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Anxious Reading: Eric Michaels’s *Unbecoming*

Ill people whose unaccommodating behavior earns them the reputation of being “difficult patients” are a trial to their caregivers and friends. There is a sense, though, in which the practices of AIDS witnessing, to the extent that they represent a refusal to give up and go quietly from the scene (as so many would like AIDS “victims” to do), function as a social correlative of the refractory performance turned in by so-called difficult patients. In its very title Eric Michaels’s AIDS diary signals its project of making “the writing of AIDS” a site in which “unbecoming,” as the disintegration of an individual body and the disappearance of a person—the death of an author—can become an occasion for the production of social discomfort through an equally unbecoming rhetorical performance. The purpose and effect of Michaels’s writing is to deprive readers who, as survivors, may be prone to believe themselves unaffected by the epidemic of any possibility of equanimity or complacency, by putting them under something like the stress suffered by the friends of a difficult patient. The text thus offers an opportunity to reflect on AIDS witnessing as it is modeled by the difficult patient performance and to examine the rhetorical stakes of such an exercise in unbecoming(ness).

Peter Hujar, in *Close to the Knives*, is described by David Wojnarowicz as a difficult patient (see “Living Close to the Knives” 84–110). Wojnarowicz tells, for example, how he and a friend, Anita, drove Peter to Long Island to consult a quack doctor offering a miracle cure for AIDS. Peter is too weak to take the train, as he threatens to do, and so is completely dependent on his friends’ help, yet he behaves abominably, complaining that there must be a faster way to get there when there isn’t, insisting on stopping on the freeway to pee, refusing to be touched although he can’t get out of the car without assistance. “‘Don’t touch me.’ ‘Peter, I have to touch you to help
you out. ‘Don’t touch me it hurts’” (91). The painful journey winds up with a meal in a diner:

He barely touched his food, staring out the window and saying, “America is such a beautiful country—don’t you think so?” I was completely exhausted from the day, emotionally and physically, and looking out the window at the enormous collage of high-tension wires, blinking stoplights, shredded used-car banners, industrial tanks and masses of humanity zipping about in automobiles just depressed me. The food we had in front of us looked like it had been fried in an electric chair. And watching my best friend dying while eating a dead hamburger left me speechless. I couldn’t answer. Anita couldn’t either. He got angry again. “Neither of you would know what I’m talking about . . .” Finally I said, “Peter, we’re very tired. Let’s go home.” (98)

At home Peter withdraws to his bed and angrily dismisses his friends. “Later, talking on the telephone with Vince, I heard that Peter had talked with him minutes after Anita and I had left his house and Peter said, ‘I don’t understand it, they just put me in bed and rushed out’” (99). For the patient exasperation arises from a kind of nec tecum nec sine te [neither with nor without you] relation to his friends, who are both indispensable and a constant reminder of his loss of independence and agency; for the friends anxiety arises from being put in a perpetual double bind, their help being required but simultaneously dismissed as inappropriate. I want to redescribe that dynamic, in what follows, as the rhetorical interaction that generates the situation I call “anxious reading.”

The point of Unbecoming, in the first instance, is to give an account of why Eric Michaels, in life, felt constrained to adopt the persona of the difficult patient as well as to transcribe that role into the writing of his dying. Trained as an anthropologist and having worked for five years among people (the Warlpiri) who, like many Australian Aboriginal groups, name individuals according to their classificatory social position and understand identity in terms of responsibility for the preservation of specific cultural information (stories, songs, designs, rituals, including the maintenance of sacred sites), he was professionally predisposed to understand individual
biography as socially significant. To be gay, therefore, as gayness has been lived in Western countries since Stonewall, is, for Michaels, to occupy a social position of oppositionality, and to be infected with AIDS in 1987 is to be under attack from the social forces—not solely homophobia but a range of pressures toward conformity, orderliness, and homogeneity—to which open and “liberated” gayness is an affront. AIDS is, so to speak, in alliance with those forces, and it is the PWA’s duty, therefore, to fight back for as long as he lives and, if possible, to ensure—since it is social issues, not individual destinies, that are at stake—that resistance is carried on beyond the death of the individual sufferer. In that way, although AIDS destroys individuals, the more important factor of social resistance will be preserved. The function of the diary, therefore, will be to provide evidence of Michaels’s personal refusal to accept victimhood and to go quietly but also to ensure the continuance of the spirit of recalcitrance his battle represents in the future society of which Michaels, as a person, will no longer be a member.

But out of such reasoning comes, for Michaels as a writer, a kind of nec tecum nec sine te relation toward the social persona he attributes to himself and the social agency he wishes the diary to enjoy: without it he dies absolutely, and the spirit of resistance disappears, but with it his personality and individual agency count for nothing. The difficult patient role he adopts could plausibly be read as an attempt to resolve this tension: a classificatory identity in the disciplinary society of the hospital (and beyond) but one that individualizes the patient as one who has too strong a personality to blend into the crowd. But the tension surfaces also in the form of what Michaels calls paranoia. For what exactly justifies an individual in the view that significant social forces are doing battle in his person? The general view seems to be to the opposite effect, and such “paranoia” therefore functions as an uncomfortable confirmation of the patient’s individual status, holding views that make him the only one out of step. The diary as difficult patient performance—inevitably an irrational rhetorical position to occupy—thus comes to coexist with the diary as a site of informal, but rational, social analysis, designed to prove the proposition that individual positions are socially constituted and that the difficult patient’s irrational oppositionality is not just a sign of individual craziness, therefore, because it is socially justified. Michaels, in this way, is keeping paranoia at bay. For the
reader, however, all this translates into the paradox that, in a book that lays claim to purely social agency, a voice speaks that is recognizably and inimitably personal: the supposedly “social,” rhetorical subject is that of an unusually vivid (and likable) performance of “personality,” the performance of a difficult patient who is not altogether comfortable in his role.

But on the side of reading an anxiety is thus generated, or can be generated, that corresponds symmetrically to paranoia and the struggle against paranoia, on the side of writing. For, in responding in this way to the voice of Michaels’s personality is it not possible, and indeed probable, that I am simultaneously betraying the social agency the text is anxious to exercise and of which, now that the author is dead, I as its reader have become the bearer? But equally, in realizing the text as a social agent only (supposing I could do that), would I not be displaying culpable indifference to the death of the individual author, on whose disappearance the purely social identity of the text depends? To realize the text as an agent of social oppositionality, independent of the individual personality of the author that speaks in it, would be an act of complacency equivalent to the social delinquency of failure to mourn the dead.

This particular difficulty, of being able to read legitimately neither for purely social significance nor for personality, corresponds, I want to suggest, to a more general definition of the double bind that is normally and definitionally placed on readers, who are required, by the death of the author in its theoretical sense, to realize textual significances that transcend authorial intention and control but can do so only under limits of positionality that make reading comparable to an interpersonal communication. But it also suggests that the anxiety of reading is a function, in the long run, of the essential paradox of culture, which is that human beings are its agents in a double sense: without our agency, as persons, there is no transmission or production of culture, yet culture works through us, as its agents, in ways we can neither fathom nor control, to produce a history that makes a mockery of all individual claims to the privilege of agency. Michaels’s text, with its authorial paranoia, on one side, and the readerly anxiety it produces, on the other, might be viewed in this light as a singularly self-conscious enactment, in the mode of worry, of this paradox of culture and the problematic it generates of the relation of individuals to history.
But for now, and in this context, it is the symmetry of the rhetorical relation of authorial paranoia and readerly anxiety that I want to stress: to the *nec tecum sine te* of writing corresponds the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” of reading. This symmetry signals a difference between the imaginary of representation and communication that is at work in *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* and *Silverlake Life*—which include a transcendental dimension in their figuring of communication across death and writerly survival through reading—and Michaels’s vision of the ability of essential social relations to survive the death of persons and hence of writing and reading as purely discursive phenomena. Such phenomena are without transcendence, but, governed by a rhetoric that reproduces something of the agonistics—of ordering and resistance to order—that defines Michael’s view of social relations in general, they are traversed also by an anxiety about the relation of the personal to the social that derives from the cultural paradox. His figure for the passage that marks the difference, bounded by the author’s death, between writing and reading is therefore not a figure of other-worldly visitation, involving spectral imagery or zooming, but, as I’ve said and as it will be necessary to explore at much greater length, an extended tongue—the protruding tongue, marked by the writing of AIDS in the form of cancerous lesions, in the photograph of the dying author that serves as a frontispiece to the volume.

