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Plasticity: The Ability to Be De-formed Without Breaking

When we recognize our lack of control over human suffering in a chaotic, painful, and meaningless universe, we frequently respond by entering a state of inaction. To combat this state, we often create false meaning in our lives and curb our actions into monotonous routines to escape from engaging with the unknown of the world around us. My novel, *Plasticity*, aims both to exemplify how literature counters this inaction enabling us to act *and* to compel my actual reader to act. *Plasticity* is about a protagonist who undergoes many painful experiences and creates false meaning and routines to counter engaging with the mystery of life. When she sees no other way to assert control over her body and lifestyle, the protagonist attempts to commit suicide, passes out, and subsequently finds herself a reader in a library, who has just finished reading a book. A librarian informs her that she must continue reading, but the reader refuses to read. By showing the protagonist three books containing unique lives, a librarian convinces this protagonist to live again, through reading. I define “plasticity” as the way literature empowers us to live through suffering by having the ability to be de-formed without breaking.

In order to show how literature enables us to live through suffering and overcome inaction, my novel opens by showing how affliction can inhibit us from acting. The

protagonist of the novel is originally named Joy Elizabeth Townsend. In the first chapter of the novel, Joy is in a serious, sexual relationship with Tom, a man she does not love. She perceives no value in her life although in the past she attempted to create false meaning to her life: surface attraction and routine sexual rendezvous with Tom to counter engaging with life's unknowns, her independence and loneliness. When she sees no other way to assert control over her body and life, Joy attempts to commit suicide, but faints before she is able to complete the act. This protagonist commits suicide after an experience in which she perceives no meaning in her life and is trapped in a state of inaction. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche calls this experience, "nausea" (60). Prior to this experience of "nausea," Joy was living under, what Nietzsche calls, "the veils of illusion" (60). She was able to act because she was ignorant of the reality of her situation. Joy ended her relationship with Tom. Shortly thereafter, Joy reentered the relationship, evading the fact that she actually did not love Tom. When she began to suspect that she might actually hate him, she attempted to escape her reality by creating false explanations to justify her situation. She references "all those little tchotchkes—the shampoo and the conditioner, the things that I gave my "loved one," to Tom, to make his smell disappear, to make my loathing disappear; everything fake that I bought to escape from thinking or feeling the truth" (5). She attempted to create false meaning in her "to escape from thinking or feeling the truth."

Like many people who search for value in painful experiences and cannot find explanation for suffering, Joy tries to counter the meaninglessness of life by creating a temporary, imaginary meaning. She listens to "the songs on the classic rock station said that I should cry and beg and plead *Please don't leave me*" (6) and buys "the shampoo

and the conditioner” to shield and mask her repulsion to Tom’s actual smell. Joy’s environment seems to encourage her to return to her relationship with Tom and to value the love they create above all else. But this value is false, falling apart. Joy says that “At the end of the day it’s just about two bodies pressing up against each other and being able to smile and pretend like everything is so goddamn all right. It’s about being able to go through the motions without feeling anything” (7). In her state of “nausea,” Joy’s angry tone conveys that she realizes that this belief that life is “about two bodies pressing up against each other and being able to smile,” is a contrived, meaningless value which she could never buy into, as denoted from the diction “goddamn all right.” To justify her experiences, she wanted to believe that the meaning of life was to be in a sexual relationship. Joy changed her actions toward this false goal by practicing “everydayness” (13), a term Walker Percy uses in his novel, *The Moviegoer*. In describing his protagonist’s “everydayness,” Percy states, “he is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in” (52). Like Percy’s protagonist, Joy pursues a routine of dull, loveless, and repetitive sexual rendezvous to avoid engaging with the mystery and uncertainty of life. As this false justification unravels, Joy acknowledges that she only returned to this sexual relationship because she was lonely, insecure, and felt the need for sexual legitimacy from the community around her. She realizes these three problems and enters a state of “nausea” in which her “knowledge kills action” (Nietzsche 60). Joy’s epiphany paralyzes her. She no longer believes she has control over her body and sees no way out her relationship. She wants to be a happy, independent, self-sufficient human being, but cannot act. I portray this state of “nausea” by having Joy literally vomit. Because she does not want to continue to have

meaningless, painful experiences, Joy asserts the only control she can perceive over her life—she attempts to commit suicide, but does not die.

