

The Vulnerability of Withdrawal: Between the Sentences of the Early Prose of Tao Lin

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Abstract

In Tao Lin's early books *Eeeee Eee Eeee* (2007), *Bed* (2007), *Shoplifting from American Apparel* (2009), and *Richard Yates* (2010) vulnerability is linked to a lack of context. Passages and sentences are semantically removed enough from each other that a space of vulnerability opens in which the unexpected can happen. Using the work of Quentin Meillassoux, Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière, and Levi Bryant, among others, this sense of vulnerability is argued to be the primary experience of our lives, but we often forget it. Lin's work makes this primary vulnerability visible in the three works analyzed using three different techniques: incomplete information, withdrawn context, and a monstrous vulnerability. In this sense, the author makes his writing vulnerable to the very problems that it foregrounds.

Keywords: Tao Lin, vulnerability, incomplete information

INCOMPLETE INFORMATION

The early novels of Tao Lin use three narrative techniques to represent vulnerability between both the reader and the text and the text and the world. The first technique is incomplete information, in which a vulnerability to making the wrong choice is caused by not having enough information about the situation. The second technique is a withdrawal from context, in which parts of the narrative world are “blocked off” to both the reader and characters, creating a sense of unease about what the world actually contains. And lastly, Lin interrogates a monstrous vulnerability, in which it is not the alien other which causes violence, but the most mundane among us. All three techniques are then used to argue for what Judith Butler calls “primary vulnerability” (2016, 12), meaning that vulnerability is the fundamental basis of our lives.

Tao Lin’s first novel *Eeeee Eee Eeee* (2007) is named after the onomatopoeic sounds that a dolphin makes. Although the story focuses on Andrew, who recently graduated from college and is now delivering Domino’s pizza, it is also sporadically populated by talking dolphins, moose, bears, hamsters, and aliens. One function of these creatures is to create a sense of vulnerability in the narrative through a feeling that what happens next is unexpected. Therefore, when no one seems shocked when a moose gives a pizza delivery driver a ten-dollar tip (Lin 2007b, 10), it opens the way for the narrative normalization of a number of bizarre events.¹ One effect of this normalization is to develop a text that is repeatedly interrupted by the unexpected. Another way through incomplete information.

Andrew’s first extended encounter with an interrupting animal happens with a bear that comes out of his co-worker Joanna’s house. After dropping Joanna off, Andrew sits in his car, daydreaming about his ex-girlfriend Sara. The bear that comes out of Joanna’s house is rather aggressive, trying to convince Andrew to follow him by offering him “free money” and a laptop (33). When Andrew hesitates, the bear attacks:

The bear has a twenty-dollar-bill and a blue blanket and holds them in front and walks to Andrew’s car and puts the blanket on Andrew’s head and rips off Andrew’s door and the top of Andrew’s car. The bear picks up Andrew and carries Andrew to the house he earlier pointed at and in the side yard sets down Andrew, who takes the blanket off his own head. The bear kneels, opens a secret passageway under a patch of grass, and points at a ladder that goes underground. Andrew goes to the ladder. “Do it,” the bear says. (33)

1 The word “bizarre” is not chosen haphazardly as some elements of Lin’s text fit into the absurdity of the genre of bizarro fiction (Burk 2009, 3).

The ladder leads to an underground passage that contains a moose in a nook, a city of dolphins and bears, as well as “a very tall statue of the current president of the United States” (35). However, this is just the beginning of an episode featuring dolphins with sledgehammers slapping Andrew’s face and the bear telling Andrew that the bear’s name is also Andrew, along with the Andrew-bear throwing a smoke bomb and then a dolphin appearing, after which the dolphin throws a smoke bomb and then the Andrew-bear comes back (36). These absurd story elements lie in contrast to what happens when Andrew leaves the hole and the bear. Back on the surface, Andrew seemingly forgets what happened to him and is back to obsessive-compulsively thinking about his life, about why Joanna seemed to get happier when she left his car, about if he should start a band with his friend Steve, about whether he should try and have a relationship with Joanna’s sister (whom he has never met), and about how he needs to go back to a Denny’s restaurant and apologize to a waitress he thinks hates him (41). The underground adventure with the bear has been forgotten. It has no impact on the rest of Andrew’s life. The interaction with the animal is just an interruption and Andrew’s otherwise normal existence continues unhindered afterward. The bear is a character who introduces change and absurdity. However, when Andrew is not interacting with such an animal, his life is a fairly predictable collection of worries about his work and love life. When Andrew does interact with such an animal, anything can happen. However, when such animals are out of the picture, life continues as normal.

