertoire of forms – theatrical dialogues, drawings, dream maps, blatant plagiarism of canonical figures (e.g., Hawthorne, Mallarmé, Céline), fake translations – and, in this sense, she paints a vivid and inventive picture of the apparatuses behind control and manipulation, aggression and alienation.

While I find aspects of these critics' remarks helpful in understanding Acker's work, often these critics fall to what statistician Nate Silver calls "recency bias": allowing too narrow a scope or time-frame to deduce information from a given object of study. What I am looking to examine is how Acker's work grows out of the particularly *literary* history of masochism, and, moreover, how cultural critic Nick Mansfield's ideas about "masochism as a theatrical space of power" elucidate Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*.

No critics have suggested that Acker's work is not provocative, but what we need to consider here is the question – provocative to what end? How or in what ways is Acker successful in reframing the issues of violence and oppression?

2. Is It "Incest" Incest?

Kathy Acker's watershed 1978 novel *Blood and Guts in High School* has become an icon for punk aesthetics, postmodern fiction, post-feminism, anti-feminism; an object of wonder; an object of deep disdain and disgust. Ostensibly, the novel follows the life of Janey Smith, who, we are expected to believe, is:

- 1) a 10 year-old girl;
- 2) with Pelvic Inflammatory Disease;
- 3) in an incestuous relationship with her father while living in Mexico;
- 4) until she flees to New York;
- 5) where she is sold into slavery/prostitution via a Persian slave trader;
- 6) escapes to Tangiers, where she cavorts with an aging Jean Genet; and
- 7) eventually succumbs to cancer at the age of 12.

To be sure, the bare outline of the plot – to the extent there is one – suggests a harrowing tale. But this is hardly a victim narrative, and between the galleries of depravity Acker calculatngly places dialogical engagements with literary figures, both canonical and subversive, such as César Vallego, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Stephane Mallarmé, William Burroughs and Jean Genet, while deploying an array of narrative devices, theatrical and visual, to arrest and surprise the reader.

The novel begins with an explanation that frames the entire book:

Never having known a mother, her mother had died when Janey was a year old, Janey depended on her father for everything and regarded her father as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father. (7)

With this opening, the reader is at once presented with the problem and promise of Acker's novel: a world where interpersonal relationships are fluid, conflated, incestuous, object-oriented and tautological.

By the next paragraph, we have learned Janey's father is trying to dump her so he can pursue Sally, a starlet; and within the mere space of three pages the book is broken up by a crude drawing of two exposed penises and paragraphs of prose into scripted dialogues (including stage directions) between Janey and her father:

Janey: You told me that you were just friends like me and Peter (*Janey's stuffed lamb*) and you weren't going to sleep together. It's not like my sleeping around with all these art studs: when you sleep with your best friend, it's really, really heavy. (9)

The scene begins what Catherine Rock describes as a "coupling of the debased and the delicate" (208). Janey is depicted as both very sexually aware ("sleeping around with all those art studs") and childishly unable to comprehend the seriousness of the situation ("when you sleep with your best friend, it's really, really heavy").

As Kathy Hughes suggests in her essay "Incest and Innocence," "The innocent, vulnerable request of a little girl who asks to sleep in her parent's bed for security and snuggling takes on a whole new meaning with Janey and exemplifies the dichotomy Rock sets up" (123). Before her father leaves for his date with Sally the starlet, he behaves like a loving father: he promises Janey he will wake her up when he comes home, calls her "sweetie" and says "yes" when she asks if she can "crawl into bed and sleep with him" (Acker 12). But the brashness of Acker's tone tips off the reader that Janey is not going to get the tenderness, consideration or security she is asking for.

Hughes contends that Acker's choice of Janey's age is part of "a challenging aesthetic, an irony as morbidly humorous as it is heartbreaking" (122). While I would agree that irony is an active part of Acker's work, I am unconvinced that Janey's age is "heartbreaking," in large part because Acker clearly has no interest in constructing a mimetic representation of a child. Acker favours severity over subtlety, and making Janey cruelly young initially forces the reader to take note. However, it is not a particularly bold or inventive gesture. It is a simply one of the more deplorably common manifestations of incest: Janey as character and placeholder must be young, because familial sexual abuse and incest typically imply childhood and youth. Moreover, unlike a novel such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Acker's Janey does the majority of

narrating, and, quite simply, we hear her “voice” more directly and explicitly. Acker refuses to allow Janey to function simply as a passive victim, and regularly reminds the reader that mimesis is not her aim. For example, when discussing something as sensitive as an abortion, Janey observes that “[t]hey upset the hormonal system: the hormones send out many more eggs to compensate. They leave gaping holes in the womb and any foreign object that nears these holes can cause infection” (34). This kind of clinically precise, emotionally detached language is in no way typical of any ten year-old, and would fall more plausibly into the purview of adulthood.