After showing how painful “knowledge kills action,” and can cause greater destruction of life, I aim to reveal how literature cures us from inaction and enables us to live through suffering. In the second chapter, Joy finds herself transformed into the body of a nameless reader, sitting in a library in which all of the books are lives. A librarian named Kirk confronts her, attempting to make her read another book on her assigned reading list. As a reader, however, she is still trapped in a state of inaction; she tells Kirk that she does not want to read again. Annoyed with her disruption of normal library proceedings, Kirk says he will take a break from his normal duties to join her in her passive state. To pass the time, Kirk reads aloud three different books to the reader, trying to convince her to live again. The texts within my novel aim to save the reader of my novel from the inability to act caused by nausea and from the destruction of life caused by suffering. But how can literature do this?

Literature moves us to experience life and to continue living through suffering. By “moves,” I mean that literature emotionally and viscerally drives the constructive expression of our passions. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche signifies constructive, intellectual articulation, as “Apollonian” (33). He also refers to our chaotic, inner passions as “Dionysian” (33). Nietzsche argues that literature synthesizes the Apollonian and Dionysian. An exploration of how literature gives Apollonian intellectual structure to our Dionysian passions so that we can better perceive life instead of “everydayness,” can be found in, “The Idea of Order at Key West.” In the poem, Wallace Stevens describes a woman who “sang beyond the genius of the sea” (105). He describes how “the water

never formed to mind or voice” (line 2), “yet its mimic motion/ made constant cry” (4-5). The “water” seems to “mimic” the words of the singer, but at the same time, “the water never formed to mind or voice.” The “water” was separate from the woman’s song, from human art, and did not produce her song. Rather, the song was created by the woman. In the last stanza, Stevens portrays the significance of literature in chaotic world.

“Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
 The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
 And of ourselves and of our origins,
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.” (106)

We live in a chaotic environment in which we must “rage” or struggle “for order.” But “order” is not defined as finding meaning to life or justifying pain through easy answers. “Order words of the sea” echoes the opening line that “She sang beyond the genius of the sea.” “Order” is associated with how we perceive “the sea.” “Order” refers to creating a new type of understanding and perception of our environment through art. Therefore, “to order words” literally refers to the process of creating art, whether with writing a song or with writing a text. In the first stanza, it is unclear whether or not the singing—a symbol of understanding or “order”—which embodies and captures a depiction “of the sea” actually derives from “the sea” itself or if this “order” is imposed upon “the sea.” Either way, this singing—this depiction “of the sea”—allows us to ponder the essence underneath the appearance—the mere physical body which is present to our senses—of the sea. The essence is a “ghostlier demarcation,” provides “keener sounds” than the appearance. An essence of an object is “ghostlier,” more spiritual or metaphysical than

our senses can superficially perceive. Through singing, through art, we can attempt to uncover the essence of an object, rather than just the surface appearance. The writer must create “Words” that not only represent the “dimly-starred” or confusing and fragmented “portals” of the surface appearance of the world around us, but convey “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds,” the metaphysical essence underneath the appearance. Stevens argues that art, the application of an Apollonian structure to our Dionysian passions, better allows us to perceive the essence and reality of our environment. Literature therefore moves us by making us aware of the metaphysical reality surrounding us.

