Fear of Commitment

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> Male people cannot just become female people because they want to. Those words have meaning beyond feelings in our heads. Hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery may enable people to live in the same way as the opposite sex (and they definitely provide evidence of commitment) but they don't actually change our sex. My chromosomes are as they ever were.
> —Debbie Hayton, "Not All Transsexuals Think Trans Women Are Women," *The Spectator*, 17 October 2018

1. Why Do We Let Him Do This to Us, Over and Over Again?

WHAT does it mean to commit? And why are men stereotypically afraid to do it? At some point in the last, say, sixty years, commitment-phobia displaced sexual neurosis as the acceptable euphemism through which men could talk about (or at least be talked about as though they talked about) the obsessive fear of castration that, from Ovid to Freud, took as its sign the phallophagic vagina.[1] Thus, in one of the key contemporary representations of male commitment-phobia, the relationship between Chandler and Janice on *Friends*, our sympathetic horror derives not from Chandler's having been encompassed by Janice's body but by her postcoital laugh. To surrender, by surrendering to the feminizing procedure of commitment, one's contempt for women; to put oneself in the position where one had no choice but to put up with such a laugh—worse, perhaps, to feel compelled to *excuse* such a laugh among one's friends: such would be the anxious hypothesis of a heterosexual body magnetized toward feminization, but just as strongly defended from it.

Transsexual women are likely to approach the question of commitment a little differently, if only because for transsexual women the

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prospect of *feminization*—however fearful or even contemptible it may remain in certain respects—is additionally both avowed, in a psychoanalytic sense, and logically asserted in the proposition that "trans women are women." But trans women, if we are women, are women who have chosen to become such, and so to those whose understanding of the subject "women" distinctively entails a predicate like "not choosing, unwilling," we present something of a conundrum. This conundrum endures whether or not anyone choose to ontologize "transness" as an innate condition of being, because even if we could agree that transness *were* innate as a form of desire or identification, its expression would still require an exertion of will—an exertion, moreover, often conducted at the stake of one's own life. Conceiving of a moment in which such a truth presents itself to a subject who may, at some point, transition, the psychic moment that defines a trans woman as such is not one of mere identity but of *commitment* to the truth of that identity, a commitment that could be contrasted from (say) living in the light of it, to confessing it or to asserting it, or simply holding it to be true in a sense that requires no action on the part of the holder.

For such a subject, the term "commitment" names both an act of self-creation and an act of self-dissolution. Self-dissolution, because for trans women who were not raised as women, the subjection by a sudden awareness must interrupt the continuity of consciousness, must break into the story. The old name is thereafter "dead," as though choked off. This breach, after all, can occur with or without hormonal treatment, which likewise is supplied to trans women on the paradoxical grounds that it will both affirm our prevailing sense of ourselves and radically reorient the way we think.

But self-creation, too: a new person must be animated. Susan Stryker's analogy of the trans woman with Frankenstein's creature does not, exactly, stipulate who is Frankenstein, but in addition to the non-trans women she addresses, one must surely cast the author herself.[2] If the self-abolition effected by trans consciousness seems to align trans with the evocations of negativity that have proven so important to queer theory, it is by no means obvious that such an alignment can be brought to completion. An optimistic framing of a trans identity would frame it as the integration of a whole. But there is surely a more critical-theoretical account to hand. If truth breaks into consciousness with the kind of force that shatters previously maintained ego-architecture, could commitment to a proposition like "trans women are women" be anything other than a reaction formation through which a wounded ego

could attempt to reinsert itself into a domain from which, by the emergence of the new truth, it has been (however temporarily) expelled? For Adorno, who will be the focus of attention for most of the remainder of this essay, "commitment" was a complex way of asserting the autonomy of an artistic creation: a committed artwork possesses "an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political," and, because it is "necessarily detached as art from reality," subsumes both an available category and its antithesis. An extrapolation that might make sense for trans women would be something like: a negation of the past self without the embrace of a new one; it would in that sense be aligned with an account of transness as "open-ended" and productive of "categorical crossings, leakages, and slips of all sorts."[3]

