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Die Prager Männerbünde: On the Cultural Techniques of Shared Male Experience and Brod's/Kafka's Unfinished Novel *Richard und Samuel* (1912)*

Since the publication of Max Brod's *Der Prager Kreis* in 1966, literary and German studies have drawn from Brod's detailed, often personal knowledge, and, at the same time, qualified his claims about the cohesion and literary and cultural significance of the "narrower Prague circle" with alternative models (Höhne et al. 2016; Weinberg 2017). It has been pointed out that Brod actually speaks about a number of both diachronically and synchronically related circles and posits their openness; his approach was characterized as "lived-through literary history" (Demetz 2016: 11). On the other hand, masculinity literary studies provide a different perspective, which I wish to explore here: The narrower Prague circle (and this observation carries implications for similar formations) is less a designation for cultural and literary movement or phenomenon (Brod explicitly denied that they constituted a school, with a program and a leader, and so on), and appears more as a group of four male friends where cultural practice and techniques were being interwoven. Clearly, within masculinity studies, the aspect of an existence of a relatively close-knit circle of male friends is far from irrelevant to understanding the

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nature of their literary and cultural production, however varied it was; on the contrary, it represents a significant, even if not necessarily unifying dimension of it. One may begin to appreciate the importance of the aspect of presence as something important to cultural production with reference to Gumbrecht's understanding of hearing and touch as paramount to the experience of presence, a concrete encounter with the physical environment; "I would like to emphasize," writes Gumbrecht:

> That things always already – and simultaneously with our unreflective habitus of positing significations they are supposed to hold – stand in a necessary relationship to our bodies. I call this relationship 'presence'. We may touch objects, or not. They, in turn, may touch us (or not), and they may be experienced either as imposing or inconsequential (Gumbrecht 2012: 6).

Although Kafka's closest friendship and collaboration was with Brod (the main focus of the earlier sections of this essay), and although he did not adopt the informal *du* with Baum and Weltsch for several years, mutual attachments nonetheless developed among all of them over time. With Weltsch, for instance, Kafka formed, for some time, a bachelors' brotherhood, cemented by their shared anxiety towards planned marriage, an almost unavoidable perspective among young Jewish men and women of the 1900s (see, for instance, Stach 2017: 42–53; 172). Oskar Baum, for many years the only married member of the group, was blind and wrote using a slate and stylus for Braille. It is his impairment that makes us more aware of the importance of touch and hearing in this group, their heightened sensitivity to auditory and tactile experience as a sensorial foundation for bonding. Among other forms of discourse, reading aloud to one another played a significant role, while touch featured more prominently than usual in moments of shared navigation of space.

As Prague's German Jewish writers and critics, they occupied a position that was symbolically "male", yet at the same time fraught with ambiguities and fundamentally unstable. They were "male" by virtue of their privileged access to culturally productive activity (a point I will illustrate with Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter*, 1903), and, in the Prague context prior to 1918, also linguistically privileged through their use of German. At the same time, however, they were multiply vulnerable: first, socially, since none of them could make a living solely through writing, and second, ethnically, as Jewry (and specifically contemporary Western Jewry) was conceptualized, both in German

and Czech nationalist discourse and in degenerationist rhetoric,[1] as decadent and effeminate. A position of vulnerability, yet one that enables multiple and revealing switches of perspective.

In the writings of Kafka and Brod, which I examine in detail, the male friendship involves bodily closeness and intimacy. I somewhat doubt the homosexual repression thesis (cf. Schmidhäuser 2000, Beck 1986), because in Kafka's fiction and non-fiction alike, we find explorations of a whole continuum of transgressive and alternative sexualities (or paraphilias) including incestuous desire (e.g. in "Die Verwandlung"), sadomasochistic subtexts and reflections (*Der Process*, a letter to Oskar Pollak from 24 August 1902, a letter to Grete Bloch from 18 November 1913, "In der Straffkolonie"), vorarephilia (a letter to Brod), voyeurism (the "foursome" in *Das Schloss*), adipophilia (the Brunelda scene in *Der Verschollene*), foot fetishism (a diary entry from 9 June 1912), aquaphilia ("Das Urteilt"), and so on. In Brod's texts (and it is worth noting his pronounced heterosexual promiscuity), we find a rare moment of (unconscious) subcoding. After Kafka's death, Brod had a dream which he recorded. In it, Kafka touches Brod's deep undereye circles saying: "So weak?" Brod realizes these are words of both reproach and consolation and they embrace:

> We were now like a unity made of braces and supports; it was entirely different from touching a woman. Under my hand, I felt nothing but his coat, a cool, pleasantly rough, elegant fabric; I didn't feel his body, only a wonderfully encouraging firmness, like iron rods (*herrlich aufmunternde Festigkeit wie von Eisenstäben*). Franz also seemed to find a support in me. We took a few steps together, as if we wanted to fully savor the feeling of shared security" (Brod 2016: 134–135).

Even if the motif can be taken in a homoerotic sense (iron rod as a phallic reference, the circle under the eyes suggesting sexual exhaustion), I would like to point out that Brod adopts an element of Kafka's own discourse of objects and partly human, partly non-human entities (body as iron construction). Their union is reminiscent of a passage from the last chapter of *Der Process*:

1 The idea of degeneration, an evolution reversed and accelerated, was introduced by Max Nordau, Zionist theorist and co-founder of the movement, in *Entartung* (1892) specifically in relation to Diaspora Jewry, and as a corrective, *Muskeljudentum* was proposed as the disciplined cultivation of mental and physical strength, agility, and vitality, aimed at reviving the Jewish people.

> K. walked between [his executioners], stiffly upright, the three of them forming such a single unit that knocking one down would have meant knocking all of them down. It was a kind of unit only inanimate objects can usually form (Kafka 2009: 161).

There are indications of what I will call *the posthuman approach to the self*, which I will elaborate further below, followed by a discussion of the period discourse (notably Hans Blüher), to which this unusual motif might be related, of homoerotic bonds as beneficial to the establishment of healthy, constructive community.

A unity in motion also recalls the friends' habit of walking arm in arm, linked together, whenever Oskar Baum was present, a practice necessitated by his blindness. It was at Baum's home that the group initially met regularly, once a week, to read aloud their work to one another and talk (later, the apartments of the other three also became meeting places). When Brod describes, in *Der Prager Kreis*, their habits of organizing reading sessions, engaging in discussion, and going out to the winery, pub, theatre, or cabaret, the group's defining masculinity is unmistakable – not least in the way the involvement of (eventually three) wives is indicated. The women could participate in "live debate", Brod writes, but his disparaging remarks (Mrs Baum's critique of Brod's historical novel *Reubeni* came to symbolize "clueless critique", one of the wives, left unnamed, willfully fell asleep during one of their readings) make it apparent that "our Circle" was the male Circle: "an expression of pure love of truth and candour such that only rarely occurs in a collective". His humanist conceptualization of this narrow male band draws from Ralph Waldo Emerson ("a friend is a man… in the presence of [which] I may drop even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought, which men never put off", Brod 2016: 184), but it remains blind to the privileged position of men in relation to intellectual work and practice upon which Brod's concept of friendship is predicated.

He also prefers to not disturb the conventional humanist undertones by a somewhat more dubious cultural practice and thus never mentions, and deleted from Kafka's diaries all mentions of, their often collective visits to the brothel, such as Gogo and Shuha Salon, and to the wineries like Trokadero and Eldorado, with *chambres separée*, and a porous boundary between entertainment, licentiousness and prostitution (Stach 2017: 325–334).

In 1908, an anonymous article in *Prager Tagblatt* recorded 35 "tolerated" bordellos and two hundred registered street prostitutes. In reality, however, their number likely rose to thousands; the "vice statistics" published in *Prager*

Tagblatt on 6 January 1917 estimated six thousand "clandestine prostitutes" (Stach 2017: 514). In the contemporary discourse on sexuality, the male visit to the brothel, like premarital sex and promiscuity, was an unmarked, normal act, as long as it avoided disclosure and scandal (epitomized by pregnancy and revelation of adultery). Young men were expected to let the steam off in the brothel, and Hermann Kafka's contemptuous remarks to the still unmarried Franz, as mentioned in "Brief an den Vater", are an expression of this belief. Female promiscuity, in contrast to male promiscuity, marked the woman with an irremovable social stigma (and often the physical stigma of necessary abortion). A visit to the brothel, however, represented a male bonding rite of passage, especially characteristic of metropolitan male groups or collectives (*Männerbünde*; I will later discuss the ethnographic genealogy of this term). The possibility that male friends may be present together during their sexual activity with prostitutes reinforces this aspect of male bonding. For instance, in a dream recorded on 9 October 1911, Kafka writes:

> I had to do mainly with the whore whose head hung down, Max with the one lying next to her on the left. I felt her legs and then kept pressing her thighs at regular intervals. My pleasure in this was so great that I was surprised that for this entertainment, which was indeed the most wonderful of all, one did not yet have to pay anything. I was convinced that I and I alone was cheating the world (Kafka 2024: 32).

We may note how this passage, in line with Gumbrecht's observations, associates touch (pressing her thighs) with presence (of the friend), and brings about the conjunction of the individual (I and I alone) and collective (there is a group of men waiting by the stairs).

Kafka and Brod apparently approached the diary genre, and writing in general, very differently. Kafka's so-called diaries (designation introduced by Brod) contain a variety of texts, with no clear distinction between fiction and non-fiction: records of everyday experience, thoughts, ideas, excerpts, accounts of dreams, drafts of letters and fictional texts, notes for future work and near final-versions of certain pieces. Underlying this is an understanding of writing as an existential activity, whose products need not pass through the filter of publication. Writing and life are bound in a strange relationship – one in which life seems to depend on writing, serving as a shadow zone that supplies it with (little) material of its own. Brod's diaries are very different: they are simply abbreviated records of recently past events with little in the way of literary-technical exploration. Richard und Samuel is an exception. Kafka made the suggestion

to Brod that they write parallel travel diaries during their shared vacation trip to Switzerland, northern Italy, and Paris in summer 1911 and develop them into a communally written novel. The diaries that were to form the basis of this novel were written during the trip itself, from the twenty-sixth of August through the thirteenth of September, as well as in the weeks after the two friends returned to Prague. Brod and Kafka met on several Sundays together to work out the text, but only the first chapter (with the subtitle "Die erste lange Eisenbahnfahrt", "The First Long Train Journey") ever saw the light of day and was published in *Herder-Blätter* by Willy Haas, Norbert Eisler and Otto Pick in the third issue of 1912.

What makes this text not only an avant-garde experiment in collaborative writing, but also an experiment in – male – friendship? I will also examine its engagement with new representation technologies, such as film and stereoscopy, and consider how this technological aspect intersects with the masculine dimension of the experiment. The introduction states:

> The purpose of this work is to describe the many gradations possible in a friendship between two men and at the same time to turn a double light, from two different angles (eine widerspruchsvolle Doppelbeleuchtung), upon the countries traveled through, and by this means to present them with a freshness and significance too often unjustly reserved for exotic regions only" (Brod and Kafka 1969: 280; Brod and Kafka 1987: 193).

What follows are alternating entries representing the same events in two different perspectives, except that there are few "events" as such: they travel by train, they meet a girl, Dora Lippert, who joins their compartment, they make a stop in Munich to take a short car ride with her, and continue their journey crossing the borders to Switzerland. Pioneers, as Brod writes, of "the novel without plot and without superficial exoticism" (Brod 2016: 168).

At first glance, Samuel appears to be modelled after Max Brod "a young man of the world who takes very seriously his ambition to acquire knowledge in the grand style" – while Richard (referred to as Robert in some variant passages) resembles Kafka, as someone who "lets himself drift along at the mercy of unaccountable feelings and still more of his weakness" (Brod and Kafka 1969: 279). Yet the parallels are complicated: Richard is a bank clerk who works because he believes he cannot endure free days – a detail that reads as a reverse parody of Kafka – while Samuel has to live off his successful and esteemed work, suggesting a note of (bitter) self-irony on Brod's part. The realization that the

