

Hypnotic Supplement

“If I have always trembled before what I could say, it was fundamentally because of the tone, and not the substance. And what, obscurely, I seek to impart as if in spite of myself, to give or lend to others as well as to myself, to myself as well as to the other, is perhaps a tone. Everything is summoned from an intonation.”¹

Hold the photo in your hand: a tone. Hear: the sound of clapping. See: 17 boys sitting cross-legged in two rows. Two adults standing. She (L. Chiriaeff) with feet in turn-out from years of ballet dancing. He (F. Nault) clapping loudest. Is he saying something? The boys with varying expressions. At least two not clapping. All eyes on the dancer (except one, back row, stealing a glance to the side). The dancer (A. Bélin) having finished his dance holding an awkward pose. One arm and one leg outstretched, crouching. A Canadian flag limp on its pole. A stage curtain pulled to the side – to make room for the sitting boys, so that they can see the dance. There are some papers on a stand behind the boys, but it is impossible to see what is printed on them.

A reversal at work here: the position of the photographer *behind* the dancer. This is a record of a performance. A performance that is also a demonstration of dance. But with the lens pointed in the wrong direction. The subject of the photo being the boys, not the dancer. Not a photo of dance. Rather, a photo of clapping on the occasion of having seen a dance. A performance of clapping. A photo that shows an exchange between the prior movement of the dancer and the sound of the hands. A photo that depicts dance only in its effects, dispersed across the bodies of the boys, who look up at the dancer.

(We can imagine the dancer was once a boy, clapping. We can imagine the boys will dance, as men. Can we? Or that they will someday find themselves in front of a group of people, with all eyes on them, and will pass through the moment after the end of the performance and before the beginning of the clapping. A moment whose silence rings toneful.)

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I try to match the tone of the writing to the tone of the photograph, attuned to the sound of the clapping boys.

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My friends are wounded. How can I say this otherwise? They are and always have been. Learning how to pay for the wound is called performance. They pay for their wounds differently, endlessly. They pay their friends for the wounds they inflict even as they pay to leave them and their wounds behind. A wound is a promise that arrives as a compromise. A compromise to forego what they need in order to need what they have. It is a wound and it is painful. Would that he be wounded. Wounds don't heal but become sounds instead. They listen to the sounds at night on speakers very loud. A wound is a bridge that gives a foothold. When they sing, they sing loud and low with a straight tone, no vibrato. To sing they must

¹ Jacques Derrida (*Monolingualism of the Other*; or, *The Prosthesis of Origin*, tr. Patrick Mensah)

dance. Woundedness is a condition of dance. It is a movement within movement. But dance is a wound, too. Dance is the wound we give ourselves to pay for the one we were given.

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The boys, plural noun, are nameless in the archive from which the photograph comes. They cannot, in this writing, be a proper noun. Here is what we know: we know that they are orphans. They have been orphaned. And they are living at an orphanage in Black Lake, QC. They are watching a demonstration of dance that was organized by Chiriaeff. Chiriaeff had by this time opened a school for ballet in Montreal and was having trouble getting young boys to attend. She sent Gilles Castonguay, a teacher at her school, to teach the orphaned boys to dance, at her own expense. This photograph, Gilles tells me, was probably taken in 1968. In 1968 most Quebec families would not send their young boys to dance schools because dance was too sensual. Chiriaeff and Nault have travelled to Black Lake with Bélin to check on the boys' progress, and to make a demonstration.

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I admit, I am obsessed with this photo. I am obsessed by the triangulation of authority, by the expression of each boy, by the space between the dancer and the sitting boys, by the limp flag, by the stage curtain. I am obsessed by the orphan boys who are being shown how to dance. And that is because I am obsessed by the transmission at the heart of this demonstration: a transmission of identity, fueled by lack, with lack as its very ground. I am obsessed by the transfers at work here: the figures of mother and father, the boys as potential, as blank screen on which to project. The wound at the center of this photo. A wound immanent to dance and prior to it. I am obsessed by the way the photo puts me, its viewer, behind the dancer, on the stage, in the stage space, so as to be clapped at, having finished my performance of looking at the photo, my performance of trying to hold a history that recedes like the nameless boys into a priorness that is untouchable, and silent.

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The first experience I have while Marine is hypnotizing me is of Mr. Z's gym class. Grade 2 or 3. Soft white floor with black markings on it. In the back-corner Mr. Z has put a large and plush mat at least two feet thick. It is dark blue. Above the mat he has hung a rope from the ceiling. This brown rope is thick, like one used to tie a gigantic metal ship to a dock. Maybe 1.5-inches thick. It hangs from a 25-foot ceiling composed of metal supports and some kind of spray insulation. We gather at the back of the gym by the mat. Mr. Z explains the manner by which we will climb the rope. It is supposed to be fun. But how could this be fun. Everyone takes turns. Odell scurries up the rope and slaps the metal support at the ceiling. People freak out. Tara who has possibly been homeless and bites her finger nails to the hilt cannot get very far. Everyone watches with excitement. Mr. Z tries to make it so it isn't about competition but it obviously is. I get onto the mat. The thick blue cushion gives deeply under my feet as I walk across it to the rope. I put my feet on the big knot at the bottom of the rope. And I try to hold the rope between my legs. I am already shaking when I squeeze my legs together. The rope touches my crotch and I fear that my shorts will not conceal my sex. I try to pull myself up the rope. I can make some progress. The rope comes out from between my legs, held between my thighs. I extend an arm up to pull myself further. The rope is slippery. I can do it. But it is

slow. People are speaking below me but I have no idea what they are saying. All I can hear is a heartbeat. I have made very little progress but looking down it seems that I am precariously high. My arms seem to be losing strength. I try to make one more push but I slip back to where I was. I say to Mr Z “is this good” but my voice is weak and I can’t hear the response. I come down the rope and land on the mat. I am sweating. I rejoin the group. Someone pats me on the back. Maybe Mark. He is nice. I don’t know if I am a hero or a failure.

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I try to say *orphan dancer* out loud but the words do not come. Or, they come out sounding wrong. This word that is a broken line, an indeterminate lack. Two inverse images of freedom. Two inverse images of movement. Two words that cannot and yet must go together. How we become ourselves, how we become a Self, dancing. *Orphan* from the Greek word *orphanós*, meaning without parents. Further back, from the proto-Indo-European **h₃erb^h*- which gives a series of words that recall the history of the body as a history of both subject and object—object *and then* subject. These words: *robot*, *bot* and *orphan*. On another branch of the word’s history is a collection of words having to do with inheritance: the old English *ierfa* which gives us the English word *heir* and the Old High German *erbi*, meaning heritage. Robot-heritage.

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In a talk at the Whitney recently², Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminded the audience of two things: first that “institutional validation is real” (meaning *you really need it even if you don’t admit that to yourself*) and then that “the oldest valuing institution all the world over, before all other institutionalization kicks in, is reproductive heteronormativity.” The value of this *oldest valuing institution* lies precisely at the division of these two branches of the word for orphan, robot versus heritage. *No heritage and you are a robot*. Pardon the bluntness, I say it only to illustrate something. The statement is definitely untrue, but the extent to which it is so may be the extent to which orphans learn to dance. In learning to dance they (and I mean *we*) learn to stop understanding the word *robot*.

But in misunderstanding the word robot do we also learn to misunderstand the word orphan? And by that I mean (and I hear the question ringing in the halls of the nation): do we forget who we are?

I want to erase this silly question.

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A hypnotic dance, eyes closed, the burn of a gaze.

² Spivak’s talk from October 20, 2018 can viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etviMJNsnwU>.