It would resemble, in perhaps surprising ways, the commitment that Debbie Hayton attributes to "hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery" in the epigraph above—a commitment without an object, exactly, because the apparent object of commitment (I get surgery to prove I am a woman or to make myself one) is precisely that which the expression of commitment has been formulated to abolish. For, as the author of these words (herself a transsexual woman) thinks, the object of this particular commitment is nothing more than a paradox. A paradox, because the thing that the trans woman asserts that she *is*, a "woman," is precisely the thing that she cannot be as long as she is a trans woman; at least this would be the case if, as Hayton claims to think (and one can never hear the word "chromosome" without smelling bad faith), the predicate "a woman" were indexed by the symbolic division demarcated by unfelt but determinative chromosomes.

One can, however, imagine forms of commitment that exist in the vicinity of negation, with rather more affinity to the claim "trans women are women" than does this one—once one takes account of the unscalable negation that what Hayton euphemizes as "gender reassignment surgery" makes unavoidable: the negation of the phallus, its subsequent inversion and invagination. This negativity endures precisely *as* the form of the realist proposition. As Eva Hayward writes, "My cut is *of* my body, not the absence of parts of my body. The regenerative effort of my cut is discursive; my transfiguring cut is a material-discursive practice through which I am *of* my body and *of* my trans-self. My cut penis entails being and doing, materiality and affect, substance and form."[4] I cannot write on my own body in these terms, but the same cut encompasses me no less than it does Hayward, for I also am a transsexual woman caught within a dialectical structure of predication. I have said, I shall become a woman, and thereby cease to be "I"; but as soon as I have

said it, the "I" that will have done so will not possess the authority of the one that began to utter this sentence. This very setup is, according to Hegel, in fact the representational form (*Vorstellung*) of dialectical reasoning as such. "Starting from the subject, as if this were a permanent base on which to proceed, [this way of thinking] discovers, by the predicate being in reality the substance, that the subject has passed into the predicate, and has thereby ceased to be subject."[5] In predication, some aspect of the subject's subjecthood is left behind; or, in more colloquial language, definition is an act of cutting. If only, of course, the thing left behind could be fully done with—but those pesky chromosomes make themselves known in the Hegelian dialectic too, since the new subject (the one formed by predication) can no more rid itself of the old one (the one pre-predication) than a leopard can change its spots:

> [T]he subject in the second case—viz., the knowing subject—finds that the former, which is itself supposed to be done with and which it wants to transcend, in order to return into itself,—is still there in the predicate: and instead of being able to be the determining agency in the process of resolving the predicate—reflectively deciding whether this or that predicate should be attached to the former subject—it has really to deal with the self of the content, is not allowed to be something for itself, but has to exist along with this content. (§60)

I mean, *yes*. The surplus subject present in its existence at the beginning of the proposition (eggplant emoji) will be lost in the act of predication (scissors emoji) but now finds its own subjecthood determined by the plenitude of loss that characterizes the new condition. Trans woman are women; are "not allowed to be something." For trans women (or, speaking for myself), as for Hegel, the act of commitment (eggplant emoji, scissors emoji) entails the dialectical absorption of a logic of predication whose truth value is literally impossible to determine, because there is no subject ("trans woman") that does not include the predicate ("woman"), nor any predicate that can fully divest itself from the subject. So, then, an urgent question that, for us, arises within the discourse space of feminist ethics: Is it possible to separate ("separate"; cut off) the tendency toward commitment from the necessity of proving a falsehood? The question applies to men, not just trans women. Does anyone really want to be a man? Perhaps not, says Valerie Solanas: "Since he's trying to prove an error, he must 'prove' it again and again."[6] Is commitment to a thing finally a decision to stick with it *right or wrong*, and therefore

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to acknowledge that one's commitment is made, not on the basis of rightness, but on the basis of commitment for its own sake?