fictional Richard is not exactly Kafka and the fictional Samuel is not exactly Brod becomes clear when we confront the friends' respective travel diaries (Brod and Kafka 1987: 73–76; 143–145) with the story itself (193–208): sometimes, an observation appearing in Brod's diary makes its way into Richard's entries (a farmers wife with a look of "Delphic Sybill"), at other times, the circumstances described by Kafka in his diary are incorporated into Samuel's entry with the friends' roles swapped around (e.g. who fell asleep, while endlessly complaining of insomnia, and who stayed awake observing the landscape). The principal method of writing Richard and Samuel, however, is not the simple exchange of observations, but the staging of mutual misunderstanding in such a way that it becomes constitutive of their (fictional) selves. In other words, the misunderstanding shaping Kafka's view of Brod and that marking Brod's view of Kafka becomes a foundation against which these characters are defined, and through which certain elements of their respective "models" become recognizable – as fiction and thus, paradoxically, as something fixed in reality.[2] Richard, for instance, admires Dora for her musicality with which she hummed some tunes to the two friends, while Samuel notes that she has no musical talent; this corresponds to Brod's musical competence and Kafka's (hyperbolic) self-conception as unmusical. The endeavour is paradoxical, because one's error, or element of error, about the other is incorporated into the fictional self (and thus is understood as akin to error), but this does not correct the misunderstanding; on the contrary, it exacerbates it. Kafka stylizes himself according to the element of error in Brod's view of him, and Brod, in turn, stylizes himself more in line with Kafka's misconception; yet this does not result in any convergence of feelings. Another example: when Richard advises Dora, in all seriousness, to take her medicine bottle with some iron mixture against anemia and throw it out of the window, diagnoses her condition as caused by the office where a girl's skirt has to "shift to and fro all the time for hours on a hard wooden chair" and "round bottoms are galled, and the breasts too against the edge of the desk"[3] (Brod and Kafka 1969: 286), we see Kafka's hypochondria (which he knowingly projects onto others) represented in such a way that Brod's exaggeration – somewhat of an erotomaniac and a sexist – is expected to take shape.

2 One might recall here Wolfgang Iser's distinction of the imaginary, the real and the fictive (Iser 1993).

3 "Und jetzt soll gar ein Mädchen im Bureau sitzen, der Frauenrock ist gar nicht dazu gemacht, wie muß er sich überall spannen, um dauernd, stundenlang auf einem harten Holzsessel sich hin- und herzuschieben. Und so werden diese runden Popos gedrückt, und zugleich die Brust an der Schreibtischkante" (Brod and Kafka 1987: 198).

Both writers also implicitly connect their method to the new technical optical media of their time, when they characterize it as employing *widerspruchsvolle Doppelbeleuchtung*, which suggests, as Zilcosky points out, "contradictory stereoscopy" (2003: 25). The two "pictures" do not create a unified image. The text also evokes its connection to film through Richard's reminiscences of *Die weisse Sklavin* (1910), a film in which strange men force a girl into a car, kidnapping her (to Richard, this becomes a painful allusion as Samuel forcefully persuades Dora to join them for a brief sightseeing drive through Munich). The filmic aspect is in the new linear arrangement of consecutive events as well as in the thematic evocation of motion that makes the spectator static and passive (as in the train, the car, and the cinema). The stereoscopic aspect can be seen in the confrontation of simultaneous perspectives and simultaneous events. It is, again, a conjunction of experience and writing (technique). It combines a multiphase process of a-synchronization and re-synchronization with the memory of shared experience, a combination which serves less as an extension of their travel than as a deepening of mutual misunderstanding, an intensification of experience as something mutually contradictory. This is I think why Kafka never wishes to return to this experiment: He does not need his friend, and, anyway, would have to sacrifice him, in order to employ, as Kafka did, the method of self-exaggeration and self-misunderstanding, using his experience and sense of self as a *false subtexture* of his text – a similarly avant-garde construction method.