I believe that literature integrates the Apollonian and Dionysian through an emotional and visceral connection to the reader. The importance of literature’s emotional and visceral connection to the reader greatly differs from Walter Pater’s view of the power of art. In the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Pater states that art “proposes frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (190). While I agree with Pater that literature should “give nothing but the highest quality to your moments,” Pater limits literature ability to do this to the intellectual realm. For Pater, this ability to “give” does not transpire through an emotional or passionate event. But an intellectual proposal or an instruction is not going to force us to do anything, especially in the case of my reader, who does not want to read. In the introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*, Walter Kaufmann examines Nietzsche’s belief that literature brings out the “creative employment of the passions” (20). I believe literature does this by making us *feel*; emotionally and viscerally.

Literature moves us to experience life. We do not “experience life” when we retreat into a numbing state of “everydayness” to avoid life’s unknowns because we are afraid of suffering. In the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Pater says “that our failure is to form habits” (189). We cannot experience life when “form habits.” Rather, “To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (189). To experience life is to have plasticity, the ability to be de-formed without breaking. We must live in the present, “To burn always,” and “to maintain this ecstasy,” without breaking by creating “habits” and “everydayness.” To experience life is to let events shape and change us, while still acknowledging that we remain human. For example, a ball of clay can be smashed and become many small little squares of clay, but it is still clay. Or just as a doll can be burnt and mutilated but it is still a doll, a human can lose a limb and become psychologically disabled in a war but still be human. Painful and pleasurable events change us and make us take on new form, but we are still human. By acknowledging this, we can better live through suffering instead of trying to escape from it through “everydayness.” In *The Message in the Bottle*, Walker Percy questions what makes someone human. He argues that most people define humanness in one of two ways. Some define humanness as the fact that each person “can be understood as an organism in an environment...endowed genetically like other organisms with needs and drives, who through evolution has developed strategies for learning and surviving” (20). Others define humanness as the fact that each person is “somehow endowed with certain other unique properties which he does not share with other organisms—with certain inalienable rights, reason, freedom, and an intrinsic dignity” (20). The former is based on “the profound impact of the scientific revolution, the other representing a kind of

attenuated legacy of Christianity” (20). As in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in which we cannot fully capture the essence “of the sea” (line 1), we can only attempt “to order words of the sea” (52)—we may never be able to define humanness, but we can contemplate the presence and reality of this notion through literature. When we live through painful moments that change every aspect of our personality, mentality, and physicality, our humanness remains unchanged. By exposing our fixed humanness, literature allows us to engage with life’s unknowns and endure our moments “for those moments’ sake” (Pater 190), without the promise or reward of a heaven. When we become inactive or flee into “everydayness” to escape from engaging with life’s unknowns and the possibility of suffering, literature counters this by moving us to have plasticity.

Literature embodies therapeutic qualities through plasticity. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the therapeutic qualities of literature.

“The metaphysical comfort—with which, I am suggesting even now, every true tragedy leaves us—that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable—this comfort appears in incarnate clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings who live ineradicably, as it were, behind all civilization and remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generations of the history of nations.” (59)

Nietzsche believes that our experiences are like “all the changes of appearances,” both positive and negative. Only literature can provide us with “The metaphysical comfort... that life is at the bottom of things, despite all changes of appearances.” Although we may experience suffering, “the chorus of satyrs” within literature reminds us that “life,” our

humanness, this “indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” force, will “remain eternally the same.” Nietzsche shows how literature provides “metaphysical comfort” to individual experiences, but also examines how literature can provide “comfort” on a larger scale. Literature provides us with the “comfort” that “behind all civilization,” we “remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generations of the history of nations.” Not only does literature show our internal plasticity—our ability to be deformed by our unique and individual experiences without retreating into “everydayness” to avoid suffering, but also how all people can be deformed by massive sequences of events and our histories and continue to engage with life’s unknowns without breaking.

