

SECULAR DECREATION: ACTS OF UNDOING IN PRISCILLA BECKER'S
INTERNAL WEST

by

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For Sophie and Sam.

Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

In the collected journal entry excerpts gathered in *Gravity and Grace* (1952), twentieth-century French philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil introduces her concept of “decreation.” Here, “decreation” refers to an act of renouncing the self—of undoing the self (physical or otherwise) in order to allow room for the desired object: God’s love. By reading the American poet Priscilla Becker’s collection *Internal West* (2001) in relation to Weil’s “decreation,” this thesis will examine how *Internal West*’s exploration of disembodiment and embodiment finds Becker’s speaker undergoing her own secular form of “decreation” in order to bring herself closer to her own desired object: an interruption between the inner self and the external world as mediated by the body.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This project is concerned with the thought of two writers: the early-to-mid-twentieth century French philosopher, Simone Weil, and the contemporary American poet, Priscilla Becker. Being deeply interested in questions of embodiment, self-denial, and self-effacement in relation to anorexia nervosa and poetic venture, I have discovered the centrality of the process of undoing in both Weil's notion of decreation as found in *Gravity and Grace* (1952) and Becker's exploration of what I call "disembodied embodiment" in her first collection of poems, *Internal West* (2001). In each of these texts, undoing refers to a process of diminishing the self and/or body as a means of producing that which is greater than the self and/or body. In reading Weil, undoing can be used synonymously with decreation to refer to the act of self-effacement that diminishes the individual down to the image of God, thus producing the space required to enable God to "love[] himself" (Weil 34).¹ In the poems of *Internal West*, the speaker's undoing is carried out as she distances her self-conception from the body despite being, fundamentally, embodied, thus producing the space for a new conception of self: dis/embodiment (disembodied embodiment). By bridging the gap between these two forms of undoing using Becker's account of anorexic affect in the essay "Big Little" and the phenomenological concept of introception, I will extend Weil's

¹ For context for Weil's premise, see Genesis 1:26: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (*Authorized King James Bible Version*).

concept from its theological origins to reveal how the plight of Becker's speaker is in fact a form of secular decreation.

In order to fully establish the link between Becker and Weil's concepts of undoing, this project will be divided into seven chapters. In the chapter following this introduction I will provide the biographical information and textual histories necessary to understand Weil's concept of decreation. In the third chapter, I will provide an introduction to the writing of Priscilla Becker and the publishing history of *Internal West*. Following this, in chapter four, I will define the phenomenological tool of introception in the context of anorexia nervosa and dismantle the dichotomies of mental health (normal/abnormal, ordered/disordered, etc.), replacing them with Audrey Wollen's Sad Girl Theory. This, in turn, will equip us with the lens needed to properly view the process of undoing central to Priscilla Becker's account of anorexia nervosa. Having established the necessity of this lens, I will dedicate chapter five to Becker's account of anorexic affect in her essay "Big Little." This interpretation of her act of anorexic undoing will allow me to introduce a new conception of the self formed by the poet's simultaneous self-identification with and rejection of the body: dis/embodiment. Using the concept of dis/embodiment, supported by my discussion of introception, I will dedicate the sixth chapter of this project to interpreting three poems from *Internal West* ("The Futureless Future," "Influence," and "Overture to an Hallucination"). In the final chapter, I will conclude this project's theoretical argument to reveal how Becker's speaker's

undoing is in fact a secular form of Simone Weil's decreation: an undoing of the speaker's relationship to her body enacted in order to create the space for something else—that is, a new self-conception enabling her to disrupt the difficulties inherent in her embodied relation to the external world

CHAPTER 2 DEFINING DECREATION

Providing a definition for Weil's concept of decreation is a fraught endeavour, as the concept can be easily misinterpreted by the unfamiliar reader of her work as a call for baseless self-denial. As Weil's own explanation is at times opaque, evasive, and demanding of one's will and attention, it is important to understand the context of her writing.

Let us first consider the textual history of Weil's writing. In his introduction to *Gravity and Grace (La Pesanteur et la grâce)*, French Catholic philosopher Gustave Thibon relays the story of how he befriended Simone Weil and eventually went on to become the sole possessor of her manuscripts, the excerpts of which comprise the text. He writes of her work as "extraordinary," claiming that—despite his feeling that the project of sharing her thought is somewhat analogous to "divulging a family secret"—his desire, above all else, is for her work to "reach other kindred souls" (vii). This statement begs several questions, including: What of Weil's soul? Who was she in her time? And what might others discover as familiar (if not *familial*) to their own perspectives in her writing?

To answer these questions, we must turn to her life's story. Simone Weil, born 3 February 1909 to Dr. Bernard Weil and Salomea "Selma" Weil (née, Reinherz), was a French mystic, philosopher, educator, and activist for worker's rights (Pétrement 1-2). Having studied under Émile-Auguste Chartier (better known as

Alain) at the École normale supérieure in Paris and particularly influenced by the work of Immanuel Kant, Weil's early writing centers upon questions pertaining to education and perception. Testament to the originality of her intellect, as Lisa McCullough points to in her article "Simone Weil's Phenomenology of the Body," Weil's 1930 dissertation, *Science and Perception in Descartes*, precedes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) by more than a decade (195). In addition to her writing on education, another socially-pertinent inquiry found in her early writing is that of empathy's role as a form of suffering-*as-the-other* in the context of political strife (68, 94). In the years that follow, this question eventually shifts to that of how empathy can be understood in relation to God. Identifying her key influences at the time when she was writing the material that went on to become *Gravity and Grace*, Thibon claims her intellectual heritage is firmly rooted in "the great Hindu and Taoistic writings [undoubtedly that of the Upanishads], Homer, the Greek tragedies and above all [the work of] Plato, whom she interpreted in a fundamentally Christian manner" (xi). This foundational knowledge supporting one of Weil's most difficult concepts—decreation (*décréation*)—reveals her own thought in sharper relief.

Having now briefly sketched both textual history and personal biography, I will approach the difficult undertaking of defining Weil's concept of decreation. I could describe it quickly using Weil's own words ("Decreation: to make something pass into the uncreated"), but this would still be an insufficiently clear foundation to then build my argument regarding Priscilla Becker's poetry

(*Gravity and Grace* 32). Decreation is an act of renouncing the self—of moving into the “uncreated” rather than into “nothingness”—this latter term belonging instead, as Weil explains with cautionary precision², to the language of destruction (32). This distinction between decreation and destruction is crucial to the term’s meaning, and one’s ability to perform the former hinges upon one’s³ capacity to suffer in resignation without submitting to the impulse to appease God out of self-interested desire or with the aim of reaching an afterlife. In this vein, Weil writes, “[t]hose who wish for their salvation do not truly believe in the reality of the joy of God” (37). As a result of submitting to a state of resignation, the individual becomes acquainted with a knowledge of misery—“knowledge,” she writes, “which is the door of all human wisdom” (35). In turn, the newfound awareness borne of this knowledge means the individual has reached the frontier of renunciation. Weil explains:

Renunciation demands that we should pass through anguish equivalent to that which would be caused in reality by the loss of all loved beings and possession, including our faculties and attainments in the order of intelligence and character, our opinions, beliefs concerning what is good, what is stable, etc. [...] Moreover the energy thus cut off from its object should not be wasted in oscillations and degraded. The anguish should therefore be still

² “Destruction: to make something pass into nothingness. A *blameworthy substitute* for decreation” (32; my emphasis).