2. Adorno and *Friends*

In the "Commitment" essay, Adorno ladles some of his liveliest acid onto those enfeebled creatures, among whom are doubtless numbered some of our own, who publicly espouse a radical politics but do so in bad faith. Scanning the souls of these creatures with his characteristically unblinking eye, Adorno cannot neglect to observe a whole suite of tells, each disclosing that beneath the carapace of this or that would-be revolutionary hero cowers a milquetoast romantic lead. So, for example, Brecht's "exaggerated adolescent virility [. . .] betrayed the borrowed courage of the intellectual"; he has fallen prey to "the theatricality of total plain-spokenness"; consequently, the "simplicity of his tone is thus a fiction."[7] The feeling of being thus scanned by Adorno is, doubtless, part of the pleasure that only a German disciplinarian can still supply to that type of earnest young man who believes that beginning a PhD in literary studies will sublimate the violent cravings, sadistic and masochistic, that are aroused when he meditates on revolutionary themes. Indeed, it would not take Hélène Cixous to detect in this very rhetorical move a kind of self-scansion, a no less enfeebled desire to be released from the violence of the author's notoriously, even comically, self-serious prose and allowed, if not to chill out, at least to join in; "works of art, even literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain" (89). Thus it is not just startling to learn, at the essay's end, that the villain all along has been "the petty-bourgeois hatred of sex" that unifies the "Western moralists" with the "ideologists of Socialist Realism" (88): it is also disturbing, since the opposite of hating sex is not, as it turns out, enjoying it (whatever that would mean) but hating those who hate it, reversing the bourgeois aversion to sex and situating theory itself as an interminable, asymptotic approach toward pleasure, good faith, and practice.

Is "trans women are women" a commitment after all, then? That possibility would be suggested, partly, by the gendering of the would-be radical intellectual in "Commitment" toward which I have already gestured —hard on the outside, with a gooey center. To be clear, I'm not saying Adorno's conscious understanding of these terms is one in which sex is dispositive or definitive. Adorno doesn't want to avow masculinity—maybe nobody does—it's just that the nonavowal of masculinity is a constitutive gesture in his performance of masculinity. It is therefore also

part of the proposition Adorno advances of an artwork's discovering its commitment. Where do commitments come from? Do they "develop," come into being, or change—or are they "natural"? The coming-into-commitment has at least this in common with the logic of coming-out-as-transsexual as we understand it through Janet Mock, Andrea Long Chu, and Susan Stryker (to take three heterogeneous examples): it is both a recognition of something that is *already* true and a promise of a *future* truth that will, everybody understands, never be fully realized. In respect to that first problematic, Sartre's mistake is to believe that it is possible to represent "a just life" under the present conditions of injustice—the "feigning of a true politics here and now" (89), which generates mere radical kitsch.

It will seem picky to take issue with an aspect of Adorno's writing that he does not openly avow: the analogy of artistic commitment with the feminizing humiliation of the wannabe radical. Especially since, if this thread in his writing were pointed out to him, he could probably explain it as an inverted symptom of bourgeois prudishness, or else perhaps one of the cognitive biases swallowed along with his Freud. Nonetheless, this critique will feel familiar to readers of nineteenth-century literature, since the feminization of interiority was one of the most consequential cultural projects of the nineteenth century, as such feminist scholars as Nancy Armstrong and Rita Felski have explained so powerfully. One of Adorno's greatest virtues for contemporary scholars is the tonic he prescribes to treat our bad-faith politicking. But the shock of the sexed body as it arises, spasmodically, toward the end of "Commitment" cannot (or at least does not) treat the pathological conception of "bad-faith politics" as the masculine concealment of primary femininity that underwrites modern metaphysics as such. This is why, I take it, Sianne Ngai turns to Adorno to theorize the cuteness of the avant-garde as the disavowed but finally desired fantasy of its own inefficacy: the fictitious but comforting belief that poetry makes nothing happen. "Poetic explorations of cuteness," Ngai writes, citing Gertrude Stein and Francis Ponge alongside Adorno, "can be read as a way of acknowledging but also critically addressing oft-made observations about the literary avant-garde's social powerlessness, its practical ineffectualness or lack of agency within the 'overadministered world' it nonetheless persists in imagining as other than what it is." In the framework of "Commitment," where men stand alone, the question of how to be a good political subject can only be resolved by either negating the feminine object of self-identification (the dimension of the artwork and the radical alike that is both ornamental

and anaclitic) or else deferring until some postpolitical future the question of sex altogether.