By moving us to engage with the mysteries of life in a painful and chaotic world, literature provides us with a “metaphysical comfort.” In the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Pater describes “the love of art for its own sake” (190). Just as Pater argues that art is inherently valuable, he believes that living is valuable without philosophical justification. Like Nietzsche, Pater argues that we must live even though there is no justification for the pain we may experience. In fact, Pater wants us to “love” life. Similarly, Nietzsche believes that we should “want the eternal repetition of one’s life” (Nehamas 142). Instead of looking forward to a heaven after death, we should want to always live. We certainly should not want to die. In fact, Pater greatly fears death, much more than Nietzsche. But both Pater and Nietzsche want us to “love” life—to want to eternally repeat our lives in Nietzsche’s case or to appreciate living for “its own sake,” as Pater would say. I believe the only way we can do this is if we continue living and engaging with life’s unknowns, rather than retreating into a state of “everydayness.” Literature therefore moves us to experience life and continue living.

Why should literature move us to experience life and continue living *through* suffering? Kaufmann would perhaps argue that literature should move us to experience life “in spite of suffering” (20)—but this ignores suffering or separates moments of suffering from experiencing life. Suffering can be a fundamental part of the chaotic, meaningless universe around us. We cannot always prevent moments of pain nor constantly fight against them. If we attempt to escape from suffering or to separate suffering from the rest of our experiences, then we would break because we would enter a state of “everydayness.” We would desire to create a routine which will allow us to avoid pain. We would avoid all engagements with aspects of life we cannot control. Literature does not move us to experience life and continue living “in spite of suffering.” We might think that because suffering can be inevitable that literature moves us to experience life and continue living *because* of suffering. The inscription of a song on a Greek tombstone shows this point of view, stating, “As long as you live, be lighthearted./ Let nothing trouble you./ Life is only too short,/ and time takes its toll” (Burkholder 2). Because suffering is inherent in our existence, the Greeks would argue that “we are encouraged to be cheerful, not in spite of death and the ravages of time but, ironically, because of them” (Burkholder 2). We should live “because” of suffering. But this makes experiencing life dependent on suffering. This gives suffering value and worth. This implies that suffering is necessary to live. What if we don’t have any suffering? Does that mean that we cannot experience life? Suffering has no meaning and is not necessary to experience life. Some people experience life who have not gone through a great deal of suffering. Others suffer, such as my protagonist, but have pursued “everydayness” and do not truly experienced life. Just “because” suffering is there, does not mean that we should be encouraged to

suffer in order to experience life. Literature does not move us to experience life and continue living “in spite of suffering” or “because” of suffering.

Instead, literature moves us to experience life and continue living *through* suffering. “Through” literally describes the methodical process of how literature moves us. Ironically, literature actually makes us suffer in order to move us to experience life, through alienation (Percy), “defamiliarization” (Shklovsky), and “self-effacement” (Poulet). Literature allows us to become alien from the real events around us. In, *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy argues that “only a Martian can see man as he is, because man is too close to himself and his vision too fragmented” (11). We cannot fully understand our humanness or our ability to experience life because “man is too close...and his vision too fragmented.” Our life is a series of chaotic images and experiences in which we are constantly and completely submerged. We are “too close” to see our plasticity. As we enter the solitary physical state of reading, we gain a new perception of the world from outside of our routine physical and mental positions. We cannot concentrate on ourselves as we focus on the experiences and perceptions of characters captured in a text. Writers unveil the “ghostlier demarcations,” the essence underneath the surface appearance of people and objects. Writers change how we interpret and perceive life in a text and we bring this change in understanding into our reality. Through the constructive expression of passions, texts convey “order” in a chaotic universe. Instead of being trapped with a “fragmented” view of the world, texts make us see the bigger picture by removing us from the world around us and forcing us to focus on the world inside of a text. Literature changes our perception of life through alienation.

Through “defamiliarization,” texts can disturb, haunt, and attack us, emotionally and viscerally to make us sensitive to the experience of life. In “Art as Technique” Viktor Shklovsky argues that art should lead to our “de-familiarization.”