³ In this paper I will opt to use “one” as a third-person gender-neutral pronoun. With respect to clarity, I will only be doing so when necessary or in situations where it cannot otherwise be avoided.

greater than in real affliction, it should not be cut up and spread over time nor oriented towards a hope. (36)

Renunciation, then, as the final stage of decreation, creates the space and productive, undirected energy needed to allow God to love himself through the individual, which is the object of one's highest aspiration. In short, decreation may be understood as literally referring to the processes of death or dying—of absenting the self in order to make room for God to reach his image in the spirit.

It is at this final point, of absenting the self in order to make room for something else, that we are brought to the work of Priscilla Becker. Though it is important to acknowledge that from now on I will be moving Weil's concept outside of its original theological context, it is not the intention of this project to alter or deny Weil's own thought for the sake of unreflective interpretative use. In her writing on decreation in *Gravity and Grace*, Weil is contending with the human spirit, and to suggest that this—in a manner not dissimilar to how she writes about the body—can be effaced from her writing would unnecessarily divide my reading of her work into two worlds: that of the mystic and that of the decidedly secular person. Indeed, this project's account of embodiment's decreation should be understood as distinct from divine decreation in order to maintain the original intention of Weil's thought. As with Anne Carson's *Decreation* (2006), the Canadian writer and classicist's collection of poems, essays, opera libretti, and

screenplays centered upon the question of undoing central to Weil's concept⁴, a fundamental aspect of my project is that of preservation—of allowing for the contours and intricacies of Weil's thought to be left in their original form, unaltered. In this way, it should be noted that this project is concerned with forging a secular model of decreation via poetic interpretation, and it is not an attempt to force Weil's concept of the divine to align with the poems of *Internal West*. Similarly, the effort to enforce divisions within Weil's work also disadvantages and undermines any understanding we can garner from Becker's work, because—as I will demonstrate later—what Becker proposes in her poems regarding the division between embodiment and disembodied being does not correlate with narratives imposed by false dichotomies. Our concern, on both occasions, is to embrace an outlook of what English Romantic poet John Keats calls “negative capability”⁵—that is, being at ease in a conceptual state of conflict and situating ourselves firmly in the in-between.

⁴ In Carson's work's “fourth part of a three-part essay,” “Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Poerete and Simone Weil Tell God,” she most straightforwardly explores the question of self-undoing inherent to Weil's concept (171). However, where Carson teases out the contradictions of Weil's biography alongside the paradox of decreation and presents the written page as “the crossing-point of a contradiction,” as a way to “reify [the] paradox” of staying near and far from the object of one's love (175), my concern in this project is not with discerning the location of flux—of the whereabouts of the in-between—but with identifying one of the various reasons why we choose to go there.

⁵ In an 1817 letter to his brothers, Keats first uses the term “negative capability” when discussing Shakespeare. “Negative capability,” he writes, “is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (60). In the centuries following Keats' letter, negative capability has evolved more broadly to encompass what Ou Li, author of a historical account of the concept, argues to be an “idea [that] is not confined to formalistic aesthetics,” but, instead, as one that becomes “a way of being,

CHAPTER 3 PRISCILLA BECKER AND *INTERNAL WEST*

To lay the framework for understanding what I mean by this “in-between,” let us now consider what has already been written about Priscilla Becker. Despite Becker’s accomplishments, the academic community has directed relatively scant attention toward her. While Simone Weil’s work has been the subject of much discussion in the past two decades by scholars of poetry, phenomenology, theology, and philosophy⁶, mining library databases for critical interpretation of Becker’s poems results in less than half a dozen literary reviews of her first and second collections. This lack of academic recognition requires a corrective. And for valid reasons: For one, her work is undaunted by the accusation of narcissism often directed at poets who dare to be rigorous and transparent about the question of the self. Secondly, Becker has received exceptional recognition in the realm of art. Testament to her poetry’s reach, she has not only received the attention of former poet laureate of the United States, Billy Collins, but her writing has also been praised by the one-time front man of the band Sonic Youth, Thurston Moore. Moreover, her debut collection *Internal West* came out of the success of what Joanna Smith Rakoff identifies in a 2001 interview with Becker for *Poets & Writers* magazine as, “increasingly,” the new route to publication for not only first time poets but [also] seasoned veterans: “win[ing] a contest” (70).

conveying an attitude towards human experience” (22). In this way, my use of the term refers to being at ease in a conceptual state of conflict.

⁶ For a creative work inspired by Weil’s thought, see the aforementioned *Decreation* (2006) by Anne Carson. In terms of theology and philosophy, see Gillian Rose’s critical inquiry “Angry Angels: Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas” from her larger work *Judaism and Modernity* (1993).

To give a brief history, *Internal West* began as a manuscript Becker sent to the *Paris Review Prize*'s inaugural book contest. Prompted by the suggestion of a friend, Becker entered her poems to counter the feeling that she, at the time, "never [did] anything with her work" (72). *Internal West*'s win, in this way, came as a surprise not only to her but to other writers active in the poetry community. Tallying the statistics, Rakoff marvels at the unlikeliness of Becker's victory. She writes, "[m]ost poets [at the time of her interview in 2001], no matter how stellar their publication histories, will enter an average of 20 contests before actually winning one" (70). This fact, coupled with the knowledge that the *Paris Review Prize* was "the first contest to which Becker ever sent her manuscript," makes Becker's "experience," Rakoff cautions hopefuls, "the exception" (71). As the winner, Becker received a small cash prize and *Internal West* was published and distributed by the now-defunct Zoo Press of Lincoln, Nebraska. Following this, her poetry has continued to be published by New York's Four Way Books, which printed her second collection, *Stories That Listen*, in 2010. In addition, Becker has gone on to expand her bibliography with the inclusion of her essays in the collections *Going Hungry: Writers on Desire, Self-Denial, and Overcoming Anorexia* (2008) and *One Word: Contemporary Writers on the Word They Love or Loathe* (2013).

CHAPTER 4 PERSPECTIVAL SHIFTS AND KEY TOOLS

In Becker's essay, "Big Little," from this first collection, *Going Hungry*, I have come to identify a process of undoing that is central to her account of anorexia nervosa. This identification of her process of undoing will later be used in chapter six as a framework to understand the speaker's plight in *Internal West*. In order to first determine the place of undoing in her work, however, I will preface Becker's account by dismantling the influence of mental health logic—replacing it with a more appropriate perspective from which to approach her experience. For this purpose, I will critique mental health logic through an investigation of the *Diagnostic Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders*, revealing its prevailing assumptions and blind spots. I will then follow this criticism by introducing an alternative theoretical framework for conceptualizing sadness, Audrey Wollen's Sad Girl Theory. Finally, in part two of this chapter, I will delineate Jordi Sanz and Ian Burkitt's use of the phenomenological concept of introception in their essay "Embodiment, Lived Experience and Anorexia: The Contribution of Phenomenology to a Critical Therapeutic Approach" (2001). The use of introception will later prove key in my interpretation of both "Big Little" and *Internal West*, as it is a necessary tool for explaining *what* both Becker and her speakers' acts of undoing allow them to do.