Sometimes it seems as though the work of "Commitment" is to model the former action, to strip feminine objects of their glamour and spoil their shine: "A work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish" (177). Elsewhere, it seems like the best resolution to the problem of feminine interiority is something a good deal more negative—the "menacing thrust of the antithesis," perhaps. If there is an irony here, it is only that the division of the political into which "Commitment" finally collapses requires the separation of the political not only from politics, which it has coded not merely as risible but also as feminine from the start (as mere "ameliorative measures"), but also from the domain of the body, which is arranged among other objects of "brawls of the cattle dealers over their shares of the booty" (81). Political commitment requires not merely the blotting out of that which the world (wrongly) calls politics but also the negation of embodiment as such: proper (negative) commitment gets figured as an immanent, quasimaterial tensility inherent within the writing of, particularly, Kafka and Beckett. Of course, these men cannot be praised without someone else being correspondingly feminized: they "have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomime" (86). Commitment is a zero-sum game. In another of Adorno's notes on Kafka, it is not his competitor but his reader who is railed by Kafka's irresistible force: "He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed has lost forever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad" (83).

Unanchored in the flesh, and with no hooks in the institutional fabric that would designate the political as an ideological or even—to others less aversive of the critique of that which the world calls politics—a repressive state apparatus, Adorno can't avoid his own pratfall into confessional: "Formal structures which challenge the lying positivism of meaning can easily slide into a different sort of vacuity, positivistic arrangements, empty juggling with elements. They fall within the very sphere from [which] they seek to escape" (83). This is surely the humanist radical's pessimistic *credo*, and it is worth repeating: "They fall within the very sphere from [which] they seek to escape." The "[which]" is in brackets because, incredibly, the *New Left Review* publication of Adorno's "Commitment" available as a PDF through the *NLR* website omits the pronoun through, one assumes, typographical error. The

error draws the anglophone reader's attention to the setting out of a logical formula (x "falls within the very sphere from which [x] seeks to escape") that, though it does not precisely encode the propositional form of bad faith, expresses that condition in a historical setting: the species of unwilled intellectual enfeeblement through which critique fails to obtain escape velocity and reinstantiates its own premises. Does this ever happen in "spheres" that are not, already, entirely accommodated by cushions of sublime abstraction? In fairness, Adorno doesn't say so.

I have been arguing that "commitment" finally describes a process of subjectivization (eggplant emoji, scissors emoji) rather than a politics in the conventional sense of the word. So it is difficult to know what an account of bad faith would look like, for either Adorno or Sartre, if it did not depend upon some negation of the feminized interior. Does either conceive of a model of subjectivity, intellectual or otherwise, that is not hard on the outside but soft in the middle, or are both doomed to endlessly introject the terrifying masculine authority that ever tries, and ever fails, to choke out the interior femininity, which, in reality, exists for that masculine identity only so that it *can* be choked out? I think it is worth wondering from where would Adorno (or where would we) have inherited this bafflingly misogynist conception of the political subject, the subject at the scene of politics: this political man is the unhappy participant in an endless gauntlet in which the failures of his (it is always his) own acts of linguistic expression are routinely and humiliatingly exposed. It becomes a kind of drama of telling and not telling, what I see but you can't: "The less works have to proclaim what they cannot completely believe themselves, the more telling they become in their own right" (83).

Opposite Sartre and Adorno, Solanas and Chu both think that *all* men are afflicted with a repressed transsexual desire. A strong case for that position could be derived from observing the case of Chandler Bing, in the very second scene of the first episode of *Friends*, "The One Where Monica Gets a Roommate," which broadcast on September 22, 1994. A Truffaut fade overlaps one shot of our new buddies in a coffee shop with another almost identical shot, the buddies in a minutely different configuration on the upholstery and their costumes slightly changed. Chandler is reciting a dream:

> So I'm back in high school. I'm standing in the middle of the cafeteria, and I realize, I am totally. . . naked. (Monica: "I've had that dream.") Then, I look down and I realize there is a phone . . . there. (Joey: "Instead of?") That's

> right. (Joey: "Never had that dream.") All of a sudden, the phone starts to ring. And it turns out it's my mother. Which is very, very weird because . . . she never calls me.