“The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because of the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”

Shklovsky believes that all art will “make objects ‘unfamiliar,’” forcing people to question their “perception” of life. To prolong our perception of life is “an aesthetic end in itself.” Art prolongs our perception of life for its own “sake.” Echoing Pater and Nietzsche’s earlier arguments, Shklovsky believes that art’s ability to prolong our perception of life is inherently valuable, without philosophical justification. Like Nietzsche who believes that we should “want the eternal repetition of one’s life,” Shklovsky believes that we should want to perceive life—we must counter “everydayness” and monotonous routines which impede us from engaging with life’s unknowns. “The technique of art” is what delivers us from “everydayness.” Just as Nietzsche claims, like Lessing, “that he cared more for the search after truth than for truth itself” (95), literature constantly challenges us to lift our “veils of illusion.” Instead of settling into “everydayness” and a simple “perception” of the world around us, we must “increase the difficulty and length of perception.” As Nietzsche argues that literature moves each person to perceive his life as “an actor who, being truly talented, sees the role he is supposed to play quite palpably before his eyes,” so that “man contemplates himself” (63), we must aim to perceive “the role” we “play” and our ability to experience life without breaking. We can only recognize our plasticity and experience life by

“defamiliarization,” by completely changing our simple perceptions of life and transforming from a state of “everydayness.”

In addition to alienation and “defamiliarization,” literature uses the technique of “self-effacement” to move us to experience life and continue living. In “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority,” Georges Poulet describes how reading is therapeutic by “achieving self-transcendence through self-effacement” (Tomkins xvi). While Poulet argues that types of art outside of writing change our perceptions, reading conveyed a specific method. Poulet describes how only literature, unlike other art media, literally attaches to the thought processes of the reader (42). When we read, the words of a text meld into our inner mental monologue. While our individual voice is not completely erased, it is temporarily silenced. In addition, the perspective of the camera in film—another type of literature—becomes our only lens for perceiving the outside world in a dark theatre. Only through this temporary silencing or blinding of our normative perspectives, can our perceptions be changed so that we experience life and continue living, rather than pursuing “everydayness.” This direct connection to our perception of the world differentiates literature from other art forms.

The duty of the writer is to produce a unique writing technique and style which will move the reader, through alienation, “defamiliarization,” and “self-effacement,” to change her perceptions and engage with life’s unknowns. In order to show how literature moves us to experience life through suffering, the librarian in my novel reads sections from three books to the reader. At the beginning of the third chapter of my novel, for example, the librarian reads aloud a scene from *The Book of Marcel*. The scene depicts a situation in which Marcel faces a crisis and sees no meaning in his or his friend Diego’s

experiences. After Diego works extremely hard in high school, UCLA rejects him from a prestigious music fellowship program. Marcel imagines that Diego will pursue a life of drug abuse—which Marcel introduced him to—and depression as he enters into a nearly proscribed future as an undervalued manual-laborer. There is no greater meaning behind Diego’s economic constraint and necessity to work. There is no moral reason or justification for why UCLA rejects Diego—and Marcel realizes this. I aimed to use language which conveys the vast disappointment and sense of universal meaninglessness Marcel experiences so that the reader will empathize with the emotions of this situation. Marcel’s “knowledge kills action;” he retreats into a state of passivity by locking himself in his mother’s bathroom. Marcel’s mother, Trudy then catches Diego intoxicated.

Why, after just attempting to commit suicide, would the reader want to listen to such an awful scene of “nausea”? How could a scene of meaninglessness and suffering compel the reader to experience life? Marcel’s experience of “nausea” shows Joy’s experience of “nausea” from a completely new perspective. Instead of Joy actually living this experience, she is watching Marcel’s experience as an outsider. She has become alien to a once familiar situation. The experience of “nausea” is suddenly “unfamiliar,” adding to “the difficulty and length” with which it takes the reader to perceive experiences. Marcel is “too close” to his experiences to his outer plasticity. Joy, as a reader, however, is distanced from this scene—she is not experiencing the scene herself, but rather viewing it from afar. Because of this, she can perceive the plasticity of these characters as well as her own plasticity. “Nausea” itself is not important, it is meaningless pain, but the endurance of the experience of “nausea” becomes important. The language of the passage should not only sensitize Joy to experience life, but allow her to endure this experience.