It is worth pausing to consider the context in which Kafka's *method of misunderstanding oneself* takes shape. The first work that must be mentioned is Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character), originally a dissertation, later expanded by three chapters (including the antisemitic "Judaism") and published in 1903 shortly before the author's suicide. The book was discussed in various Prague circles among other approaches to sexuality and Jewishness, and belonged to the antisemitic strand of discourse against degeneration. Like Wilhelm Fließ, and, more fleetingly, Sigmund Freud, Weininger took up the concept of general constitutive bisexuality, claiming that every human is composed, to different degrees, of the male aspect (*der Mann*, *Männlichkeit*) and the female aspect (*das Weib*, *Weiblichkeit*). This seemingly progressive idea is then reverted by attributing essentialized characteristics to the two aspects: the male one is supposed to be active, productive, conscious, moral, the female aspect, passive, unproductive, unconscious, amoral, and so on. All social habits of the fully female aspect are related to reproduction (coquetry, dressing up, gossip, etc.); the male aspect is perfected in the genius, in the sublimation of sexuality, etc. Of course, Weininger (even though he was considered by many to be a genius), never turned the logic of his "analysis" from its head back on

its feet by recognizing that the female social habitus (and thus inevitably his two aspects as well) are culturally constructed. "Like woman", writes Weininger, the Jew – conceived as a "psychological constitution", rather than race or people – fails to grasp the true conception of State, the true idea of society. Our age, he claims, is "the most Jewish", "the most effeminate", etc. The figure of the genius represents here a purified form of the male principle. Following Ulrike Brunotte's analysis (2010), this figure – defined through its entanglement of misogyny and antisemitism – can be understood as an attempt to redeem masculinity through sacralization in increasingly secular societies. This sacralization marks a shift within the traditional *topos* of heroic masculinity and should be seen as part of the hegemonic struggle within masculinity itself, the process of its renegotiation (cf. also Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Similar entanglement of misogyny and antisemitism, but with a peculiar subcultural twist, can be seen in Hans Blüher's two-volume *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft* (The role of eroticism in human society, 1917, 1919). In this work, Blüher advocates homoerotic bonds (the inversus type) as the core of community- and state-building, and criticizes feminine homosexuality (the third gender). In *Die Rolle*, not unlike Weininger, Blüher racialized the misogynist element, as Geller points out, by radicalizing "the construction of the opposition between the healthy inversion characteristic of manly Germanic men and the decadent homosexuality of effeminate Jews" (Geller 2003: 98). Blüher regarded only latent and effeminate (and female) homosexuality as pathological, while sexual inversion in men was understood as productive, constructive and constitutive of true communities, and eventually the state. Blüher uses the idea of *Männerbund* (male band) which he takes from the German ethnographer Heinrich Schurzt who invented it the context of the study of "exotic" African tribes as the "coming together of boys of the same age during their *rites de passages*" (Brunotte 2010: 174). Blüher was an early member and the self-proclaimed first historian of the Wandervogel movement, a German youth life reform movement (established in 1896), which advocated primitive healthful life, hiking, camaraderie, responsibility, collective singing etc. as an antidote to the ills of modern civilization. The movement was marked by various internal splits, including debates over the admission of girls, and in some groups, a prevailing homosexual orientation also emerged as a distinguishing tendency. In *Die Wandervogelbewegung als erotisches Phänomen* (1912), Blüher, a controversial and often polemical figure, emphasized his and his companions' disinterest in the opposite sex – they were not incels, but volcels, then known as "mysoginists", but without pejorative, but rather humorous connotation. In *Die Rolle*, Blüher also writes: "With the Jews it is as follows: they suffer at one and

the same time from a weakness in male bonding (*Männerbundschwäche*) and a hypertrophy of the family (*Familienhypertrophie*)" (1920: 170). Kafka did not follow the history of the Wandervogel movement, but he planned to write a critique for *Selbstwehr* of Blüher's later and openly antisemitic *Secessio Judaica* (1922). As Stach correctly explains, Blüher attacked the exposed wing: "He was describing Judaism with the same vocabulary of decadence and mimicry that the Zionists and Kafka himself used to characterize the western European Jews" (2013b: 482–482). Mimicry, a term with Darwinist overtones, was understood as a strategy of camouflage adopted by Jews in a fundamentally hostile environment – a strategy despised by the Zionist thinkers such as Max Nordau or Theodor Herzl.