Such an image is a figure of connection, representing the power of discourse to survive the death of its authorial subject in order to remain rhetorically active in the world of those who survive. But it is also a figure of impudence, recalcitrance, and resistance, representing the power of that discourse to survive as an act of social provocation capable of unsettling the survivors, its readers. The greatest danger, for a resisting text, is that it survive its author’s demise only to be read complacently, in a way that fails to realize its resistant potential and so confirms the victory of the ordering forces that are responsible, in the form of AIDS, for the death of the author. The necessary unsettling of the reader is figured, therefore, by the provocatively outstretched tongue. But reading—this is an axiom I’ve already alluded to and to which I will return—cannot fail to fall short of the textual demands that are made of it and so can’t fail to confirm the author’s death and hence the power of social order to contain resistance—and that is, I suggest, another reason for the dying author’s last gesture to
be a defiant one, but an act now of personal defiance, in the face of the inevitable loss of individual agency that will result from his death.

In the end, then, it is the reality of an individual’s death that must be faced, given the strictly immanent character of Michaels’s view of things: it is that reality that haunts both authorial paranoia and readerly anxiety and makes the scenario of survival to which Unbecoming (nevertheless) subscribes a singularly dubious one. Ultimately, the symmetry between the side of writing and the side of reading in communication, the mirror image each form of worry presents to the other, derives from the fact that the death of the author, which defines the entry of a text into the moment of reading, is also and already—indeed always already—palpable in the moment of writing, understood as the site where the rights of the personal surrender to those of the social, in the form of textuality. And AIDS can thus become the sign both of that unbecoming into writing, figured by the disintegration of the individual body, and of the reality of death as it (pre-) occurs in life. Not so much a disease in itself as the precondition for the attack of opportunistic diseases of variable severity, ranging from the “merely” incommoding and humiliating to the life threatening, it is, as Michaels puts it, “the disease of a thousand rehearsals” (139/94), and the rehearsals are rehearsals for death. And because, for Michaels, it is one manifestation of a general feature of social existence that he finds oppressive, it joins forces with a host of other contingencies, ranging from the “merely” irritating to the debilitating, to signify the preposthumous presence of death in the AIDS sufferer’s life: “It’s the specificities that wipe us out in the end” (156/106). It becomes easy, therefore, at certain moments, for the sufferer to imagine he is already dead: “I’m starting to have this odd sense of being at my own funeral. [. . .] I lie in bed feeling like I’m peering out of my own coffin” (146/99). So that his life prior to death comes to mirror, symmetrically, an experience of postmortem survival.

Under such dire circumstances two reactions are possible. One is the thought of suicide, the simple desire to give up and abandon the struggle to resist. The other is the opposite: to take advantage of the similarity of the preposthumous condition of living with AIDS as a dying subject of writing and the posthumous condition of having died into readability from AIDS, in order to bring about a certain continuity of survival, between the author resisting death and the text that will go on, after his death, to resist the social forces for which AIDS
stands. This, in Michaels’s telling metaphor, becomes a matter of “stage-managing” one’s death, with a clear implication of rhetorical performance and indeed of calculation for a particular effect. For dying of AIDS and the writing of one’s dying require management so as to produce the effect of “resistance,” to the extent that they function as a denial of the urge to give up and to submit to death, which would be a kind of suicide. And one stage-manages one’s dying, then—and the writing of one’s dying—so as to stage-manage one’s posthumous existence, as the difficult patient who dies living on, by virtue of a fractious journal, in the form of a socially effective text of resistance.

The difference between the two phases seems minimal, just the little matter of the author’s actual death, which is already such a palpable reality in his preposthumous existence. Thus, on May 28, 1988, in a moment of severe discouragement, Eric Michaels wrote:

I’m sure death itself is the simplest thing in the world. The choice seems merely to be this: to arrange everything, to maintain a morbid fantasy of control, or to simply give up and let go. The latter looks to me more and more appealing.

But the existence of the diary, of course, with its final entry dated August 10, 1988, just two weeks before the author’s death supervened on August 24, is testimony to the strength of his commitment to “the morbid fantasy of control.” And my reading of it, already some years after his death, is evidence that, whatever “control” might actually signify in this circumstance (which is the question my essay turns on), Michaels’s fantasy was not a pure illusion.

That fantasy, of controlling a certain posthumous survival, subtends all the thinking about genre in Unbecoming and all the speculation about publishing, finding, and reaching a readership—the definitional question of conceiving an AIDS diary [written for whom? and from what position? following which models? in relation to which adjacent genres?] and the closely related pragmatic question of turning a supposedly intimate and personal genre [the private diary] into an agency of witness, capable of exerting significant social effect. Taken together, these concerns do not only form a new area of worry in the text, one that links authorial paranoia to readerly anxiety by
speculating about how to effect that link. Michaels’s thinking and questioning also amount to the most extended reflection I know of on what is at stake in the writing of AIDS, understood as the “stage management” of an author’s death in the interests of a politics of resistance, that is, as a double act (pre- and postmortem) of witness that is an “act” in a double sense: an action whose effect is dependent on facticity.

The undeviating principle running through these reflections is the desire to convert, through the stage management that is representation, a form of defeat—the unbecoming of an author afflicted with AIDS and beset by social hostility—into the possibility not, of course, of victory or triumph but of continued resistance (that possibility being itself a kind of victory). Under what conditions of stage management, through what writerly agency, can a tale of disintegration become an unbecoming social gesture, the rhetorical equivalent of poking out one’s tongue in the reader’s face? When, in the opening sentences of his first entry (Sept. 9, 1987), Eric Michaels describes his recently appeared lesions as “morphemes” and imagines stringing them together into sentences that would form a story—“a narrative trajectory, a plot outline” (23/3)—we can suppose, then, that the story he has in mind is the story framed by that question: the conversion of his personal unbecoming into something more durably and productively, because rhetorically, unbecoming.

Let us begin by noting the presence in Unbecoming of an intermittent poetics of lamentation, which can be read as a kind of stylistic harking back to very ancient historical strata: those of a certain Jewish tradition, biblical and diasporic, of survival—and of survival under the direst of circumstances. But it also has overtones of queenly “bitching” and perhaps even of what, in Australia, is known as “whingeing.”

I’ve been ragged and paranoid all week. Fevers and sweats coming and going and some odd lung thing that’s scary. My tumours itch and seem to be developing psoriatic complications or something. It’s been raining as long as I can recall; everything is mould, mould, mould. The kitchen is filled with flying weevils. The toilet is backed up. My neighbour has taken up the saxophone and tries to play hits from The
Sound of Music all day. I can’t sleep and can’t do anything but. I wake up repeatedly in the middle of the night with the horrors. I don’t even want to call anybody. I have no interest in working and I haven’t even been pursuing my immigration business responsibly. My physician seems to have deserted me. My conviction that the world I perceive corresponds to anybody else’s is slipping. Maybe I died in November and this is some awful postmortem fantasy I inhabit now? (118–19/80)

I don’t quote this passage as characteristic (the book is very varied in subject matter and style, containing passages of social analysis, autobiographical reflection, and academic polemic as well as, or as part of, its reporting from the AIDS front). I quote it as indicative. The world Eric Michaels inhabits is purely immanent [no butterflies or cats à la Guibert or Joslin]; it is hostile and debilitating; and the appropriate response elicited by distressing contingencies does not entail displays of heroism in the stoic mode or rhetorical discretion and a sense of pudeur. Instead of serene courage or restraint, what gets displayed with some ostentation, through rhetorical devices of accumulation and excess, is worry and paranoia, even a certain self-pity [mitigated by humor], and a spirit of complaint. A whole heap of particularities, from scary symptoms to weevils in the kitchen and an irritating neighbor, weigh on the protesting spirit and motivate perfectly unjust accusations [the physician’s alleged defection], depression and apathy [failure to look after important business], a sense of isolation and incipient madness [the discrepancy between subjective vision and that of others], and morbid fantasy (“Maybe I died in November . . .”), and these in turn furnish further subjects of complaint.