What is more, her exchanges with her father are not static perpetrator-victim dynamics and result in empty deflections:

Janey (*now the rational tone*): But you might leave me.

Father (*silent*) (9),

a surprising accusation that Janey dominates her father: “You’ve completely dominated my life . . . for the last nine years and I no longer know who’s you and who’s me” (12), physically painful sex between them: “[I]t hurts her like hell ‘cause of her Pelvic Inflammatory Disease” (10), and Janey oscillating between behaving coldly rational and feeling deeply hurt. Susan E. Hawkins writes that

Janey, as an incest victim, blames herself for her father’s indifference and thus can’t handle Johnny’s romantic interest in the starlet. Conversely, Johnny’s attachment to Janey and his need to free himself of it sound absurdly like the emotional struggles disenchanted spouses experience in their attempts to leave a marriage made unhappy through their own midlife crises. (646)

Her father exits and Janey seeks counsel from Johnny’s friend, Bill, who also sexually abused Janey. Bill tells Janey that she has “dominated [Johnny’s] life since your mother died and now he hates you. He has to hate you because he has to reject you. He has to find out who he is” (11).

The absurdity of these statements, which Susan E. Hawkins alludes to and Karen Brennan takes a step further, is centred on their Freudian implications. Brennan writes that “Bill’s psychoanalysis refigures the family roles by casting Janey as the overbearing mother and her father as the daughter/son on the threshold of the Oedipal stage. The father-daughter relationship, for Bill, is really a son-mother relationship” and turns the Freudian theory upside-down and inside-out (258). Moreover, Brennan’s analysis of the drawing of two male figures with exposed penises (Acker 8) leads her to the conclusion that the headlessness of the father is symbolic of castration, and his nudity “transforms the daughter into a pornographer and the phallic father into a sex object, a

consumable product" (256), a contention I am not inclined to agree with, because, on balance, none of the figures in the novel feature heads: all figures in the novel are little more than their genitalia.

The father resents his daughter, who is only a child, for holding him back and smothering his identity the way the son resents the mother for the same reasons. But here Acker is inverting and conflating Freudian parent-child dynamics. Who is parent and who is child are fluid designations, or as Michael Palmer writes: "The self is assigned to others" (85). Janey tells Johnny that "[i]t was always me, my voice, I felt like a total nag; I want you to be the man" (12). This ten-year-old little girl believes that she has usurped her father's position and holds agency in the relationship. Janey also ironically tells Johnny, "When I first met you, it's as if a light turned on for me. You're the first joy I knew" (9), as if she almost pre-cognitively understands the inevitability of their relationship.

This fluidity of power coupled with a self-aware stylized theatricality is not simply an incestuous relationship, but grows out of an unavoidably masochistic one. When Richard von Kraft-Ebbing coined the term "masochism" in his book *Psychopathia Sexualis*, he declared the following: "I feel justified in calling this sexual anomaly 'Masochism,' because the author Sacher-Masoch frequently made this perversion, which up to his time was quite unknown to the scientific world as such, the substratum of his writings" (87). This definition is a complex gesture. At once, Kraft-Ebbing is quick to point out the "anomaly" and "perversion" of masochism, but yet with equal importance emphasizes that literature is the birthplace of it. Masochism might have existed as a social phenomenon long before *Venus in Furs*, but without it, it could not have been isolated; it is as though the condition and the literature came into being at the same instant.

As Nick Mansfield notes in *Masochism: The Art of Power*:

Everywhere we look in the description of masochism . . . we find literature – in the style of the scientists' writing on the topic; in the behavior of masochists themselves, which is best described by images of the literary but also draws on literature in role-playing; and, of course, behind it all, the name of the condition itself was originally the name of a novelist. (3)

Moreover, from the outset, Acker is quick to conflate. After all, father is "sister, money, amusement" and – curiously and last of all – "father." Father is both a series of others and a tautology; masochistic and incestuous. Active and passive oscillate; victim and perpetrator become interchangeable.

Marianne Noble points out that "[m]asochism is a form of redefining and seizing power, a form available for women to exploit" (156). V. N. Smirnoff extends this thinking:

Masochism is defiance. It is expressed through the masochist's apparently passive behavior, by his compliance with the inflicted pain and humiliation, by his claims of being enslaved and used. In fact, the masochist knows his position is simply the result of his own power: the power of endowing the executioner with the obligation with playing the role of the master, when indeed he is only a slave, a creation of the masochist's will. (688)

No doubt defiance is a fundamental part of Acker's project. Her punk aesthetic aims to provoke or incite, plants her characters and narratives in a kind of borderland, obvious and extreme places to react against any number of issues – patriarchy, capitalism, sexual limits, literary history, and so on.