4.1 MENTAL HEALTH LOGICAL AND SAD GIRL THEORY

As we will see in chapter four, Priscilla Becker's essay "Big Little" highlights the contemporary⁷ burden of the anorexic. Her account is subversive, complicating received understandings borne of the pathologized narrative of anorexia nervosa as a form of mental disorder. This term, "disorder," preferred by publications like the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), is inappropriate to use as a primary lens when analyzing Becker's thought. Though it should be acknowledged that this logic's application is often helpful in particularized contexts⁸, it is also necessary to stress the danger of its origins in the paradigmatic authority of mental health. With passive acceptance, this paradigm can inform how we read and interpret mental differences beyond its origins in medical science. As such, understanding Becker's account requires careful, self-critical thought.

To explain the need for a more nuanced approach, let us consider the alternative and continue our discussion of the mental health paradigm by using the DSM as an example. Now in its fifth edition, the American Psychiatric Association first

⁷ This contemporary burden is to be distinguished with that belonging to the anorexic of the High Middle Ages, whose anorexia mirabilis was seen as a saintly pursuit (Jacobs Brumberg 2)

⁸ According to a 2014 report by the House of Common's Standing Committee on the Status of Women, "anorexia nervosa has the highest overall mortality rate of any mental illness, estimated between 10% and 15% of individuals with the illness" (*Eating Disorders Among Girls and Women in Canada*). To be very clear, my point is not to suggest that individuals with anorexia nervosa should never be seen through the lens of mental health. My point is that the lens of mental health should not be the *only* one through which we view the experience of the anorexic.

published the manual in 1994. As a system of classification, the DSM distinguishes between different types of mental disorders based on symptoms or what is referred to in the preface of the fifth edition as “how mental disorders are expressed and can be recognized by trained clinicians” (xii). In its intended use, the DSM is most commonly employed by mental health practitioners to diagnose their patients; as the introduction to the fifth edition puts it, “[t]he current edition, DSM-5, builds on the goal of its predecessors [...] of providing guidelines for diagnoses that can inform treatment and management decisions” (6). By virtue of the fact that the DSM claims certain experiences and states of human consciousness to be markers of disorder, it also presumes the inverse: the existence of a model of order to individualized lived experience. Though the DSM’s use may prove helpful to those in distress who require professional assistance, it is deeply problematic in its uncritical, blanket use for at least two immediately identifiable reasons: For one, it advocates for conformity of the mind, suggesting we can and *should* measure our own quality of living in relation to that of an assumed order of the majority population. Secondly, it operates under the false assumption that some normative thread ties day-to-day lived experience together. Instead of allowing for heterogeneity, this logic supposes a standard way of being—one based on the assumption that our external perception and inward feelings grounded in the process of temporal duration should function steadily and predictably, without too much or too rampant a deviation.

Running counter to what the DSM stands for, the meaning espoused by Becker's account of anorexia finds itself more comfortably at home in the recently developed field of critical inquiry, Sad Girl Theory. Sad Girl Theory is a call for feminist resistance based in the language of gendered experience. The artist and writer Audrey Wollen is often credited for having coined the term. Her work, which routinely confronts androcentrism by challenging the male gaze in the self-aware representation of her subjects, has been curated in three separate exhibitions⁹ since 2014 and includes a series of photographs critically re-depicting scenes from other artists' works called *Repetitions*. In a 2015 interview with Lucy Watson for the online edition of *Dazed & Confused* magazine, Wollen describes the theory, "propos[ing] that the sadness of girls should be recognized as an act of resistance." She explains:

Political protest is usually defined in masculine terms—as something external and often violent, a demonstration in the streets, a riot, an occupation of space. But I think that this limited spectrum of activism excludes a whole history of girls who have used their sorrow and their self-destruction to disrupt systems of domination. Girls' sadness is not passive, self-involved or shallow; it is a gesture of liberation, it is articulate and informed, it is a way of reclaiming agency over our bodies, identities, and lives. ("How girls are finding empowerment through being sad online," *Dazed Digital*)

⁹ *Venus of the Mirror Show* (2015), *Sad Girl Show* (2014), and *Profane Love Show* (2014).

Here, counter to dominant modes of thinking about the quality of being sad, Wollen claims sadness as an active experience. In direct opposition to the violence “sadness” undergoes when misread by those who inappropriately view the “sad girl” under the lens of mental health— deeming her to be someone requiring treatment, someone who must be helped—Wollen elects to reframe the term, articulating it with the language typically used to describe conventional forms of political protest. The difference between Sad Girl Theory and these more conventional forms, however, lies in how the theory encourages women to abandon “masculine terms.” Instead, Wollen suggests, women may understand their sadness not as a sign of feminist failure, but—alternatively—as something for each to make individually her own and use in the fight against patriarchal oppression.

Building on her argument in another interview, this time within the online edition of *Nylon* magazine, Wollen positions the question of the body at the center of her argument. She writes, “I’m trying to open up the idea that protest doesn’t have to be external to the body; it doesn’t have to be a huge march in the streets, noise, violence, or rupture.” When asked about the importance of acknowledging the experiences of sad girls, she underlines the significance of paying attention to what has been rendered “invisible” or passively conceived in terms of mental illness. She writes, “we still tell every girl that her sadness is individual, her own failure, her own *symptom*, and to keep quiet about it” (my emphasis). In reaction

to the isolation these externally-imposed feelings of failure result in, Wollen advocates for feminism's acceptance of the sad girl. She writes:

Instead of trying to paint a gloss of positivity over girlhood, instead of forcing optimism and self-love down our throats, sticking a Band-Aid on this gaping wound, I think feminism should acknowledge that being a girl in this world is really hard, one of the hardest things there is, and that our sadness is actually a very appropriate and informed reaction. ("Artist Audrey Wollen on the Power of Sadness," *Nylon*)

Gesturing toward the formation of community based on the principle of embracing gendered sadness, Wollen's point, that the sad girl's sadness is an appropriate and informed reaction to the social and cultural climate in which she lives, renders the sad girl's experience normal and encourages her visibility.

Ways that sad girls can make themselves visible include the practice of creating art that represents their own distinct experience of melancholy. A recent example of this kind of art is the work of Toronto-born, NYC-based photographer Petra Collins. In April 2016, Collins' work from her ongoing series of photographs displaying close-up shots of distressed young women's faces was featured in the exhibition *24 Hour Psycho*. Put on by San Francisco's Ever Gold [Projects] gallery, the process behind Collins' series is one that is unique and central to her art's meaning. According to an article on the exhibit by the *San Francisco Arts Quarterly*, her images involve active collaboration between Collins and her

subjects. Delineating the process, the article continues: “Collins works with a small group of women who take turns being photographed and acting as assistants holding lights, talking and contributing to the mood of the setting. The resulting images are the outcome of these intense sessions. Tender yet violent, they assert the value of feeling for feeling’s sake” (“Petra Collins”). In its concern for this last point, feeling for feeling’s sake, Collins’ work (directly inspired by Sad Girl Theory) reinforces Audrey Wollen’s claim of the validity of being sad. By working within the realm of art, *24 Hour Psycho* re-envisioned sadness. No longer to be hidden or understood as symptomatic of the disordered mind, sadness is recognized and honoured simply for being an embodied sensation or experience. And while this re-valuing of sadness—of feeling for feeling’s sake—is, in itself, not the form of protest that Sad Girl Theory calls for, it *is* the necessary base for which action can grow and be brought into being. By allowing themselves to be sad, to sit with their own sadnesses, girls can voice their discomfort through artistic expression and band together to revolt against the oft-unbearable external world.