The refusal one can see here of any mitigating or idealizing vision, although it is itself anything but serene, is in line with Michaels’s dismissal, in another place, of the sentimental in the name of what he calls first principles: “At least one reason for publishing this journal is to counter the sentimentalised narrative that seems to be all that San Francisco has been able to produce about this sequence; and to reconfirm first principles” (144/97). I don’t know what the target of the San Francisco jibe is, but the passage requires us, therefore, to attempt to elucidate the first principles that lie behind its unwillingness to sentimentalize the experience of AIDS.
and why the AIDS crisis requires them to be reconﬁrmed. I’ll stress the way these principles can be thought to be performed in the passage’s rhetoric, understood as a mode of resistance that is embodied in the persona of its speaker, “ragged and paranoid” as he may be. Indeed, it is the relation between lamentation and paranoia, and the sense in which both relate to resistance, that I particularly want to try to understand.

Michaels’s ﬁrst principles, as I’ve already in fact suggested, are three in number, and each requires an unsentimental approach: there is a principle of immanence, a principle of resistance, and a principle of continuity or survival. Not only is the world a hostile place and AIDS a dire afﬂiction, but there is no beyond. Any “postmortem” life will therefore be ﬁgurative—“some awful [. . .] fantasy I inhabit now,” the sense that AIDS produces, as “the disease of a thousand rehearsals” (139/94), of having outlived oneself and of experiencing death while still alive. Or, if it is genuinely posthumous (the author’s death being not fantasy but reality), it can only entail survival in a strictly immanent sense, that is, in the form of mourning as a matter of social practices and arrangements for dealing with the death of a member of society, including the disposition of property and (of particular interest to Michaels) of intellectual property: the survival in collective memory of a textual and social “self.”

The second and third principles therefore entail the necessity, short of giving up, going under, and abandoning meaningful forms of survival, to “stage-manage [one’s] own posthumosity” (152/103), ensuring by this means that there will be some survival of the will to resist, some continuity between the grievously assailed subject of pre-posthumous postmortem experience and the social participant a text can be as a posthumous survivor of its author’s actual death—in other words, between a certain performance of unbecoming and an unbecoming social performance. I submit that the rhetoric of the passage I just quoted—its inspired kvetching, its performance of exasperation—is part and parcel of the stage management of that double (present and future) “posthumosity.”

In this project, as I’ve also already proposed, the ability to stage-manage [a recurring metaphor in Unbecoming] is clearly crucial: a certain factitious rhetorical performance is the only alternative [short of suicide] to the depredations of AIDS and the forces it is aligned
with, that is, to the threat of being reduced to such a degree of passivity that there will be no spirit of resistance to survive posthumously. That is why it is important, in the lamenting passage, which in its énoncé seems to record a sense of defeat, for us as its readers to catch [in the énonciation] the tone—a bit campy, humorous, and wry—that indicates a surviving resistant subjectivity and produces Michaels, as subject of his writing, as anything but a defeated figure, despite the Jobian list of ills that beset Michaels the PWA. But because paranoia names in the text the sense of isolation, as well as the excessive rhetoric, that also characterizes such a resisting subject (“My conviction that the world I perceive corresponds to anyone else’s is slipping”), it is helpful also, in understanding the passage’s embattled tone, to have some understanding of the circumstances that nourished the historical Eric Michaels’s “paranoid” vision of a situation that anyone would have to agree was objectively dire.

A United States citizen, he was dying in semi-isolation in Brisbane (Australia), a city that came to represent for him the worst of everything that he was facing. As an active participant in the New York gay liberation movement in 1969–72, he was now “without direct involvement in the gay world” (79/43); for five years (1982–87) he had been closely involved, as an anthropologist, in the life of the Warlpiri community at Yuendumu (Central Australia). There was thus a double contrast with his Brisbane life, in which he felt “comparatively alone” and “minimally connected” (55/26). On the evidence of the diary itself he had the support of numerous relatively distant friends but could rely on little on-the-spot help. He seems furthermore to have been virtually estranged from his “crazy” family in the United States and concludes bleakly, at one point, that “if my family is to take any major responsibility for my care, we will have to invent that family” (74/39). It would not be surprising, under such conditions, if the daily aggravations of a life in which nothing ever seemed to go right—a common perception, I know—but also some less common difficulties, such as the bureaucratic harassment of an Immigration Department intent on deporting him and the disciplinary regime or “Foucauldian horror show” (25/4) of the hospital, began to loom very large and very discouragingly: whence the bitter conclusion finally expressed toward the end that “it’s the specificities that wipe us out in the end” (156/106). Paranoia, or more accurately
the suspicion of being paranoid, would have reinforced that discouragement by adding a sense of mental isolation to the social and geographical isolation of the sufferer.

But, as we’ve seen (it is a matter of first principle), giving up is itself tantamount to being wiped out, an acceptance of the likelihood of disappearing without trace, and one must therefore not give up, even if one’s resistance is reduced to lamentation, that is, to complaining about one’s impotence and inability to resist. And in that context paranoia can become an unexpected ally, because in an odd way paranoia itself, together with the ability to worry about being paranoid, confirms not only one’s isolation but also one’s status as a resisting subject. One needs to resist because one feels threatened, but the very fact of feeling threatened—whether it is a paranoid belief or not—guarantees one’s difference with respect to the unsuspicious norm of social beings, and thus grounds one’s fear and need to resist. Furthermore, paranoid anxiety and anxiety about one’s possible paranoia are themselves, in the end, indistinguishable. As Michaels points out (61/30), the very question: “am I paranoid?” which sounds like a manifestation of rationality, is already a paranoid question, while, as Freud was aware, there is no reliable way to distinguish paranoia, as delirium interpretandi, from legitimately suspicious (social or) psychoanalytic theorizing. In the end, then, it is the anxiety itself that qualifies the resister, so that resisting threat, worrying about being paranoid, asserting the situation of danger one believes oneself to be in, and producing reasoned justifications for such assertions all turn out to be part of a single continuum of suspicious[ly] self-defensive behavior, which might in the end be no more than a sign of simple good sense. Paranoia asks undecidably: is it just me, or do they really want to kill me? It asserts the indissolubility of private terrors and social realities.

So, in Unbecoming one encounters assertions that certainly sound paranoid enough: Michaels describes his position as a PWA as “a way of dying which I, but maybe only I, believe has elements of murder” (53/25), and adds later, without the carefully restrictive clause but with a parallel acknowledgment of possible illusion: “I feel they can smell me now, like an injured member of the pack. . . . And they go for me, the sons of bitches, they go for the throat” (60/30). “I’m again impressed,” he writes again of the same hospital—clearly his model for the whole social world—“with how the place [. . .] tries
to enforce passivity (unto death, I dare say) so that to get any work done I have to work around and against the realisation that I’m in a place that wants to kill me (even as my doctors—some of them—try to save me)" (147/99). But one also reads an elaborate social analysis that underpins and accounts for Michaels’s vision of the world in general, and the hospital in particular, as hostile, drawing out the sense in which the disciplinary world of “Foucauldian horror show” can be understood as life threatening: a site of preposthumous experience that needs now to be represented not just as a living death (which suggests passivity) but as an extended murder—the experience of being actively, if slowly, killed and of having therefore, not only to resist but to keep up one’s resistance over a long period of time. And consequently, when Michaels writes to a friend, in almost coldly theoretical terms, that “the hardest part [of being in hospital] really is maintaining resistance to the institutional discourses of the public hospital system so as to retain some dignity, assurance and self-definition” (141/95), the sentence can be taken equally to support statements of the type “I’m in a place that wants to kill me” and lengthy passages of plausible social analysis that draw connections between Foucauldian disciplinarity and modes of ultimately lethal oppression.