Another gentle crossfade onto a minutely different shot. What, exactly, is Chandler doing, in order to realize that it is his mother? Does he . . . pick it up? Or . . . press a button? Is she on speakerphone? What must this wretched, defeated man do to his genitals to enable him to communicate with his mother, by whom he feels so permanently abandoned and deferred? It might be worth recalling, too, that the term "mother" could at this point be one of two women—for Chandler, though he doesn't acknowledge the fact, has two mothers. The first one we meet, the one he calls "Mom," is Mrs. Bing, played by the almost-transsexually glamorous Morgan Fairchild; but the second, the one he calls "Dad," is otherwise known as "Helena Handbasket," formerly Charles Bing, and played by Kathleen Turner.

3. Man-Woman and Woman-Man Travel Back in Time

I have been arguing that Adorno's framing of the faithless intellectual describes a masculine shell concealing a feminine soul; I have argued that his work is still read and circulated at least in part because of the pleasure readers derive from his virtuosically cruel performances of anti-femme discipline. And I have argued that among the consequences of that discursive practice has been the opening of a question concerning the place of trans women within critical theory. I am, in one sense, substantiating an argument made by Chu in her dialogue with Emmett Harsin Drager entitled "After Trans Studies," in which she argues that scholarship dealing with trans life has been, in general terms, in hock to the account of gender offered by queer theory, at the expense of the claims and self-descriptions particularly advanced by trans people, and profoundly uncomfortable with the figure of the transsexual woman that should have been at least a *major*, if not the *central*, figure of trans life, but who is instead too often cast by scholars as an embarrassment, a throwback, an anachronism.[8] I don't agree with Chu's diagnosis of the state of the (inter-)discipline of trans studies. It is true that plenty of essays in the field have worked to dilute or excuse the experience of trans women, and to promote heuristic or metaphysical accounts of transness within which the singularity of many trans women's experience (eggplant emoji, scissors emoji) seems almost pedantic. But it is equally

true that the figure of the transsexual woman returns again and again in the founding and refounding statements that comprise trans studies as a series of intermittent events: in Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," in Sandy Stone's "The Post-transsexual Manifesto," and in the work of Eva Hayward, whose writing circumvents the drive to lay down the law to which Chu, Stryker, and Stone all give powerful voice, but whose experience of surgical and hormonal treatment forms the ontological grounds on which inquiry is possible. But for all that I think that trans studies has maintained more of a distance from this particular kind of theoretical transmisogyny than Chu allows, I would argue that critical theory as such has maintained a strange proximity to the rhetorical configuration of the trans woman's bad faith.

By way of a brief conclusion, I want to consider an alternative genealogy of the relationship between criticism and sexual embodiment, and toward the possibility of a realist commitment to female transsexuality—a commitment that would uphold the possibility that trans women are distinctive people and that "trans womanhood" is not merely an overstated formulation of the condition of maleness as such—through a very brief reading of an even briefer lyric (if one can even call it that) by the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson. And to the Tennyson who, toward the end of a very long career, stuttered to articulate a difference that has puzzled every reader since its 1889 composition. The lyric is called, rather pleonastically, "To One Who Affected an Effeminate Manner":

> While man and woman still are incomplete,
> I prize that soul where man and woman meet,
> Which types all Nature's male and female plan,
> But friend, man-woman is not woman-man.