Returning now to the question of how to suitably approach “Big Little,” as with the case of Petra Collins’ *24 Hour Psycho*, the careful interpretation of Becker’s account requires the dismantling of mental health logic in order to consider its meaning in terms of embodied feeling. By drawing from the work of Audrey

Wollen, I will reframe the experience of anorexia¹⁰ as a process of productive undoing instead of one of pure disorder. In addition, by reframing Becker's account of anorexia in this way, I mean to also reconsider the experience of undoing the body central to *Internal West*. By rejecting the logic of mental health in favour of the logic of embodied feeling, I will illustrate how the speaker's act of undoing is not a consequence of mental illness or disorder, but an intentional act meaning to disrupt the relation between the self and the external world through the creation of dis/embodiment.

4.2 INTROCEPTION

It is with the mention of this last point, of reversing the traditional narrative of anorexia nervosa—one that excludes the possibility for an aware and autonomous individual who actively effaces the body in order to create a protective barrier between her self and the surrounding world—that I am brought to describe the inclusion of phenomenology in therapeutic approaches to anorexia. More specifically, I would like to establish the place of introception as a useful tool in delineating the ties between the identity and lived body of the anorexic.

Introception is a concept first used in the context of phenomenological inquiry by

¹⁰ To be clear, “anorexia,” when understood in its strictest sense, refers more accurately to what the *New Oxford American Dictionary*'s third edition defines as “a lack or loss of appetite for food (as a medical condition)” (“Anorexia”). This distinguishes it from “anorexia nervosa” proper, which refers to what is defined as “an emotional disorder characterized by an obsessive desire to lose weight by refusing to eat” (Anorexia nervosa”). For the sake of brevity, unless otherwise noted, I will be using “anorexia” as a shorthand for the latter.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his essay “The Child’s Relation With Others” (“Les relations avec autrui chez l’enfant,” 1960) to refer to “the image of [one’s own] body by means of the sense of touch or of cenesthesia” (115). Using this understanding of embodiment as informed by the self’s perception of its livedness, Jordi Sanz and Ian Burkitt write against the superficially-imposed dichotomy “between anorexia as illness and lived experience” (49) and offer an alternative to the clinical therapy in their essay, “Embodiment, Lived Experience and Anorexia: The Contribution of Phenomenology to a Critical Therapeutic Approach” (2001). Aligning their perspective with that of feminist theorist Susan Bordo, Sanz and Burkitt employ introception to argue for the active nature of anorexic embodied experience.

Expanding on Merleau-Ponty’s preference for “introception” over “introspection” or self-analysis as that which necessitates identity-formation, Sanz and Burkitt preface their argument for the anorexic’s active stance, stating, “introception is the feel that we have of what it is like to live in and through our bodies and to perceive other people and things in our bodily relationship to them” (46). Understood as a feeling of being embodied or, equally, as a relationship between the self and external world, mediated by the body, introception offers changeability: if altered or impressed upon through active or passive means, introception informs the construction of the self with the alterations or impressions its structure bears. Developing a “multidimensional view of personhood through the idea of introception,” Sanz and Burkitt write:

[I]dentity is constituted around the physical body and the way in which we develop a feel for what our body is like, as sensed by ourselves and as visible to others: yet at the same time the feel and the image we develop of our body is also linked to how we learn to express ourselves symbolically within culture and the values that a culture places on certain body types, or parts of bodies. Body-image and self-image—the two must be interrelated if not identical—is to be located neither within the body, in its perceptual organs or cognitive processes, nor outside the body in culture and discourse. Instead, it is dependent on how these elements are interrelated in the course of a person's life. In this view, the meaning of the lived experience of body-image and self-image is not internal to the body, but depends on how physiology is articulated and identity is formed within the networks of social relations and practices. (46)

Here, by unpacking the concept of personal identity and exposing its constituent parts (body-image and self-image), Sanz and Burkitt demonstrate how an individual's lived experience, as informed by their introceptive feel of being embodied—of being inextricably bound up in external and social associations—is not only dependent on what messages are relayed to them by their external social and physical environments, but also by what they as individuals express. This suggests something of a feedback loop: where individuals present themselves through their body to the world as, say, athletic, they in turn receive messages

from the external world by way of reactions that reinforce or discourage this expression—and, therefore, informed understanding—of personal identity. Importantly, accompanying this expression of the athletic body and self is a whole host of value-based associations. As it stands in the West at the current moment, the athletic identity may denote self-discipline, health, purity, and—on the opposite spectrum—superficiality, dull-wittedness (i.e., the very tired “brain versus brawn” cliché), and toxic masculinity. Depending on the reception individuals are met with and how it aligns to their own expectations, the identity of the athletic individuals will alter and shift as they process the external world’s reaction to them.

In short, the relationship between the self and the world as mediated through the body is one of communication or dialogue. Forever caught in an act of interplay, the individual cannot be said to have a “false or distorted image or perception of their body.” Instead, as Sanz and Burkitt write, offering an alternative, “[w]hat we can say is that there are always some discrepancies between our own feeling of being our body and the image we develop of it, and the perceptions and images that others have of us seeing our bodily-self from another perspective” (47).

Returning to the case of the anorexic and the question of her active/intentional nature, by introducing the concept of introception, Sanz and Burkitt allows us to conceive of her experience of effacing the body as a method of altering not only her self-expression, but of altering her identity as informed by the world’s reception of her diminishing figure (not to mention the physical sensations

incurred through the process of denying oneself food). Introception, in this way, is a beneficial concept to use when analyzing Priscilla Becker's account of anorexia and the speaker of *Internal West*'s acts of undoing. By establishing the body as a mediator or form of communication, we can later reflect on how the simultaneous efforts to distance and identify the self with the body performed by Becker and the collection's speaker are intentional attempts to disrupt introception for the sake of self-preservation.