Paranoid anxiety and anxiety about paranoia, including defensive demonstrations that paranoia is not involved, thus join forces as essential constituents of a discourse of resistance. In the passage of lamentation I began with, both anxieties are present, one in the long list of distressing contingencies, the other in the anxious observation “My conviction that the world I perceive corresponds to anyone else’s is slipping.” And they are coterminous in the opening sentence, “I’ve been ragged and paranoid all week,” which (in its énoncé) acknowledges the anxiety of paranoia as real, while the fact of its enunciation implies self-diagnosis from a supposedly nonparanoid, or rational, position. Lamentation is thus motivated by paranoid perceptions of the world as unconditionally hostile but includes paranoia as one of the things it is necessary to lament and hence as part of the hostility lamentation attempts to resist. And resistance to AIDS has a similar and similarly anxious structure: it is motivated, in paranoid fashion, by the excessive significance it accords a disease understood to embody a fearsome social phenomenon—the fact of oppression—while it takes the form of a social diagnosis intended to dispel the
judgment “I am paranoid” but only by justifying theoretically the fear and sense of threat originally thought paranoid.

I think the difficult patient’s performance that Michaels adopts in and out of hospital, and embodies also in his diary as a rhetorical performance, can be best understood as a product of the kind of anxiety, the anxiety of resistance, conveyed by the lamenting passage and as a way of giving each component—social, individual, paranoid, nonparanoid—of resisting discourse its due. To be a difficult patient is an alternative to paranoia, since it corresponds to a known and acknowledged, and so legitimate, category in the orderly and ordering world of the hospital, itself metaphoric of the AIDS patient’s world in general. But it registers a distinctly paranoid response to that world, viewed as a place where it is natural to assume that, rather than healing me, they want to kill me. And the difficult patient embodies, like paranoia itself, the problematics of resistance to the social when the resister is socially constituted and thus occupies a social “slot”: on the one hand, why resist? but, on the other, how to do anything else than resist? Measured against the weight of the social, resistance is a role to be played and a rather desperate one—the role of the “individual” and a matter of “stage-management.” Yet it is itself nothing other than a social role, the role of resister, which means that it is experienced simultaneously as the deepest urge of one’s personality. Why, similarly, should a gay PWA resist AIDS, when it is so easy to go under? Because resisting is what gayness, as a social phenomenon, is all about. In that sense the gay PWA has no option but to be a difficult patient.

Michaels’s anxiety of resistance has generic implications that it is also necessary for us to consider, since it is genre that organizes the interactions of text and reader. In general terms AIDS diaries, while their “storylessness” is well adapted to the temporal experience characteristic of AIDS as a syndrome (its day-by-dayness, intermittency, and unpredictability), are less obviously welcoming to the narrative of resistance and survival that underlies the project of AIDS witness, and the adaptation of the diary as a private journal of self-examination to the purposes of witnessing has thus led to a range of generic solutions. In some cases (Barbedette) the diary is published as a Nachlass, fragments found among the author’s papers; more self-consciously, Pascal de Duve frames his account of the sublimity of being “writ-
ten” by HIV as a *journal de bord* or seagoing log, activating the poetics of voyaging. Video makers, to judge by the examples of Guibert and Joslin, turn spontaneously to the “home movies” model (as opposed, e.g., to the documentary). Pioneers of the genre, writing like Michaels relatively early in the epidemic and with some sense of cultural isolation, are perhaps particularly exercised by such questions: Alain Emmanuel Dreuilhe, writing in New York a text in French that was published in Paris in 1987, makes obsessive reference to war movies and military history for the model of combativity toward the virus his diary seeks to respect and enact. And Eric Michaels, who found the diarists available to him as models (Joe Orton, Anne Frank, Anaïs Nin) unhelpful, turns—perhaps for reassurance?—to familiar generic models: the legal model of the will and the, to him, habitual academic model of the position paper. The will responds to anxiety about the survival of his text, given in particular that, “as far as I can tell, I have only intellectual property to dispense” (32/10), while the principle of (paranoid) resistance implies that his document—diary and will—will also be a sort of manifesto, or *prise de position*.

These two generic responses, furthermore, are allied in that each constitutes the defense of a “position” that is experienced as threatened. The position paper responds to and simultaneously enacts the anxiety associated with paranoia, the fear that they want to kill me associated with the fear that the fear that they want to kill me is a paranoid fear. The will responds to the threat to survival, and specifically intellectual survival, that is represented for Michaels, as the position paper explains, not only by AIDS as a terminal disease but also by the set of oppressive social forces that AIDS is aligned with. It is against these forces that the will asserts an authority borrowed, in Benjamin’s phrase, from death and hence stronger than any lethal force: the legal “last will and testament” is indeed the prime case of such discursive authority. But it does so here under particular circumstances that, in Michaels’s (possibly paranoid?) perception, singularly jeopardize the recourse to such legal authority and require his will not only to guarantee the survival of his intellectual property but also to consist itself of an intellectual demonstration: “My will, it seems, will be a position paper” (32/10). In the end the will and the position paper are inseparably linked, then, indeed indistinguishable, because for the diary to have the character and function of a will (enjoying postmortem authority) it needs to combat threatening
social forces through an analysis that both justifies resistance to them and constitutes an example of such resistance. But, to such general insecurity about the present and future status of his writing, Michaels’s status among the Warlpiri of Yuendumu added a particular twist that can be seen to overdetermine his recourse to the diary as will and the will as position paper.

As a principled anthropologist, he had accorded the Warlpiri people among whom he worked rights of veto over the publication of his writing so that they could oversee its accuracy and appropriateness. But the Warlpiri, among whom Michaels had earned an identity (including a classificatory name) as a member of the community, are like most Aboriginal groups in their social response to death. They “maintain elaborate, protracted mourning ceremonies. As dramatic as these are, they involve a contradiction in that, upon death, an individual’s property, image, even name, must be obliterated. [. . .] Songs and designs belonging to the deceased exit the repertoire, sometimes for generations” (31/9). Suppose, then, Michaels worries, that the Warlpiri insist, after his death, on the obliteration of his diary and with it all hope of survival for his project of social resistance? An ugly argument over the illustration of an article on Warlpiri art, in the journal Art & Text, which members of the community wish to censor because it includes phallic graffiti, supervenes later [101–3/59–61, 105/62, 109/64] to suggest that a Warlpiri ban on Unbecoming is not an implausible eventuality. The problem poses an interesting cultural question, one of those radical contradictions between Western and Aboriginal law that are (especially for the Aboriginal minority) a frequently lived reality in Australia. But the point of affirning Unbecoming’s status as a kind of will, then—a document for which Warlpiri culture obviously has no place and so automatically subject to Western jurisdiction—is clearly to ensure, in the first instance, the material survival of this piece of “intellectual property,” as a first but indispensable step in its eventually reaching, and affecting, a readership. “I am not, nor have I ever imagined myself to be, a Warlpiri Aboriginal,” Michaels carefully records (32/10), with an eye to future legal determinations (and an implicit allusion to the McCarthy hearings).