Afterwards, the writing style of this experience changes her emotionally, mentally, and even on a visceral, physical level, but she realizes that she still retains her humanness, unchanged. She did not need to retreat into a state of “everydayness.” A writer’s style can sensitize and alienate the reader from life, forcing the reader to leave a state of “everydayness,” so that the reader can be moved to experience life. Especially by highlighting mundane, painful, or meaningless experiences, the writer moves the reader to endure her own mundane, painful, and meaningless experiences, without the need for justification or a final value or reward to be attained by getting through life.

Attempting different techniques to move the reader to continue living, the librarian exposes the reader to multiple scenes within each book. While I explained that the first scene in *The Book of Marcel* shows Marcel’s teenage reaction to Diego’s rejection from UCLA, the second scene shows Marcel’s job in his early 30’s, working at a Tower Records and his detachment from other people. This detachment suddenly changes after a girl named Trisha treats Marcel as a human being instead of just a store clerk. The final scene shows Marcel’s attempt to make a living as a musician in his early 30’s. These scenes show Marcel’s progression from a sense of nausea and suffering to a change in his perceptions of others and then finally moments of valuing his experiences and the mysteries of life. After hearing these scenes, the reader talks to the librarian. Although the reader feels sensitized to these experiences, she complains that Marcel’s optimistic progression does not pertain to her situation. She does not believe that there is value to her painful experiences and therefore refuses to live again after just hearing Marcel’s text. The librarian notes that the reader has intrinsically linked interpretation with reading, rather than just listening to the stories. He makes it apparent that he is

trying to change the reader's mind, to move her to read again, but the reader asserts that she will come to her own conclusions.

This commentary on the significance of interpretation derives from Wolfgang Iser's "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." In his essay, Iser argues that "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" (Tomkins 50). The reader's input is necessary for the "existence" of the text. In my novel, the reader argues that "interpretation is integral in the reading process" (47). Iser states that "A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (51). While the reader in my text undergoes "the task of working things out for" herself, I hope that my actual reader will do the same. Everyone experiences life differently, I only hope that my reader's perspectives are changed so that she is moved to allow events—events which I cannot prescribe nor predict—to shape and change her while still acknowledging her fixed humanness.

The librarian then reads aloud excerpts from *The Book of Sea Boy*, which tells the story of a boy named Roy. Roy grows up in a small, isolated, port town in California in the early 1950's. After his father's murder, he moves into a cave along the seashore. Roy meets Megda, the daughter of a wealthy developer who comes to the town hoping to change the cove into a city. Megda's father takes Roy under his wing, bringing him back to the town and enrolling him in school. Roy falls in love with Megda, but Megda wants to move to the East Coast "and live in a big brownstone and go to college and marry a Yalie" (59). After Megda's father asks Roy to join his business, Roy decides to leave the cove, to determine his own future. Roy's book parallels Joy's experience as a reader in

the library. Roy abandons life and enters the cave, a symbol for the library. He sees Megda's life, an alternative lifestyle to his cave experiences just as the reader is exposed to several alternative lifestyles in the scenes she hears. Roy then chooses to leave the town in order to form his own identity. The librarian wants the reader to choose to pick up her next book. The reader thinks that the librarian wants her to experience life, allowing events to change her, but also to permit events to define her identity positively. She finds this story too uplifting and does not believe that painful events will form her identity. Suffering may change her for the worse, damaging or deforming her identity, and the reader wants a different method of enduring experiences.