CHAPTER 5 ANOREXIA NERVOSA AND DIS/EMBODIMENT

Having now troubled the logic of mental health, considered alternative ways of viewing sadness, and established the key conceptual tool of introception, I will now proceed to interpret Priscilla Becker's 2008 essay, "Big Little." In this work, included by editor Kate Taylor in the collection *Going Hungry: Writers on Desire, Self-Denial, and Overcoming Anorexia*, Becker describes her youth and lifelong experience of anorexia nervosa, charting her relationship with bodily desire as one met by strident self-denial from an early age. Starting with the moment her anorexia made itself manifest, Becker writes in the first paragraph:

It began immediately after a comment made to me by a boy in the hall my freshman year of high school. The boy was Scott Calipari, my boyfriend. He was looking at my pelvis, squinting as though bringing something far-off into focus. He seemed to be registering an unbelievable truth: "Your thighs," he said, "they're kind of"—and here he paused—"big." (129)

Though the consequence of this initial incident might give an impression of superficiality—of an adolescent over-concern with the visual presentation of oneself—to suggest Becker's story is one that only occupies itself with surface level meaning is to seriously discredit how external receptions of the body inform personal identity. Wishing to alter this reception and, by extension, how she conceives of her self, Becker begins the act of undoing that is anorexia nervosa. Finding herself engaged over many years in rituals of restriction—of, yes, slowly

depressing the kitchen cabinet door so as to avoid sounding its “distinctive click” (130)—of, again, yes, systematically removing and somehow discarding the odd extra peanut found in the unfortunately happened upon two-peanut shell¹¹—Becker distances her sense of self from its expected home in the body and, consequently, becomes encompassed by an experience of cognitive dissonance for which she names the essay. Again, she writes:

My sense of myself can best be explained by a phenomenon that I have come to call Big Little: [Big little is] a waking dream, not quite a feeling, but an intimation of one, a sensation. It is difficult to tell if it comes from inside or out. It slips over the body, yet has form—a column—that expands and contracts, flickering, as though trying to be brought into focus. When I would try to hold it, though, as I often did (or else close my eyes and wait for it to pass), it would escape. Big Little *is* my body: *Is it big? Is it little? Does it have feeling? Will it stay?* It is as though I am approaching

¹¹ Offering an example of the kinds of rituals she engaged in during the early years of her anorexia, Becker relays to readers a scene featuring her then morning routine of eating just one of her father’s peanuts. She writes, “I would try to find a shell that contained just one peanut. Many, however, contained two. It is difficult to keep from lying about what I would do in the event of a two-peanut shell. The truth is, I don’t know. I only know I didn’t eat it.” Exemplifying how her account eschews conventional representations of anorexia, Becker complicates the memory of this incident with the following self-aware admission: “I thought about composing a paragraph about my elaborate removal of the extra peanut, my systematic ritual. But that is because I know the stories, and I am assuming you do too: the story of the cookie dissected into thirty-two equal segments, the story of the hour-long apple eating excruciation; and I am competitive and don’t want you to think I was a bad anorexic—sloppy, slack, fat” (130).

myself from a distance, almost touching down, before being quickly sucked away. (142)

Here, Becker conceives of her anorexia in terms of a paradox. Distinguishing Big Little from a feeling to describe it instead as “an intimation of one,” as “a sensation,” suggests the acknowledgment of being emplaced in a body—one informed by the physical sense of touch. And yet, as we see in the writing that follows, the relationship between Becker-as-self and Becker-as-embodied-self is much more complex. Though she presents herself as embodied, imposing distance between herself and Big Little, her then-simultaneous identification with Big Little *as* her body creates a doubling of the loci of self. Raising the question of how to reconcile these two places wherein she resides, Becker’s account of anorexia encourages readers to consider what it might mean for her to experience life *as* the in-between, *as* this new form created by undoing the self’s relation to the body whilst identifying with the body: what I term “disembodied embodiment” or, more simply, “dis/embodiment”.

CHAPTER 6 DIS/EMBODIMENT IN *INTERNAL WEST*

Before proceeding to interpretation, a quick cautionary foreword to this chapter is required. To suggest that, in addition to her essay, Becker's poetry is as equally informed by her lifelong anorexia is a reductive argument at best. As such, anorexia cannot be read into *Internal West* without its explicit mention. With that said, I have prefaced my interpretation of *Internal West* with Becker's account of anorexia because it provides us with the concept of dis/embodiment. As with "Big Little," the doubling of the loci of self proves central to the speaker's experience in many of the collection's poems. In the interpretation that follows, I will reveal how *Internal West*'s speaker continually seeks to interrupt introception via the formation of a new conception of self.

In this chapter I will investigate three poems from *Internal West*: "The Futureless Future," "Influence," and "Overture to an Hallucination," arguing how each poem represents embodiment as a fraught experience—one challenged by the speaker's feeling that her experience of the external world as mediated through her body is difficult and needs remedying. In addition, my investigations will often take into account the concept of desire, as it plays a pivotal role in these poems—often met by fervent denial, not unlike the kind of self-denial instrumental in Becker's account of dis/embodiment. In the chapter that follows, I will then undertake the main task of this project, the critical work of linking Priscilla Becker's poetry to Simone Weil's concept of decreation.

6.1 “THE FUTURELESS FUTURE”

To start, let us examine how the conflicted relationship between the self and the body reminiscent of “Big Little” reveals itself in the second poem of *Internal West*’s first section (“A.1”¹²), “The Futureless Future.” Here, in the poem’s first stanza, the speaker addresses an unknown audience to tell them that it should come as no surprise that she wishes to be passed over by the process of reincarnation. Where others seek comfort in the idea of the soul’s rebirth in a new body after death, Becker’s speaker resents the notion of being or becoming something else, stating “It would not please me to be / a dog or a blade of grass” (3-4). (Note here the third line-ending’s emphasis on “be”—gesturing toward the speaker’s later complete renunciation of living.) Contrary to the beliefs espoused by many Indian religions including Buddhism or Jainism, Becker’s speaker takes comfort in the notion of death’s finality, claiming quite frankly that she “look[s] forward to a cessation of life” (5). While the reference to forms of life traditionally considered lesser than the human body—that of a dog or a blade of grass—might suggest that the speaker’s rejection of reincarnation stems from her unwillingness to transmigrate into anything inferior to the human soma, the lines of the fourth stanza counter this impression. They follow: “You remind me that I

¹² The organization of *Internal West* is somewhat puzzling. Looking at the table of contents, the page reference to poet Richard Howard’s introduction to the work is followed by a list of the collection’s forty-nine poems divided into three separate sets: “A,” “B,” and again “A”. Within the first set of “A” there are three additional subsets indicated by spaces on the contents page and blank pages throughout the book itself. Whether this repetition of “A” and undefined use of subsets is intentional or the result of error is unclear. For accuracy, I will distinguish between the first and second “A” by incorporating Arabic numerals.

have always wanted / to be something other than myself” (6-7). In this way, the speaker suggests that her desire to be something else has somehow changed on a larger scale—one wherein she no longer wishes to be anything at all.

A number of questions arise in “The Futureless Future.” For one, who is it that reminds the speaker of her lifelong desire to be something else? Why do *they* remind her of this want of life by presenting her love of life’s different forms? Secondly, what has changed to estrange the speaker from her original desire (“to be something else”) and to instead look forward to a “cessation of life”? Admittedly, the first set of these questions cannot be answered in their entirety. The poem never formally establishes in what capacity the speaker and the “you” know each other (are they lovers? friends? enemies?). As such, our attention should instead be directed to the fact of the addressee’s reminders and what *information* is disclosed by the speaker’s response. In other words, a focus on interpreting “you” as a reference to a specific individual whose particular existence is central to the speaker’s experience is to follow a red herring—a misleading clue in our search for the poem’s meaning. For instance, it is noteworthy that the “you” “reminds [her] that [she] has always liked / to put [her] feet in the dirt” because she is reminded of her relation to the dirt, not because of her relation to the person to whom she speaks (12-13). These lines reflecting her appreciation for her sense of touch and overall relation to the external world (her introceptive experience) are followed up by another revelation—this time of how the anonymous “you” also reminds her that she has “always loved / animals” (17-

18). Again, recounted by way of the addressee's reminder, this admission of love highlights her present-perfect appreciation for the external world at large, *not* the individual who reminds her.