But, of course, an anxiety remains, since there is genuine ambiguity, if only because a will is meaningless in Warlpiri terms. And the ambiguity is reinforced because the Warlpiri involvement in the Art
Text incident shows some of them to be sensitive to what Michaels calls a Tidy Town mentality. This derives in his account, via Christianity, from the white Australian mentality of tidiness—figured by Brisbane and exemplified by the hospital—that Michaels believes is destroying him and about which more will be said soon. For, will or no will, there is thus some real danger of an alliance of interests against the publication of Unbecoming after his death, which is why it becomes essential for the diary, in addition to its function as a will but also so as to ensure that it enjoys that function, to incorporate a position paper. It is indispensable for it to identify in advance and to critique, and hence to attempt to forestall, the dangers of the tidying mentality that, whether on the Warlpiri side or the white Australian side, or on both, threatens the diary’s survival and “posthumosity.”

It is fair to assume that homosexuality, and hence homophobia, lie at the heart of this whole issue. Michaels could scarcely have been “out” to the Warlpiri without prejudicing his work with, for, and among them: his death from AIDS and the diary’s frankness about his sexuality could not fail to come as a shock in Yuendumu. At the same time, gayness as a social manifestation is, in his analysis, an emancipatory movement that, since the time of Stonewall, has been counteracted and virtually destroyed by repressive tendencies that are identified in his thinking with tidiness, on the one hand, and AIDS, on the other (AIDS is an agency of orderliness tidying disorderly social manifestations like gayness out of existence). Michaels understands his gayness, therefore, as a social persona that was culturally defined, in this context, by the appearance in 1969 on the social scene of a “public rather than a private form” of homosexuality [28/7], that is, of liberationist gayness as opposed to closeted homosexuality, understood as a regrettable deviance. (He appears not to have taken into account the sense in which the closet is itself a social institution.) By the same reasoning, the Eric Michaels who in 1987 has begun to display the symptoms of AIDS (“I watched these spots on my legs announce themselves over a period of weeks” [23/3]) is similarly a social entity (“this is why I have AIDS, because it is now on the cover of Life, circa 1987” [29/7]).

Or, more accurately, he has become a divided social entity, a site of struggle between opposed forces, his resistance to the disease and all it signifies—those general forces of repression with which it is in alliance—being itself not a purely personal affair but a social resis-
tance, something like the necessary survival into the late 1980s of the heady oppositionality of 1969–72. At stake in the posthumous survival of *Unbecoming* (as well as in Michaels’s maintenance of a resistant spirit up to his death) is therefore the social survival—the future availability to reading—of writing that will continue to represent the principle of oppositionality, signified by gayness, that in 1987 appears to be in a process of unbecoming, of disintegration under the brutal and dangerous attack of the forces of tidiness. That’s why it is not enough for the diary to be testimonial, as a kind of will; the will must itself constitute a counterattack on tidiness, having the function of a position paper.

*Tidiness,* “nearly a key term” in Brisbane and clearly manifested in the “Foucauldian holy ground” that is the Royal Brisbane Hospital, is one of a number of possible names for the danger of personal and perhaps social obliteration that Michaels understands to threaten him: *homophobia, discrimination, bureaucracy,* would be one series of alternative names; *complacency, indifference, dismissal,* another. But *tidiness* has the advantage of getting at the centrality of a certain coercive requirement of homogeneity, conformity, and order, something like what David Wojnarowicz, for his part, castigated as the “pre-invented world” and the “one tribe nation,” founded on fear of diversity. And *tidiness* also demonstrates the peculiarly hypocritical structure of the ordering requirement, so that Michaels’s position paper is led to take the classically theoretical [or critical] path of showing that, in tidiness, things are not as they seem. Indeed, it demonstrates that suspicion is justified, because their apparent benignity masks actual hostility.

The hospital provides the perfect illustration of this. For what an AIDS patient needs, for survival, is a clean, germ-free environment, consonant with the PWA’s high degree of vulnerability to infection, but what he encounters is a tidy one, the function of which is to “obscure dirt” (40/15). The floors are kept polished, and the top of the mobile table over Michaels’s bed is cleaned twice a day: these are the surfaces, as Michaels points out, that the doctors and nurses see, and it is their perspective that defines the forms of orderliness that prevail in the institution. Meanwhile, however, the patient is exposed to grime that gathers on the ceiling, and “the underside [of the table], with which I actually come into contact, hasn’t been swabbed since 1942 as far as I can judge” (43/17). To place a man with AIDS in an
infectious diseases ward corresponds similarly to a logic of tidiness that for the patient is potentially lethal. And the only form of resistance that is possible in the face of such practices consists of not submitting passively to being tidied away by the hospital’s coercive discipline. That is, it consists of practices of noncompliance: writing a critical diary, for example, and everything that for Michaels goes under the category of “working” but also something as apparently childish as keeping the TV badly tuned, on the grounds that it is a major instrument for inducing passivity. But noncompliance is also, and especially, everything we have already seen under the categories of lamentation and paranoia: complaining, criticizing, kvetching, and the deployment of sarcasm, until it “[floods] the room and [sweeps] the entire nursing staff into the hall” (129/87).

Michaels’s position paper, in other words, is the difficult patient’s manifesto: it lays out why it is necessary for the AIDS patient, as part of the stage management of his dying, to do everything within his power to earn and maintain a place “at the top of the difficult patient list” (147/100). And, the hospital being emblematic of society at large, it shows also why the same response must be extended, beyond the hospital staff and the “lackeys” of the Immigration Department, to the full range of “specificities” that are lined up against you: the grubby landlord and the dishonest carpet cleaning company, the neighbors who play the wrong music and play it loudly or who block access to the Hill’s Hoist, but also new university colleagues and—most particularly, perhaps—old friends to the extent that they prove (as prove they must by difficult patient logic) inconsiderate or unpainthetetic or just plain irritating. If the complaining passage I quoted earlier is a good example of such “difficult patient” peevishness, the diary as a whole is an extended record of Michaels’s success in keeping up this taxing performance—this “art of being difficult,” to adapt Malcolm Bowie’s phrase in reference to Mallarmé—to the end.

It is worth pausing, though, to reflect briefly on the way this difficult patient performance also, like Michaels’s testamentary anxieties, is overdetermined by gayness. Being difficult, we know, is an option that forms part of an alternative, between stage-managing the PWA’s dying and survival and just giving up and going (139/94): submission and passivity as a form of suicide. But, if the temptation to give in is recognized as a manifestation of internalized homophobia, then tidiness theory, and the behaviors it authorizes (being difficult
and the cultivation of paranoia), can be seen as reactions that function to obscure and displace a deep vulnerability on Michaels’s part, his personal vulnerability to homophobic assessments of his value as an individual and the disease as a phenomenon. “How have I allowed myself to internalize this guilty attitude which makes me apologize for being ill, and promise to go quietly?” Michaels asks rhetorically (76/41) after an interview with his dean, having a little earlier described himself, “ashamed and cowering” (71/37) at the beach, although wanting to jump in for a swim. Two weeks later he seeks professional help because he feels “suicidal and crazy” (78/42). The visibility of KS lesions is part of the issue here, of course, as it is in Silverlake Life: “I can’t manage my flawed countenance, and know it’s only going to get worse” (80/44); “It’s getting more and more difficult to look in the mirror” (87/49); “I turn myself off” (96/55)—until finally, under the relatively cheering stimulus of a trip to Sydney, he simply decides that “if my appearance bothered others, it should remain their problem” (106/62).

