

The Myth of Syphilis

By Andrew F Giles

Moonlight narrated my first attempt at a systematic response, cruising across the flat-top mountain and “the soft lines of these hills,” down into the structure of the city. They really want me to have ideas, but I haven’t had a single one. Except this one, about my diagnosis of syphilis, and how that *might*, when arranged on a page, answer all the questions they had about me. The absurdity of my task is touched by my innate rage about two things: the first involves a lie; the second is the question of my lifelong belief, picked out of my bones, in a theory of kindness. I take a scattergun approach to both. I used to envisage alchemy — absurdity to rage to kindness — as if their histories could become untouching, rather than inseparable.

Universities are called places of touching. Little universes, with all their starlit exclusive hubs: bodies, faces, feelings, ideas, styles, commitments, understandings, backgrounds, and the physical and imagined spaces where these hubs are clustered. Think of little groups of robed druids with their backs turned. A body puts its feelers out (three suicides in the first semester) just to see what place it could be in. Is this a kinship network? Is there a painted mirror image of a comfortable and comforting self? Is this magic? Is this *what should be* — like, every definition you ever hoped to dance around, right here for the taking? You feel like you’re about to trip into the “void” — it’s on one of your reading lists. Five more minutes, your dream will finish. We all might feel like we are about to fall victim to an undefined or undefinable term. Still, I had hoped to fall in love with every little universe I came across. Absolutely central to all of this is the man (the “source”) in the cluster of bushes, with an absolutely ravishing face, who looks like he absolutely loves me. *Do you like it when I kiss you? ¡Sí!* Lying is a shared remedy. Lying is relational, touching. These are the words of a liar, where the victim puts his mouth around a brand-new monster. “I must admit on some occasions I went out like a punk | and a chump or a sucker or something to that effect,” but it felt like a game. Blame: rolling it like a boulder up a hill only to see it tumble back down, over and again.

These loving myths. These little universes. High, tripping off something that makes me feel kind, he even resembles the man who had earlier become, after only a few months, my abuser — Neil. I roll that name up the page to test its weight, too, only for it to roll back down: we’ve all had something similar happen (a girlfriend); and your relationship with your father? (psychiatrist); let me finish (him); no (me). Comforted by kindness and love when under the influence, and blind to most else. Such lives are defined by the way clusters of affection make themselves available. I still *loved* him even then, my strategy has been to publish poem after poem about him. What gets published, too, is news about the millions of dollars, pounds and other caving-in currencies that might be spent on making clustered spaces a *brilliant example of this strategy in action, with government, academia and industry collaborating to deliver future-focused training that will build on X’s growing reputation*. This is the same kind of love — what looking forward, comfort, is all about. They tell us in strange but certain language that this is what touching should be. A family hub, our intimate collaboration. “The absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future,” only the myth of the future-focused. Some pages down, the kids who kill themselves in the first semester hang from the small print.

They say: your work is *unfit for purpose*. I have taken a scattergun approach, in which Interpretation has been swept up by a Susan Sontag-shaped breeze (this is footnoted). I will not say what this thing means, in this cluster of chairs and tables, but I will say that it has a voice. It is my voice, my syphilis rotting in plain sight. I will call it an *aesthetic*, I will call it an *errant* way of thinking. I will call it a *mad* methodology. I will say that this hub has opened up some kind of portal: experience hurries out, ready to say something about the reason *why* I write, and the importance of its presence. Pain and physical proximity operate the machinery of any critique of this little universe. Two tight face-anvils and their uniforms of hair and skin hammer at the space in front of me. These are so close they are inside me, their nails clawing at my stomach-lining. They would not be doing this if they knew about my infection — although it's cured, and by a doctor! But aren't the filthy things about me so *secret* in this intimate inquisition that their most important place is in my mouth, then spilt onto the page? Instead, I say I've *lost my confidence*. I say I *am not sure what you want of me*. When experience is mythologised like this, and language fails, nothing is near the surface. Nonetheless, they absolutely can define the problem: I must write *conservatively, cleanly*. Everything I write must be *holistic* and *rigorous*. They say *don't psychoanalyse it, get on with it*. They say *we're concerned you look agitated — you're speaking too loud*. My professors — my family — won't touch me anymore.

They apologise for cross posting, cross contaminating my e-mail feed with anything remotely kind or without political agenda. This experience makes me hate myself: my myth is so utterly convinced of itself, it covers my body like an ocean. You can forget about *experiment*, they say. You can find pastoral care on our website.

These faceless people: their myths are hidden to me — lacking in the same kind of rigour. But I can experiment. I can imagine. I can wish for them the *thing behind their eyes*, that must also glint on the faces of their books — where “there was something in the background, something that watched us.” Somewhere deep in the etymology of the verb to ‘hang’ is the Sanskrit word *sankate* — when something wavers. Three wavering bodies, undecided, still, about their own definitions, but nonetheless forming the hinges of a dark new cluster. Distant from the bright conservative world of the new institution, whose self-proclaimed valuable thinking watches us all. It watches us from the faces of books, pronouncing knowledge — a dangerous euphemism for violence. It is the language of dissembling and dissonance, the art of mind-ness. It is the world's *best wishes*, its *kind regards*. It is protection, meaning damage. It is the father of every little suicide performed behind the backs of each cluster. Within these clusters, everything must have its own rules — their own drum-tight gatherings of understanding.

By scrying inside these ancient clusters, exclusion *itself* is revealed as a theory of kindness. They died so we can live — with a \$300 million future-focused closed complex, and pastoral care on the website. “Carbon dioxide: they call it pollution. We call it life,” say the climate “realists.” We're doing this to help you — we have been good intellectual mentors to you, and you must give something similar back to the institution. *Neil has been a great friend to me over the years*, inserted on social media by a machine-memory. Your realism is a late diagnosis, we'll need to do some tests. We build the wall to keep us free.