The final text the librarian reads is *The Book of the Waitress*. The scenes from this book explore the life of Trisha, an upper class girl growing up in Los Angeles in the late 1990's. The first scene shows how Trisha as a young girl receives more attention from her camp counselors and babysitters than from her parents. The second scene takes place at a high school party years later, in which girls distribute diet pills. Trisha finds that class and status are connected to sexual practice and restrictions. The final scene shows how Trisha attempts to escape from class by becoming a waitress in a Malibu restaurant and having a sexual rendezvous with a busboy. Trisha does not enjoy this liaison and alludes to the fact that this is not the solution to her problems. Trisha's text has the closest relationship to the reader's former life as Joy, because they were members of the same economic class. Both Trisha and Joy were "Bobos" who had "one foot in the bohemian world of creativity and another foot in the bourgeois realm of ambition and worldly success" (Brooks 11). Trisha thinks that her economic class is not her home. After she has been expelled from her strict, repressive lifestyle, she finds that escaping from her

past class structure through sex does not provide her with the answers she needs. Trisha is on her own but also failing to live the way she wants. In a conversation with the librarian, the reader notes her interpretation of this book. She realizes that Trisha was “too close” to her own experiences to perceive that she was not escaping from her economic class, but buying into some predictable stereotypes of a Bobo such as being “money driven” (118). Through reading, Joy can “contemplate” herself and see the bigger picture of her past—as if she were an actor on a stage. While Joy’s choices may have always led to the same end and she could not have controlled her economic position or changed this lifestyle, she gains a new understanding of who she was and the context in which she lived.

This new perception makes the reader realize that life is not about valuing experiences or creating false meaning to cope with pain. The reader states, “even though I know that some of the moments in my life are dreadful and painful—and I can’t control them all—I want to live my life” (125). She is moved to live her life again—not because she will be able to change the outcome of the events she experienced, but because she wants to experience life and receive “the highest quality of” her “moments, just for those moments’ sake.” The librarian tells the reader that there are no other books on her assigned reading list. She must re-read *The Book of Joy Elizabeth Townsend*, eternally. The events in the book will always be the same—even the ending. The reader begins to do this and is interrupted by Kirk, who tells her that she “didn’t die yet” (132) and that she must continue reading from the section where she “left off” (133). The reader then wakes up in a hospital and wants to write down her experiences so that her doctor can “read” (135) them—promoting the concept of living through reading. My novel is not about how literature can prevent suicide. Rather, *Plasticity* is about how literature shows

us that we can allow experiences to deform us without retreating into a state of “everydayness” to avoid pain. By being exposed to the books of Marcel, Roy, and Trisha, the reader in my novel is moved to experience life and continue living, just as I hope that by exposing real readers to my novel, I can move my readers to do the same.

Plasticity’s relationship to literature has two parts: Literature moves us to perceive plasticity in life—how experiences in life deform without breaking our humanness. Literature does this through plasticity, by deforming and changing readers’ perspectives of life without breaking their fixed state as readers. While I acknowledge that Joy is a unique character, I do believe that most people exist in a state of “everydayness” in which they live through a series of routines allowing them to be numb and oblivious to the mysteries and uncontrollable aspects of life. I also believe that many people who do recognize the meaninglessness and chaos of the universe exist in the passivity of “nausea,” and do not know how engage with experiences and live beyond a habitual routine. My novel aims to move my real reader to experience life and continue living through suffering and to show how the plasticity of literature allows us to have plasticity in life. Because of the self-referential nature of my text and my focus on literature, aesthetics, metaphysics, I define my novel as a meta-novel.

Often, we are too close to truly experience life. We merely go through the motions of living. Literature distances us from our states of “everydayness” and “nausea.” Through the writer’s stylistic techniques we perceive life from a new perspective. A writer’s words enter our inner mental monologue, deforming and changing our views while we still retain our place as readers, separate from the physical text. We become aware of the unique identity of each character. A character’s fixed humanness

exists through painful and pleasurable events that change her emotionally, mentally, and physically. We can only sense this plasticity in ourselves when we sense this quality in others. Literature enables us to live in the present, allowing experiences to shape us, while retaining our unchanging humanness. Life is chaotic and meaningless—but we can not avoid this fact by creating false meanings, retreating into routine habit, or becoming passive. More important than trying to be happy by justifying the difficulties of life is how we live through suffering. We must actively engage with the unknown of life and fully live. Literature moves us to experience life and to continue living through suffering.

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