Beyond the anxiety about KS in this sequence, though, a more fundamental insecurity is suggested by Michaels’s interesting analysis of the fragility of gay identity and of the role of desire and of sexual “promiscuity” in reinforcing it. The “enforced celibacy” of AIDS, he concludes (generalizing from his own experience, since AIDS does not in and of itself enforce celibacy, although it may on occasion diminish desire), is therefore a threat to gay men’s sense of self: “If psychologists are right about the centrality and the fixity of identity for the human self, what terrible psychic violence something like AIDS must wreak on gays—and has perhaps done to me” (100/58). The psychologism of this passage is surprising, on the part of one who declares himself more indebted intellectually to Zen than to Freud and expresses elsewhere his suspicion of psychological explanations: it suggests a moment of introspection, here, that reverses the paranoid insistence on the important social forces at stake in personal experience and acknowledges, instead, the individual pain inflicted by social attitudes. Thus, on the occasion of an early hospital visit Michaels had written, with feeling: “Mama, you wouldn’t believe how people treat you here. It’s not the rubber gloves, or face masks, or bizarre plastic wrapping around everything. It’s the way people address you, by gesture, by eye, by mouth” (25/4). Of course, in fact it
is both of these, and especially the relation between the two. But pas-
sages like these force the conclusion that the difficult patient persona
is not the product of some deficiency in Eric Michaels’s character.
Rather, it is a polemically constructed response directed externally to
“the way people address you, by gesture, by eye, by mouth,” and
masking to some extent the degree to which it functions to bolster
also an internally fragile, and internally threatened, sense of identity,
damaged by its own internalization of those alienating gestures,
looks, and words.

That the way people address you implies a polemical counter-address
in the form of being difficult brings me, however, to a second aspect
of the difficult patient performance, which is that, constituting a
counter-address in the context of Michaels’s dying, it also informs the
structures of textual address in his writing, as a tactics of survival. If
the diary’s insistence on a generic status similar to that of a will and
a position paper has to do with eluding the perceived danger of its
obliteration by Warlpiri mourning customs and/or the forces of tidi-
ness, the adaptation of the complex rhetoric of being difficult to the
writing of the journal is part of a very carefully judged project
designed to ensure that, having escaped obliteration, Unbecoming
will go on to enjoy a posthumous afterlife by finding a readership.
Being difficult is essential, in other words, both to the stage manage-
ment of Michaels’s dying (in which it protects a vulnerable identity)
and to the stage management of his posthumous afterlife (in which it
protects a social project), and in this latter respect the diary contains
evidence of very careful thought regarding both the tactics of address
(a stylistic matter) and the politics of publication (a pragmatic one)
that will ensure such an afterlife.

Michaels understands, for example, that his obscurity as a public
figure does not permit his writing to command the mass audience
that Paul Foss seems to consider possible. But, given his notoriety
among the Sydney intelligentsia (roughly equivalent, as he amusingly
puts it, to the subscription list of Art & Text), he might hope for what
he calls a “cult” following. And it happens (given the politics of oppo-
sitionality) that “these may be just the folks I wanted to talk to”
(153/104): those that the diary can reach are, by a fortunate dispensa-
tion, also its ideal audience, the readers who can be expected to be
responsive to it. This, in turn, means that a provocative tactics of address, an unbecoming rhetoric equivalent to the performance of being a difficult patient, although it would alienate a mass audience, might well be appropriate for a text signed by Eric Michaels. The opposite of Guibert’s soft-pedal approach is in order.

I think now I’ve escaped the worst of the possible consequences of being discovered (so longed for in my youthful quest for stardom), so that even if Paul is right that these diaries can get a wider than cult reading, no worries mate! And that’s why Juan can paint the cover and I can call the thing Unbecoming (though I still like Should Have Been a Dyke). (153/104)

The thought here is condensed and allusive, but it unpacks fairly readily. The audience that a “star” might reach (imagine if Rock Hudson had left an AIDS diary) would inhibit a set of rhetorical practices—indicated by the title Unbecoming and the plan to have the provocative artist Juan Davila do a cover portrait—that are those to which Michaels is in any case drawn. Whatever the actual readership may prove to be in the end, an unbecoming address to a cult following is initially well calculated and strategic. So, no worries: “I have the satisfaction, my anger transsubstantiated” (153/104).

What this restriction of audience means in practice is that to our embryonic list of generic models for the diary (the will and the position paper) can now be added the posthumous revenge letter, as a vehicle simultaneously for the “transsubstantiation” of the author’s anger and for the recruitment of an interested (Michaels’s word will be engaged) readership. The revenge letter is a strikingly effective means of carrying on, beyond one’s death, the performance of being a difficult patient, that is, of resisting victimhood by not taking it lying down. And Unbecoming includes (en abyme, as it were) three gems of the genre (66–70/34–37), addressed respectively to the sleazy landlord, an inconsiderate friend, and the offending carpet cleaning company. It also includes an example of “revenge publication,” reproducing in extenso the hypocritical and self-contradictory (tidying) letter Michaels received, a month before his death, from the Immigration Department announcing that he would be deported (“to nowhere”) as soon as he was medically fit to travel. One imagines the glee with
which these letters were composed or transcribed into the diary for later publication.¹

But, in addition to the “satisfaction” it affords the preposthumous author, the posthumously published revenge letter, as a denunciation of the inadequacies that have hastened a dying man to his grave, makes an irresistible appeal also to a certain kind of readership. It turns the knife in the wound of survivor guilt, whether the actual guilt of those who recognize themselves in the book or the vicarious guilt of those able to recognize themselves in or identify with those the book pillories. And it appeals to the curiosity and Schadenfreude of those who enjoy watching others squirm or who squirm at taking pleasure in the spectacle of others’ squirming. Those two, not mutually exclusive, categories could add up to a good number of people, of course. But equally significant is the fact that reading itself is generically positioned, in the revenge letter mode, as an act of survivorhood and as one that entails reflection on the theme of one’s responsibility toward the now deceased author. If it is “the specificities that get us in the end” (156/106), the deficiencies of one’s behavior toward the author—whether they consist of dubious business practices or of inconveniently borrowing and keeping a VCR or of being the reader of a text whose availability to the public is predicated on the author’s death (let alone getting some form of pleasure out of it)—are necessarily tinged with culpability. And it is, of course, definitionally, the effect of a difficult patient performance to define caregiving, whether pre- or, as in the case of the reader, postmortem, as inevitably deficient.

Such an intimately involved audience is what I understand Michaels to have in mind when he speaks of a “cult” following as being appropriate for Unbecoming, and it is as if he plans, therefore, to continue and extend, in the relation between his accusatory writing and its readers, the fraught relation with his actual friends that is compellingly described and analyzed—sometimes with affection, self-deprecation, and humor; sometimes more cantankerously—at a number of points in the volume (notably 43–44/18, 48–49/21–22, 126/85, 150/101–2). As Silverlake Life already suggested, this positioning of readers (or viewers) as surviving “friends” might be thought

¹. This is true from a reader’s perspective, even though in fact, as Paul Foss (pers. comm., Dec. 5, 1995) informs me, the Immigration Department letter was inserted editorially into the text.
characteristic of the AIDS diary, as an adaptation of the personal genre of the private journal to the requirements of public witnessing. But, whereas Silverlake thinks in terms of the production of a loving community, it seems probable that Michaels was guided, on the one hand, by a disenchan ted estimate of the intelligentsia’s motivation for reading and, on the other, by his perception of “the scale of Australian demography” (61/31), in which members of the academy, of the worlds of media and the arts, the bureaucracy, and political culture all seem to know one another and indeed to be closely, if not intimately, interconnected: in other words, they form an extended gossip circle. This unsentimental approach to the problem of readership leads him to rely, in other words, on word-of-mouth, at least in the first instance, placing his faith in some of the more unsavory motivations humans may have for reading a book and looking for a succès de scandale and a succès de curiosité in order to get his volume launched (this is stage management as one of the fine arts). But it also, and in the long run more significantly, tends to define the kind of reading (guilty, anxious, involved, “close to”) that is required by the continuation, in book form, of the performance of Michaels the difficult patient.