Answering the second question of what has changed to make her anticipate death is a bit less difficult as the speaker provides us with two hints: 1) she feels she has “been given enough time here [in existence]” (8), and 2) she has grown tired of experiencing what the external world has to offer. This last hint is given to us through her repeated suggestions that she has become bored with the worldly things she once loved. For instance, when considering the fact that she “has always liked / to put [her] feet in the dirt” (12-13), she contemplates what it would be like to be reincarnated as dirt. “But,” she counters the thought with a sense that she is already disappointed by the prospect, “would there be something other to do / than follow at your heels or cushion your [the unknown addressee's] feet?” (14-15). Similarly, when thinking about how she is reminded of her love of animals, she implies that, “perhaps” this love only seems to exist when juxtaposed with her weariness for other people (18-19).

As with the case of Becker's account in “Big Little,” the speaker of “The Futureless Future” creates a new self-conception as she seeks to interrupt the normative process of introception due to her body's ties to the outside world. While in “Big Little” Becker delineates the complexities inherent to experiencing life when the self becomes estranged from the body in the context of anorexia, the

speaker of this poem distances her self from her lived body due to her diminished appreciation for what the external world has to offer her. At the same time as she enacts distance, however, the speaker's continual state of reminiscence contains the acknowledgement that her selfhood *is* irredeemably tied to her state of embodiment—informed again and again by its lived status. In this way, as I have also demonstrated in the case of “Big Little,” a contradiction is formed: in addition to feeling removed from the external world, the speaker creates this remove at the same time that she affirms her existence, rendering her self-conception as one of disembodied embodiment or dis/embodiment. In turn, living as dis/embodiment allows her to continue her existence. She may still be uncomfortable, but she is alive nonetheless.

In terms of form, the straightforwardness of the poem's short, direct lines contrast with the speaker's cognitive dissonance: where she incites the messiness of paradox (feeling embodied and disembodied at the same time), the poem is comprised of simple statements. Notably, the complex meaning of the poem's final lines most reflects this disparity, when—in contemplating the possible benefit of becoming an animal with a fur coat—the speaker states, “I was always so cold here” (22). The deliberate use of “was”—the first person singular signifying the past of the verb “be”—on this occasion bespeaks her process of undoing embodiment. Indeed, “was” illustrates just how far removed she feels from life despite the fact that she is alive. With the use of “was” it is as if someone else is speaking about her feeling of “always” being “so cold here” in

this world. In short, as with Becker's creation of dis/embodiment via anorexic undoing, the speaker of "The Futureless Future" creates a new self constituted by her two competing conceptions of selfhood: living and dead. Only now, instead of concerns regarding the introspective relation between the self and the body in the context of anorexia, the concerns raised in "The Futureless Future" are between the self and embodiment as a form of living that has gone on past one's appreciation for existence in total.

6.2 "INFLUENCE"

Moving now to "Influence," a second poem from *Internal West*, allow me to preface my discussion of its exploration of dis/embodiment in the context of physical beauty by first describing the poem's form. The work, sixth in the second set of poems from section "A.1," is written in free verse, consistent with the lack of metrical pattern presented by most other poems in the collection. Composed of fifteen lines, "Influence" is separated into five distinct tercets. Three of these tercet stanzas do not feature end-stops and instead find their endings enjambed—stressing the importance of the words that *do* fill the final positions on each of their respective lines. The five tercets' visual neatness, later contrasted by the relative disorderliness signified by enjambment, reflects the work's exploration of beauty—suggesting that what lies beneath one's perception of physical beauty, often understood in terms of physical attractiveness as symmetry, does not necessarily correspond to the beautiful individual's inward feelings.

The first tercet of “Influence” establishes the scene in which readers may contemplate this discrepancy between internal feelings and external appearances, proposing the need for a “fairytale about a beautiful girl / who cannot see her own reflection” (2-3). Unlike “The Futureless Future,” the perspective of this poem is third-person subjective. This makes the fact of the speaker’s identity less evident, offering a contemplative distance from the “beautiful girl” in question. As we will discover in the poem’s last lines, this distance proves somewhat illusory, however, with the speaker divulging the girl’s inner thoughts about her appearance as a final word on the subject. In either case, the speaker continues on to explain how no reflective surface can re-present the image of the girl’s beauty to her: “A mirror or window or lake divulges / nothing—not shadow, neither absence” (4-5). As with the efforts of mirrors, windows, and lakes, “Suitors [also] describe / her beauty” to her, hoping that she will then be capable of envisioning it. In addition, we are told they also “draw pictures, [and] invent / compensatory glass” (10-12).

Before continuing, consider Becker’s placement of verbs in these last few examples. To be precise, consider the stress Becker’s use of enjambment places on these verbs:

A mirror or window or lake divulges
nothing—not shadow, neither absence.
[...] Suitors describe

her beauty, draw pictures, invent
compensatory glass, in which she takes
no interest...(4-5, 10-13)

By ending the lines pertaining to the reflective surfaces and suitors with the verbs “divulge[],” “describe,” and “invent,” each of these actions are underscored by their ability to produce or create. The girl, though equally autonomous, rejects their efforts and “takes // no interest” (12-13). This establishes her at the top of a hierarchy comprised of her and those people/things who wish to make her physicality self-apparent. Quickly put, where others create something for her, the girl has the final say: deciding whether she wishes to use it or not.

Contrasting the supreme interest of those who wish to reflect the girl’s beauty with her own insouciant lack of interest in their efforts evinces how little faith the girl places in their ability to re-present her. Moreover, the poem’s ending suggests that she may also simply be unconcerned with what the speaker originally classifies as an inability. Providing the girl’s perspective for the first time, the speaker tells us, “If [the girl] were asked, / and she never is, she would say she looked / very much like a sudden desire” (13-15). What does it mean for the beautiful girl to look “very much like a sudden desire”? Why conceive of oneself in this way? Returning to the concept of dis/embodiment, the answers to these questions can be determined by framing them in terms of an undoing performed by the self in its relation to the body.

When we consider what it means to look like a sudden desire, we are thinking in metaphor. Desire is a feeling, which by definition has no immediate external appearance beyond the secondary appearances relayed by the body. As such, we cannot accurately visualize it. We can however reflect on what desire feels like. *Is it, like the girl's countenance, a beautiful and thereby good feeling?* Looking to *The New American Dictionary*, the noun “desire” refers to “a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen.” Synonyms for the word include “wish, want, aspiration, fancy, inclination, [and] impulse,” which illustrates desire’s outward reach from its home in the body (“Desire,” *Oxford American Writers Thesaurus*). In this way, desire is borne of one’s recognition of absence—a concept that can only be rendered outside the realm of abstraction by way of conceiving it in terms of a relation between things that are actually present. In its nonexistence, absence is a nothing that cannot be described (meaning questions pertaining to its qualities are redundant). This makes the concept of desire something of a curiosity, because it flows from an inwardly determined nonexistence of something that could be.