Christopher Ricks tells us that the manuscript version of the second line reads "In earth's best man, the men and women meet," which raises the question of who Tennyson thought, in 1889, was the earth's best man. But by the end of the verse, a cryptic but rather stern injunction appears to have been issued: man-woman is not woman-man, "friend." The title, "to one who affected an effeminate manner," seems itself oddly pleonastic, since among the properties Victorians were wont to associate with effeminacy was, precisely, "affectedness"; affecting an effeminate manner, while technically possible, thus feels like a kind of redundancy. What could the lyric's terminal distinction, between "man-woman" and "woman-man," actually distinguish? Benedick Turner offers the following assessment: "[T]he best people combine the virtues associated with both

genders, but those who fail to live up to the standards of their sex cannot hope to compensate by evidencing the virtues of the opposite one."[9] Happy fault.

It is a startlingly strange poem, and not one, I think, that it is easy to habilitate in a world where we tend to assume gendered interiorities and sexed exteriors, where trans women are, for example, required to pretend to be "women trapped in the bodies of men." It speaks, for example, to the possibility of a utopian trans future, since, at the moment of the poem's delivery, sexed beings, apparently, "still are incomplete." Tennyson does not gesture toward the question of their completion, or help us answer whether or not that completion may involve their becoming merged in a single, hermaphrodized, or otherwise nonbinary or two-spirit being, or whether their completions would follow separate tracks. Were such completion arrived at, would the poet stop prizing the true androgyne, or would the androgyne be contained within or prefigurative of their completion, or rather rendered redundant by that completion, subsumed in the act of sexual becoming? Neither of these questions is resolved by one of the most tricky verbs in Tennyson's idiolect, "types," which names the action of the true androgyne soul on behalf of "Nature." In *In Memoriam*, written nearly three decades before "To One Who Affected," "type" had been the occasion for one of Tennyson's most destabilizing wobbles, which leads the poet to correct a characterization of "Nature" between one canto and the next. In canto 55, Tennyson had found some comfort in the notion that although Nature seemed prepared to do away with any individual organism ("so careless of the single life"), she nonetheless protects and preserves classes of organism ("so careful of the type," where "type" means something like "species"). But then in canto 56, Nature herself responds scornfully:

> "So careful of the type?" but no.
> From scarped cliff and quarried stone
> She cries "a thousand types are gone:
> I care for nothing, all must go."

In other words, in one of Tennyson's most conspicuous acts of self-correction, "type," as noun, had been rejected by Nature herself. Yet in the later poem, type returns as, now, a verb, whose direct object is "plan" (suggesting now, as probably not so distinctly in the early plan, the act of typing out on a typewriter) and whose subject is an androgynous person.

It is easier, I think, to cast the androgyne as a figure of negativity (which is more or less how I think gender dissidence works out in Adorno) than it is to take the androgyne as the subject of a future for men and women. Such, at any rate, is the strategy specifically avoided by the period's more explicitly queer texts that deal with male femininity: Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," for example, in which the effeminate boy of the story's title is lost to history but felt as an irresistible archival presence; or Pater's "Diaphanèite," in which the androgyne heralds a future in which sex, properly understood, is abolished rather than completed. Wilde and Pater share a sense that the object of queer negation is and should be masculinity, and that the effeminate boy, who circumvents masculinity and authority, thus also negotiates a path for the undoing of gender as such.[10] In that way, they play Adorno in a major key, and write out the fugue of commitment with the same countermelodic negativity. But for trans women, gender isn't the problem, or it isn't the main part of the problem. For us, the problem is the phallus, and its negation won't come from androgyny, true or false, but from the material negation of the masculine subject. So one finds in Tennyson a surprising antitheoretical possibility, of more use to me than a thousand Adornos: effeminacy isn't transfemininity, we're not all the same underneath, and trans women are women.

NOTES

1. A turning point in this discourse was Steven Carter and Julia Sokal's self-help classic *Men Who Can't Love* (1987).
2. Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein."
3. Stryker, Currah, and Moore, "Introduction," 11.
4. Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish," 255.
5. Hegel, "Preface" to *Phenomenology*, §60.
6. Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 37.
7. Adorno, "Commitment," 83, 84, 84. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
8. Chu, "After Trans Studies."
9. Turner, "A Man's Work," 483.
10. This queer utopian reading of Wilde and Pater I take from Sinfield and Dollimore—who I think are right in their diagnosis of W+P but use that diagnosis to shore up the Adornian contempt for femininity.

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