As the hospital staff and Michaels’s friends were put in a double bind by a patient who both needs their care and is never satisfied with it, so the reader of Unbecoming, as the addressee of a symbolic revenge letter, is interpellated in a way that is calculated to produce anxiety and guilt. Where writerly paranoia derives from the perception that vital social forces are implicated in the circumstances of an individual life, the culpability that can come to be associated with the act of reading has to do with the social responsibility a supposedly personal and private act may incur and, more specifically, in this and in similar cases, with the responsibility for survival—the survival of an oppositional spirit—that is entrusted to one’s readerly status as survivor. But a survivor, notably in the kind of dire circumstances that call for witnessing, is always to some degree open to the suspicion (even if it is only anxious self-questioning) of having in some sense collaborated with the forces that make victims of others. Readerly status thus allies one, to all intents and purposes, with the prevailing forces of order and tidiness rather than with oppositionality. In that sense one is the addressee of a Lacanian demand that one is not in a position to fulfill, a demand that by definition cannot be
fulfilled, and such a demand is calculated, therefore—because it is an appeal that comes framed as an accusation (something like: “Why don’t you save me?”)—to make reading an experience of disquiet, inadequacy, and anxiety.

This effort to destabilize the reader’s equanimity and to produce anxiety in its place by making the unbecoming of the body the occasion of an unbecoming rhetorical performance is already visible in an astonishing predictive image that the reader encounters before even embarking on the text. It is simultaneously a frontispiece and the book’s photographic mise en abyme; it is also one of the most remarkable representations of the AIDS body known to me; and, finally, like the text itself, it stages a compelling continuity between unbecoming’s two, preposthumous and posthumous, stages. It is the product of a photography session, reported in the diary, that took place two months before the author’s death, one of a series of “shots that might serve as graphics if needed. [. . .] All nude to the waist down [sic], featuring the cancer lesions most prominently” (152/103). It has been taken with a flash, so that certain physical details are highlighted, but in the first instance it is the subject’s posture that is most striking, divided between a relaxed and seemingly passive torso (not noticeably thin but spotted with lesions) and an astoundingly alive face and head with luxuriant hair and beard, intense eyes, and—the punctum as well as the studium (Barthes)—a mouth open so that KS lesions can also be seen on the protruding tongue. In its own fashion this image thus stages the tension readable in the text, between the temptation of passiveness and the necessity of fierce resistance—the tension that makes this gesture of defiantly showing the body’s state of unbecoming, “featuring the cancer lesions most prominently” (the photo’s raison d’être), the mark of a signal victory over submission to the coercive conventions of tidiness and over Michaels’s own complicitous willingness to give up and just go.

But the focal point is the tongue, its flesh catching the light and the lesions visible, a tongue that, given the intensity of expression in the face and eyes (will? defiance? rage?) can be seen, in addition to displaying the ravages of cancer, to be unmistakably performing the gesture of impertinence known (in schoolyards and elsewhere) as “sticking out one’s tongue”—a singularly unbecoming gesture, its childishness (in an adult) suggestive of impotence, perhaps, but with
Fig. 1. Eric Michaels, Brisbane, June 26, 1988.
(Photo by Penny Taylor.)
implications of defiance and revenge as well as accusation and anger. These flash shots were intended as aids to Juan Davila’s work on the portrait planned for the cover (which, in the end, this photo replaces), and this photo clearly makes ironic reference to the erotic motif of the protruding tongue in Davila’s own work. But the intended front-cover positioning makes it clear, if such corroborating evidence is necessary, that the gesture of impertinence is directed, into the photo’s future, at us: the survivors of Michaels’s death, the viewers of the photo, and the readers of his text.

In addition to the book’s effort to confront in this way the reader’s presumed complacency, however, the extended tongue also figures, therefore, a certain mediatory desire: I mean the desire to bridge the space—the space of death—that separates the thin, two-dimensional plane of the photograph, in which the author is confined, from the three-dimensional world in which the viewer-reader lives and moves and, penetrating that space, to exert effective impact within the viewer’s [survivor’s] world. Poignant because it figures the picture’s authority, then, and by extension that of Michaels’s text, as an authority borrowed from death, the tongue also figures the power to disturb that the text thereby acquires, beyond the death of the owner of the tongue. For a tongue, qua tongue, stands, obviously enough, for language—but this tongue carries the “morphemes” of AIDS and is marked by disease, so the message it delivers can only concern its owner’s unwilling and refractory encounter with, and resistance to, the death that gives the message its power.

It would be wrong to assume, though, that there is anything ghostly or wraithlike in the image presented by Michaels’s body. If the protruding tongue is accusatory, it does not threaten to “haunt” the reader-survivor but, rather, to extend itself materially into the postmortem domain so as to pursue a continuing policy of defiance and destabilization, harassment and difficultness—a matter less of metaphysics than of rhetoric and politics. In the EMPress edition of Unbecoming there is a back-jacket photo of Michaels: film-star handsome, well groomed, with a clipped mustache and stylish clothes (presumably an ID picture: Eric Michaels just off the plane in 1982?). This image is in striking and significant contrast with the frontispiece photo: the wild hair, the bushy beard, the fierce eyes, the

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determined expression, the body invaded by lesions, the extended tongue and its aggressive gesture. In this adult face, with its wild features, the tongue seems to allude to a famous feature of Polynesian iconography—familiar to many from the Maori “haka” performed by New Zealand teams before football games—in which a protruding tongue signifies warlike ferocity. But, more generally, the contrast with the jacket photo makes this an image of Michaels as *wild man*, that is, as a social persona (more than an individual) and as a figure who lives on the edge—or beyond the pale—of orderly, civilized society and harasses it with a kind of guerrilla warfare, even if his mission is only to offer a critical counterimage that refuses to be tidied away or otherwise to disappear. This portrait of the author as wild man is thus the sign of *Unbecoming*’s own mission of harassment, its ambition to function as the permanent thorn in the side of Tidy Town and the continuing Foucauldian horror show. And in this respect we might also be led to think, therefore, and again in terms of social place and function rather than of individual identity, of the aboriginality to which the image also, unmistakably, makes iconographic reference.

I’m not claiming that in *Unbecoming* Michaels is producing AIDS as a way for white people to achieve the political status of Aboriginal people. That would be sentimental, and, more to the point, it would be insensitively exploitative of the shameful two-hundred-year history of Aboriginal contact with, and resistance to, the genocidal white settlement of Australia. But there is a certain structural homology between the difficult historical survival of aboriginality and the resistance to murderous tidiness, the struggle against the horror show, that Michaels posits—it is a “first principle”—as necessary. And the five or six years I assume to separate the trim Eric Michaels of the jacket photo and the “wild man” AIDS image of *Unbecoming* correspond, for Michaels, to the Yuendumu years, in the course of which—without being or imagining himself to be a Warlpiri Aboriginal—he earned an identity and a place among the Warlpiri people, who were engaged in an inspired, if wild [unauthorized, extralegal, *sauvage*], communicational practice of their own: an appropriation of, and so an effective intervention in, the technology, structure, and apparatus of contemporary televsual culture.

They invented and operated a collectively run TV station, maneuvering in this way, from the margins, as a matter of self-defense and in their own interests: defending their culture from the destructive
incursions of modernity while simultaneously giving it a “voice” within the culture of modernity and ensuring therefore what Michaels (1994) significantly—and, in the context of Unbecoming, poignantly—called a cultural future. These years are referred to in the diary (124/84) as the Birth of a Station, and it is possible to think that the Warlpiri example furnished another general model—alongside the position paper, the will, and the revenge letter but (like the protruding tongue) more pragmatic than generic—for the rhetorical operation being performed in Unbecoming. This could be described as the birth of a “status,” posthumous but effective, and hence the achievement of a cultural future, for an untidy, marginalized, wild subject whose body will die of AIDS.

If Michaels is careful, then, at the diary’s outset to deny any claim to an Aboriginal identity, he is led toward the end to include, symmetrically, a thoughtfully worded statement of the reasons that underlie his affection for and affinity with Aboriginal people:

they are engaged, in a way that white Australians tend not to be. Their circumstances are interesting, to them and me. They tend to be kind. And no matter how hard they try, they mostly fail to be bourgeois. They are too familiar with poverty and suffering, perhaps. I feel a whole lot less self-conscious about the way I look and my visible marks of disease when I’m with blacks. They seem a good deal less concerned. (124–25/84)

But here he is obviously not referring to a model of rhetorical effectiveness so much as he is defining a preferred mode of reception, for his own diseased self and so, by extension, for Unbecoming. Aboriginality is not the identity Michaels claims for himself so much as it names a certain like-mindedness and capacity for “kindness,” a failure to be bourgeois that guarantees the kind of understanding—not “concern” but “engagement”—that Unbecoming as a rhetorical performance would like to encounter.