Having established desire’s relation to absence, the girl’s use of the feeling as a physical descriptor for what she imagines her body to be is brought forth from what she sees in the mirror—that is, an image that is not-her, that is what lies behind her. Both occasions argue the paradox that is the presence of absence. Indeed, with the advent of absence’s presence, the girl’s final statement exposes her act of undoing: creating the self by way of thoughtful negation. To explain,

allow me to quickly recount the paradox's evolution: Though the girl cannot see her reflection, she can see the space where it should otherwise be.¹³ As this space is the only thing she can identify her image with, she internalizes it—now conceiving of her physical appearance as this conceptual absence. Her body, in this way, to her, *becomes* present absence; she is the physical embodiment of a lack. When confronted again with the mirror following this transformation, she now recognizes the reflection of absence before her. This recognition of what is not there in turn creates the image of her body as the sudden desire.

As with “Big Little,” where Becker’s anorexia is a process of undoing the body that creates the self-conception of dis/embodiment, the beautiful girl of “Influence” also creates disembodied embodiment. First, she undoes the connection between her selfhood and her body by recognizing the latter as absence, rendering it separate. But then, through her act of recognition, she simultaneously transforms her body into the image of “the sudden desire,” thus allowing her to identify with her body in its formation. This identification, in turn, enables her—like Becker—to interrupt normative introjection. Where before she was the beautiful girl whose embodied relation to the external world meant that

¹³ It should be noted that I do not intend to contradict the poem’s lines regarding how a “mirror or window or lake divulge[] / nothing—not shadow, neither *absence*” (4-5; my emphasis). Imagine if the girl were to look into a mirror or window or lake to see a literal, physical representation of absence. What might it look like? A black hole filling in the outline of her body? Perhaps. But as this literal, physical representation is, in reality, impossible, its appearance is not divulged. My point in this section is that of the girl’s internalization and self-identification of *conceptual* absence, which, in turn, makes it present, lived experience.

she could not see her own reflection, with the creation of dis/embodiment she is now to be understood as the girl who can see her reflection—only now, what she sees in the mirror is unlike what anyone else perceives her appearance to be. In retrospect, when considering the reflections other people and things created for her use, perhaps she was not uninterested in their offerings because she knew they would fail to reflect an image, but because their pursuits were redundant: she could already see it without their help.

6.3 “OVERTURE TO AN HALLUCINATION”

Now, let us consider “Overture to an Hallucination,” the last poem from *Internal West* I will interpret before bringing this discussion to its theoretical conclusion with Simone Weil. As with the case of “The Futureless Future,” this poem is written from first person perspective. Only now, the relationship between the speaker and the “you” is identifiable: the speaker is directing her words toward a past love. Beginning with a direct address to “you,” she explains how she has passed six years without being loved by “you” (1-2). In a nod to the “hallucination” belonging to the poem’s title, she tells her past love that “All appearances [of you] have been more or less / phantom” (2-3). Here, “phantom” is a metaphor used to represent how the speaker’s memories and feelings for the former lover remain despite their having left her six years ago. Using yet another metaphor, this time of employment, she explains how there is a “boy now applying for [the past lover’s] job” (3). Importantly, he is neither aware of this

“Nor how narrowly / he fills [the past lover’s] ghost” (4-5). This second use of the supernatural metaphor underscores just how entirely the speaker is possessed by her love for the past lover. Though she is at what appears to be the beginning of a new relationship with the boy, her present experience is shot through with the past. Again, this echoes the poem’s title: although “overture” generally refers to “an approach or proposal made to someone with the aim of opening negotiations or establishing a relationship,” the poem, when conceived as an overture, is directed to an “hallucination,” the impossible presence of her now absent past love (“Overture,” *New Oxford American Dictionary*).

In the poem’s second and third stanzas the speaker begins a process of hibernation. First signalling the passage of time, she relays that it is now “December and the trees are clinging to their leaves” (6). “Here we are, season number five,” she states, “like the exposed / under-science of a wish” (7-8). The “we” to whom she refers is comprised of herself and the boy, and they are about to begin their fifth season together. This fact when followed by the “exposed under-science of a wish” refers to the almost rote-like quality of the evolution of their relationship, betraying her unhappiness with it. To be clear, she is discontent because she is only going through the motions of this romance; indeed, her mind is still preoccupied with the past lover, as evidenced by his phantasmic appearances. Nevertheless, she regrets this unhappiness. As she tells her former lover: “Already I can feel myself / wasting this for sure, molding in my overcoats, / curling up my onion-skin” (8-10).

Here, expressed in terms of decomposing plant life, Becker's speaker anticipates an undoing of the self ("I") as a result of her unhappy relationship with the boy. This undoing of the self is presented through the metaphor of her rotting body, suggesting an alignment of self and body. At the same time, however, the body's use as a conscious stand-in for the self also draws attention to the body as just that: a stand-in for something else, something separate. As Ivor Armstrong Richards explains in his defining work, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), any given metaphor is comprised of two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor refers to the object of the metaphor and the vehicle refers to what this object is compared to. Indeed, "the whole task [of metaphor] is to compare the different *relations* which [...] these two members [...] hold to one another" (96; my emphasis). These relations require us to not only consider the "resemblances" between tenor and vehicle, but the "disparities" too (107-8). As such, metaphor's use as a poetic device or form of thought is an act of both division and combination from its outset. Knowing this, when thinking through the decomposition metaphor Becker's speaker establishes (the self as the tenor, the body as the vehicle), the speaker is in fact relaying to us two seemingly incongruent things at once: the self and the body as one (the metaphor) and the self and the body as separate (the constituent parts of the metaphor). As in the case of both "The Futureless Future" and "Influence," in this poem Becker presents her speaker as undergoing a process of undoing that results in the paradoxical self-conception of disembodied embodiment.

The final two stanzas confirm this existence of paradox through Becker's use of wordplay. By extending the metaphor of decomposition to hibernation (yet another feature of winter), Becker's speaker then contemplates her emergence in the spring. She tells her former lover:

[...] When I emerge, nobody looks
like me anymore. Most of all you. Or least.
Isn't it strange how either one fits?

You can do that with words, use one
for the other. (13-17)

Here, the dis/embodiment of the speaker is highlighted by Becker's use of the signifier "nobody." As an indefinite pronoun, "nobody" generally refers to "no one" or "no person." But if we undo the composition of the word, it also very plainly refers to "no body." As such, when the speaker claims that "nobody looks / like me anymore," Becker makes pun: in addition to the fact that no one resembles the speaker's physicality after she comes out of hibernation, no body matches her inward appearance anymore either—not even her own. Of greater importance to the speaker, neither does the past lover resemble her. Directing both the former lover and the poem's reader's attention to the phenomenon of paradox, wordplay is again invoked, illustrating how the inverse meanings signified by "most" and "least" can exist synonymously. In this way, the poem's final lines are

self-referential: being both a commentary on the poem whilst still being a part of it, they echo the speaker's dis/embodiment as an act of confirmation.