I argue that, in response to elements within the discourse of degeneration and the crisis of Jewish masculine identity, Kafka developed a stylistic and self-fashioning strategy that annuls masculine virility through a kind of negative hyperbole, amplifying his own persistent tendency toward failure: to fail as a son, prospective husband, man, partner, businessman, writer, and so on. Part of this strategy involves the development of what might be called a *posthuman approach to the masculine self*. Among his post-human figures we find Odradek, the crossbreed, Rot Peter, the mole, the mouse, the dog, *das Ungeziefer*. Two points may be made to further support the argument advanced above. First, these figures are often built around the collusion between hearing and touch: Odradek's laugh sounds like the rustling of falling leaves; Rot Peter is defined by a scar in his hip; the mole is driven to madness by a strange hissing sound; the mouse sings in a faint whistling tone; the strange dogs perform to music walking on their hind legs. One moment in *Die Verwandlung* provides us with a paradigmatic example:

> He felt a slight itching up on his belly; […] identified the itching place which was surrounded by many small white spots the nature of which he could not understand and made to touch it with a leg, but drew the leg immediately, for the contact made a cold shiver run through him (Kafka 1995: 90).

If presence and atmosphere were previously described as being touched from within, here we encounter a motif of being touched from within by something (horribly) externalized. The second point is that these are hybrid creatures, and their hybridity is of an impasse kind: an unassimilable hybridity that (at least in part) corresponds to the collapse of belief in Jewish assimilation. The shattering of this illusion was shared, though for different reasons and with different

consequences, by Zionists such as Herzl and Nordau, as well as by Brod and Weltsch; by antisemites such as Blüher; by converts such as Weininger (who became a Protestant); and by Kafka himself. Both Weininger and Kafka experienced a weakened sense of Jewishness, but they took opposite directions: the first rejected his Jewishness, the other, initially reluctant, later came to explore it with more and more intensity: discovering Yiddish theater and Eastern Hasidic culture, taking a sustained, even if rather distant and critical interest in Zionist thought and its developments, learning Hebrew, and so on.

In conclusion, Kafka developed his posthuman approach by way of experimenting with the relationship between a search for literary style and his sense of self. If the actual self is damaged in the process – then too bad for the self. What Kafka could not do, however, was subject another's sense of self, or a friendship, to the same test. When, five years later, Brod proposed continuing their collaborative project, Kafka declined. This refusal sheds an interesting – if I must stop here, incomplete – light on *Briefe an Felice* and *Briefe an Milena*, which may also be read as experimental, collaborative projects that were ultimately rejected. In the letters, Kafka purposefully depreciates himself, placing his masculinity in a subordinate position through (mutual) auto-narration, in order to be able to explore and develop the relationship between literary style and a shared sense of self. They are experiments too – and ones not unlike Richard and Samuel. These destructive and self-destructive collaborative methods, emerging from a hyperbolic engagement with the vulnerability and instability embedded within (German) Jewish masculinity, served as significant steps in the formation of Kafka's style and identity as literary identity.

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| Abstract

Die Prager Männerbünde: On the Cultural Techniques of Shared Male Experience and Brod's/Kafka's Unfinished Novel Richard und Samuel (1912)

This article revisits Max Brod's concept of the "narrower Prague circle" by shifting the focus from literary-historical classification to the role that aspects of homosocial bonding and the precarious position of Jewish masculinity played in the circle as a group of male friends, and especially in the friendship and collaboration between Max Brod and Franz Kafka. The importance of tactility and hearing (as components of what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls presence) in the practices of male bonding (here: reading aloud, walking arm in arm, but also a visit to the brothel) is supported by readings of passages from Brod's memoirs Prager Kreis and Kafka's diaries as

both articulations of components of shared male experience and as expressions of the vulnerability of Jewish masculinity. The analysis centers on Richard und Samuel (1912), the unfinished collaborative novel by Brod and Kafka, whose conflictingly mirroring entries stage mutual misunderstanding as defining their (fictional) selves. This method – described as a "contradictory stereoscopy" – is shown to intersect with contemporary media (film, stereoscope) and to constitute an experiment both in male friendship and in writing that ultimately had to be abandoned. The article further explores the multiple vulnerability of Jewish masculinity by examining constitutive antisemitic elements in the contemporary discourse on gender and masculinity in Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* and Hans Blüher's *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft*. I argue that, partly in response to the uneasy point of intersection between degenerationist, antisemitic, and Zionist discourses, Kafka develops a stylistic and self-fashioning strategy that voids strong masculine models through a negative hyperbole, developing what might be called a posthuman approach to the masculine self.

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