The terminological distinction that frames the whole passage may seem subtle, though, and the text offers no definitions. The gloss I would offer introduces the concept of “involvement” as a mediating term. To be concerned, as, in Michaels’s experience, white Australians tend to be, faced with the writing of AIDS on his face, is to be
interested and even sympathetic but without being involved (and, so, unempathetic). Perhaps indeed one can go so far as to say that concern is a way of disengaging oneself and one’s responsibility, but without seeming to, according to a duplicitous structure that would align concern with tidiness (which pretends, for example, to be “concerned” with health when it is actually devoted to the preservation of a certain kind of order). The health minister mentioned in Unbecoming who—“sympathetics” notwithstanding—reassured his audience that “we [gays, IV drug users, hemophiliacs] are not members of the ‘general public’” (181/123) was demonstrating concern (as politicians often do) while simultaneously withholding empathy and tidying AIDS out of sight (and so, for his viewers, out of mind as well) by means of a spurious exercise in categorization. Concern, then, is bourgeois because it is hegemonic, and it is a front for complacency and indifference.

Engagement, on the other hand, necessarily entails involvement, and in Michaels’s usage it seems to refer more specifically to a combination of involvement—as something akin to the phenomenological concept of “thrownness” (Geworfenheit): finding oneself caught up, willy-nilly, in a situation—with a degree of disempowerment that prevents one from exerting control over it. Resistance is thus a synonym for engagement, in the cases in which resistance (in Certeau’s handy metaphor) is obliged to be more tactical than strategic. Engagement defines oppositional practices that are untidy, then, like the Warlpiri invention of TV or the practice of noncompliance, the art of being difficult, that Michaels invents as a response to AIDS and the whole social horror show that goes with it—an art that extends to the rhetoric of Unbecoming. It is an anti-concern, and, because it corresponds to the practices of those whose “circumstances are interesting,” it might be thought to be in the same relation to anxiety that concern is to complacency.

Engagement, then, by this definition, is a quality that it would be difficult for those in positions of power to achieve. It is engaged readers (on the “Aboriginal” model) that the diary seeks: they would be understanding of, and empathetic with, the embattled situation out of which Michaels speaks. But it is a concerned readership (on the “white” model) that it is most likely to reach, for historical reasons (having to do with the composition of the reading public in Australia and elsewhere) as well as for structural reasons (having to do with the
power of readers, as survivors, with respect to a text’s attempted survival). It is therefore a concerned readership, not one that can be assumed automatically to be engaged, that becomes the prime textual addressee in the diary. And the problem of address as a rhetorical proposition becomes that of converting readerly concern into something more like engagement—which, in the first instance, means getting through to concerned readers, penetrating the barrier of their disengagement, getting them involved in spite of themselves, and this across the space of death that makes the text’s survival so crucially dependent on the involvement of these uninvolved survivors. Whence Michaels’s worry over the “etiquette or sense of style [that] needs to be considered when agreeing to any, assumedly posthumous project” (144). Whence his calculus of scandal and curiosity, of gossip, as a way of engaging an audience. Whence finally his tactics of the protruding tongue, which sums up a whole difficult patient performance but also signifies a desire to break down the distance between Michaels and his posthumous audience, the text and its reception, and to pass on a certain “contamination”—not the infection of AIDS but the rhetorical transmission of a certain capacity for anxiety.

To expect engagement of an audience definitionally capable only of concern is, of course, asking for more than that audience can give: it is a recipe for producing a double bind structured like a Lacanian demand. This is never truer than in the case of an audience of readers, since, except in its most mechanical sense, reading is a phenomenon that presupposes distance with respect to a text. As opposed to supposedly “direct” communication, reading enacts effects of difference and deferral in the communication process and entails arts of exegesis and interpretation. If by “involvement” in a text is meant either the capacity for a fully absorbed attention or (what is in the final analysis the same thing) the capacity fully to realize its apparently limitless effects of signification, reading falls short of that degree of involvement. Its response being a specifically mediated and so a differentially positioned [not to say conditioned] one, it falls short of the limitless demand made on it by a textuality that is itself defined by the death of the author, in the sense of an absence of any control over the range of its possible meanings.

The option available to a reader, then, is not so much between concern and engagement as it is between complacency and anxiety,
that is, between an unselfconscious tidying away, through (facile) categorization and (reductive) interpretation, and a capacity for scruple in the face of the double bind in which one is placed. A concerned but scrupulous reader can make a genuine effort in the direction of involvement and engagement, but—this mechanism is relentless—the more scrupulous the effort, the less easy it becomes to be sure that one has escaped mere concern. And, conversely, the more unselfconscious the concern, the more easily it can mistake itself for engagement. The alternative to concern, then, for a reader caught in the problematics of distance that readerly difference implies is not engagement but anxiety. Anxiety is what arises, for a scrupulous reader, from the fact of being separated from direct textual access by the author’s death, which itself grounds the act of reading, whether that phrase be understood in a theoretical or an actual sense, so that the double bind the distance of reading enforces is similar in its effect to the double bind inflicted on the friends and caregivers of a difficult patient: the more they try, the less they succeed.

There is, in short, no escaping the fact—it’s a given, a first principle, if not a matter of Gewordenheit—that reading entails power and that a text is relatively disempowered (by its author’s “death” or death) with respect to its reading, which means, on the one hand, that readerly engagement is definitionally excluded (if engagement entails disempowerment) and, on the other, that the best-intentioned reader is necessarily drawn in the direction of the hegemonic, enforcing norms and conventions, by way of tidying up and containing the manifestations of textual disorderliness. Reading, as Michel de Certeau might put it, is inevitably more strategic than it is tactical. Such is the nature of what is called “interpretation”—and in critical circles something called “strong reading” is often particularly appreciated. “Weak reading,” though, if one were to try to imagine it—a lettura debole along the lines of Gianni Vattimo’s pensiero debole!—would not be closer to the ideal of engagement, because it would be merely compliant. It would reverse the text/reader power structure rather

3. I am not forgetting that Certeau himself describes “reading as poaching” as tactical. But he is working here with a model of text as the cultural “given” that individuals have to learn to “inhabit,” like moving into a rented apartment or “walking in the city.” This is a conception of text that has no space for the death of the author, although it is of course that death, in its theoretical sense, that makes readerly poaching possible.
than producing the encounter, on the plane of oppositionality—an encounter of mutual engagements—of which Michaels seems to dream.

Engaged reading, then, in its ideal form, is a utopia. The best a militantly uncompliant text like *Unbecoming* can achieve, although it is somewhat less than it demands, is the sort of anxiously involved reading I described as scrupulous, a reading that is uncertain of itself because it is conscious, however hard it tries, of its own failure to be anything but concerned. This is a way of failing that is at the opposite pole from the ease with which Aboriginals, as described by Michaels, fail to be bourgeois (it’s a failure, equally easy, not to be bourgeois, if you will). But it does have something in common, perhaps—a certain desperate vigilance, for instance—with the unremitting effort of the difficult patient to resist and to go on resisting, despite the temptation to give in, to become passive, to go under, to disappear. A well-grounded fear of complacency, on one side, responds to a well-grounded fear of compliance, on the other. The dying author’s extended tongue, then (which, after all, corresponds to a compliant medical gesture as well as being an act of defiance), teaches us, perhaps, that as readers we *can* get some way out of our concern and into an area of anxiety, and it is in that area of anxiety that maybe, just maybe, it might be possible to meet the tongue halfway.