The speaker of "Overture to an Hallucination" enacts a process of undoing like that of Becker in "Big Little." Where Becker undoes her self-identification with the body by engaging in the corporeal-denial of anorexia nervosa, the speaker of this poem undoes her self-identification with the body by conceiving it as the vehicle of a metaphor, separate from the tenor (her self or "I"). At the same time, however, like Becker whose experience of disembodiment allows her to simultaneously align her self-conception with her body *and* Big Little (the rejection of her body), the speaker's presentation of her body as distinct from her self also speaks to how they are the same. While the dis/embodiment of Becker in "Big Little" allows her to relate to the external world in a way that means she can continue life despite her self-consciousness, the speaker's interruption of introception allows for something different. By creating dis/embodiment she can endure her relationship with the boy (though she might call this a waste, it is an easier ordeal than engaging fully in the relationship or being alone) and diminish the impossible presence of her past lover.

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Having now provided an interpretation for three separate poems of *Internal West*, I will return in this final chapter to the thought of Simone Weil and conclude this project by finally establishing the link between her concept of decreation and the process of undoing enacted time and again by Becker's speakers. First I will remind us of how the process of decreation is performed. Following this, I will extend Weil's thought from its theological origins by referring back to "Big Little" and the conceptual tool of introspection. From this vantage point, I will then be poised to present the model of secular decreation. By working backwards, this, in turn, I will argue, is the same kind of undoing we witnessed Becker's speaker perform in "The Futureless Future," "Influence," and "Overture to an Hallucination."

For Weil, decreation is the act of renouncing the self (both body and mind) in order to create something else by way of negation—to create the conditions for God's love. By virtue of this creation, the individual human spirit is revealed, containing God's image of himself. This, Weil writes, allows God to "love himself" through the individual (32). In addition to space, the emphasis of decreation is on energy—on how the process frees up individual energy from its original desired object (the self) to be directed to one of higher aspiration (God's love). Throughout this process of undoing, the problem of personal anguish arises; but, as Weil advises, the energy inherent in this anguish "should not be

wasted in oscillations and degraded” (36). Equally, neither should the energy of anguish be “oriented towards a hope.” To Weil, it is this combination of decreation’s creation of space and energy that allows for God’s love. The misguidance, interruption, or lack of either renders this process of undoing self-interested and, thus, null.

In regard to energy of anguish’s orientation, it would be a mistake to suggest that decreation is a process without intention. Though individuals are meant to be (quite literally) selfless in their decreative actions, this does not mean their actions are without aim. The pursuit, though paradoxical, is that of careening towards nothing for the sake of the greater something: the love of God for himself. Simply put, the individual who decreates, creates. And it is with this point in mind—of goal, aim, and orientation—that I return to Becker’s account of anorexia and the phenomenological tool of introception.

The first assertion of similarity between Weil’s decreation and Becker’s anorexia is clear: they are both acts of undoing, physically and mentally orchestrated via the manifest form of the body. Where Weil states, “[o]nce we have understood we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing” (34), Becker echoes this thought, explaining the early emotional development of her anorexia:

I had never shared the sense of emptiness I often heard people describe, the hollow feeling, boredom. My trouble seemed the opposite: I felt too much. I was always bursting with some

uncomfortable emotion or expression, feeling foolish and inappropriate. So instead of figuring out how to get what I wanted, I slowly figured out how *not* to want. (136-137; Becker's emphasis)

In Becker's predicament of feeling "too much," there exists the inverse identification of what she is—that is, an individual who cannot bear emotion past a particular, externally imperceptible marker. In this way, she, like Weil's individual who understands they are nothing, understands herself at this time as less than capable of feeling what she is currently feeling. And so, the object of all her efforts is to change her being, to feel and desire less in order to match her understanding of self.

This question of her efforts to become less returns us to what I discussed in chapter 3.2 on introception. Like the follower of Weil's concept, whose decreation is enacted in order to become less to create space and energy for something else, Becker's anorexia is also a process of undoing executed in the pursuit of creating space and energy for an object beyond the self's reach. However, where Weil's space and energy allow for God, Becker's space and energy result from an anti-desire: to interrupt normative introception or the normative, identity-forming relation between the world of the internal self and that of the outside world. As this relationship is mediated by the body—how individuals conceive of their physical self-representations and, conversely, how their self-image is informed by others' receptions to their bodies—Becker's

anorexia effaces the experience of embodiment in order to create the space and energy needed to feel less than she considers herself able to feel. As I have previously explained, her simultaneous identification with her self as embodied and the conception of her self produced by her experience of anorexia results in what I have called dis/embodiment. If dis/embodiment is understood as what is created out of the space and energy of anorexic effacement, Becker's act of undoing runs a secular parallel to the aim of decreation: creating space and energy by way of negation in order to achieve what is perceived to be a greater aim than the self as it stands (that is, for Weil and Becker, to completely interrupt it).

With this parallel between Becker and Weil in mind, witness how the three instances of dis/embodiment enacted by Becker's speakers in the poems "The Futureless Future," "Influence," and "Overture to an Hallucination" are further illustrations of secular decreation. On the occasion of "The Futureless Future," the speaker is caught between two distinct identities of the self, past and present. Pining for the cessation of her existence, she recognizes her corporeality, but has excised its visibility and presence by slowly beginning to distance herself from the world around her. By the time we meet her, all of her energy is directed to maintaining a comfortable stasis: reminiscing about this seemingly past life, as she is reminded time and again of those worldly things that she used to love. Like Becker in "Big Little," she identifies with the body, demonstrating her awareness of being alive by looking forward to death, and without it, too—stating, as if a phantom of the past—"I was always so cold here" (22). For the speaker of

“Influence,” by extending herself and identifying as absence, she becomes both present absence and the appearance of sudden desire. Her dis/embodiment, in this way, allows her to interrupt the forced narrative of her existence imposed upon her by the reflective surfaces and suitors of the poem. She “takes // no interest” in their stories, because they are unnecessary—she has her own (4-5). Finally, in “Overture to an Hallucination,” the speaker reveals her self-body conception as both split *and* aligned. She is indeed embodied until she begins the process of undoing enacted through thought: at first glance she is interiority connected to the external world and understood through the body (“Already I can feel myself / wasting this for sure, molding in my overcoats, / curling up my onion-skin” [8-10]), but upon second thought she is also “nobody” or—to double the word’s semantic content—no *body*. By being both, being dis/embodiment, she extends herself a hand, creating the space and energy required to continue to endure the hopelessness of her current romantic relationship.

Each of these speakers’ processes of undoing (on every occasion enacted to create dis/embodiment) are forms of secular decreation as they follow the same model of action as Weil’s decreation. For Weil the stages of decreation are of renouncing the self and allowing for the energy that comes of renunciation’s inevitable end—anguish—to be directed toward the purpose of God’s love. In a secular mode, the stages of decreation also apply to Becker’s speakers’ acts of undoing. Because the circumstances surrounding their embodied selves are too much, they undo the tie between body and self to create space and direct energy toward to the new self-

conception of dis/embodiment. This, in turn, like the decreator who interrupts self-hood to allow for God, interrupts normative introception, the speakers' former, no longer tenable relation to the world. Beyond all else, like the decreator who negatively and paradoxically creates something else for their own greater aim, the speakers of Priscilla Becker's *Internal West* undo themselves to create what is otherwise impossible—the viable life, or: the life worth living.

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