Michael Clune in his article "Blood Money: Sovereignty and Exchange in Kathy Acker" claims that if Claude Levi-Strauss is correct, and the incest taboo encourages economic relations between different families and tribes through the exchange of women, then Acker's flouting of the taboo is a refusal of the principle of women as legal tender (496). Instead, Acker uses incest to visualize a truly free market, one in which "the weeds of sovereignty can be pulled out by their roots" (497). In this way, incest becomes an economic zero-sum, a tautology that subsumes transactional relations.

Certainly Acker's writerly animus is geared to react against comfortable or predictable social definitions and hierarchies, and so it is hardly surprising that she would set her sights on incest. Taking Levi-Strauss and Clune a step further, Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem¹ – which was built on the ideas inherent in the liar's paradox² – proves that, within any consistent system which contains arithmetic, there are logical propositions which are true but unprovable. Thus a wide swath of systems and structures necessarily contain aspects or portions which subvert their own foundational functioning. Seen in this light – rather than simply being reactionary – Acker exercises the foresight to engage structural inevitabilities, and her conflation of incest with masochism, active with passive, victim with perpetrator, person with commodity, patriarchy with capitalism, past with present, is simply a matter of course.

Given that Acker begins first with an act of provocation and follows by conflating her initial issues of critique, the acts of plagiarism that appear later – whether it involves the book report retelling of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* or aping Mallarmé's "A Throw of the Dice Never Abolishes Chance" – are the result of treating the past and the present as interchangeable. Moreover, it is another instance of the tautology inherent in masochism: Acker can take aim at her view of a patriarchal canon, but her reconstructions of texts shift her from marginalized victim to victor. Literary "fathers" become "money" in an

¹ A good resource and wider context for Gödel's work and its implications for non-mathematicians would be Rebecca Goldstein's *Incompleteness*.

² The most well-known example would be: "This sentence is false."

unstable transaction where the haloed primacy of the canon is subverted, while at the same time buttressing the complex web of allusion and interrogation Acker weaves.

3. Dreams for the Future

The opening scenes in *Blood and Guts in High School* provide one of the most solid frameworks of subject matter and tone throughout an entire novel I have ever seen although – strange to say this – the rampant sexuality and vulgarity become quite commonplace. By the time the scene below appears, the reader has seen words like “fuck,” “cunt” or “abortion” so regularly they have been largely drained of resonance and are as surprising as beige walls:

I was still desperate to fuck. Abortions make it dangerous to fuck again because they stretch out the opening of the womb so the sperm can reach the egg easily. They upset the hormonal system: the hormones send out many more eggs to compensate. They leave gaping holes in the womb and any foreign object that nears these holes can cause infection.

I'm not trying to tell you about the weird rotgut parts of my life. Abortions are the symbol, the outer image, of sexual relations in this world. Describing my abortions is the only real way I can tell you about pain and fear . . . my unstoppable drive for sexual love. (34)

Acker offers formal variations with things like a map of Janey's dreams, and the section at the end called “The World,” which uses a combination of image-symbols, phrases, and allusions to Hindu mythology, the Egyptian book of the Dead, or perhaps Jungian dream analysis, but the reader is just as likely to see a block of text like this:

SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
 SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME

sex is sweet. (110)

The character of Janey becomes what Mansfield would call “Total subjectivity,” in which [she is] both a strongly centred ego and everything else, and where “sexual and aesthetic experiences are essentially the same thing” (42).

Certainly Acker’s work is part of the punk scene of 1970s New York, one of the most well-known underground movements in the second half of the twentieth century. In some respects her Janey is treated as an economic product, e.g., via prostitution, but Acker herself also leverages her character as a kind of currency by hedging that the reader will in some way believe or endorse Acker’s claims of Janey being a child. The premise of the novel depends on some amount of emotional engagement by the reader to separate it from the likes of a didactic, political essay. But little of what Janey actually says supports this idea of her being a child – rather quite the opposite. I would contend that Acker’s confections, while formally daring and interesting for their time, ultimately undermine her aims of social critique, because taken as a whole *Blood and Guts in High School* has almost no variation in tone or emotional volume. It is a kind of readerly cloying: if all I do is scream at the top of my lungs, chances are you are going to stop hearing me.

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