In order to understand this narrative strategy, we will need to define what it is about this text that allows for the interruption of absurd elements in the story. But first, we should define the kind of “absurd” under discussion. The absurd animal elements are being described in the literary sense of the world, as developed by Martin Esslin, in which the absurd expresses “its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the ratioc approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (Esslin 2001, 24). Still, this does not mean that the whole text needs to be irrational. For if Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* (1959) is absurd because people turn into the animal during the play, it still retains meaning in that it is also about the misguided acceptance of National Socialism during the Second World War. While in *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, sense does not evolve into nonsense, but nonsense interrupts sense in an unexpected fashion. The intrusion of absurd elements in the novel can be described, loosely, as random. Not in the meaning that the elements themselves are randomly chosen, but rather that they randomly appear and disappear. It is the “randomness” of the appearance of absurd elements that will tie this novel

to a discussion of vulnerability, since when you do not know when something is coming, you are vulnerable to it all the time.²

In Aristotle's *On the Heavens* (350 BCE), a paradox is formulated that has been at the heart of thought on randomness. In this work, Aristotle is discussing why the earth apparently does not move as the rest of the celestial bodies of the heavens do. Citing Anaximander, Aristotle posits that the stasis of the earth arises from its "indifference," which he illustrates by comparing to someone who, though exceedingly hungry and thirsty, and both equally, yet being equidistant from food and drink, is therefore bound to stay where he is" (Aristotle [original] 1984, 486). The choice this person has to make between food and drink is random since the person is equally hungry and thirsty. Even though Aristotle is talking about physical states, his comment has set off a number of debates on the notion of total equilibrium in the face of multiple options, seen, for example, in the joy of freedom in making a choice free of consequence: "Who would not love, albeit just for a few seconds, to play at choosing, savouring the trill of balancing up options, the delights of these set-ups that elevate you and allow you to float free of all relations of force and all confrontation?" (Châtelet 2014, 56).

Following on from Aristotle, his description of the randomness of choice could be seen as an example of "incomplete information" (Taleb 2007, 197-198). Since a human can live without food for at least a week, and without water at most for a few days, then the choice between food and water is not equal: first go for the water, then the food. The choice of one or the other can only be thought of as random if you lack certain information about human biology.³ Another approach to Aristotle's paradox seeks to separate randomness from chaos in the sense that randomness is totally removed from all probability (Meillassoux 2012, 132), while chaos features predictable properties that are so complex that they are difficult to calculate (Taleb 2007, 198) (hence chaos falls into the "incomplete information" group).

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- 2 The separation between animal- and non-animal elements in the novel is essential. This differentiates Lin's novel from what, on the surface, might seem like a comparable text, Mykle Hansen's 2008 novel *HELP! A Bear is Eating Me!* In this story Marv Pushkin is trapped under his SUV and is slowly getting eaten by a bear. However, despite this absurd narrative position, the text is fairly run-of-the-mill as it goes back and forth in time explaining Pushkin's current predicament and the events that led him there. Even the end of the story, when Marv thinks that he is a bear and begins to bite people, does not move into the fantastic and anthropomorphic territory of Lin's work. More importantly, Hansen's the whole of novel exists on the same level of strangeness, while Lin's moves back-and-forth between the absurdity of the animal scenes and the normalization of these scenes in the rest of the text.
 - 3 Steve Forte, a casino security expert, discusses the way that a lack of information about the physical characteristics of dice, cards, and slot machines leads gamblers to believe that they games they play are random (Forte 2014, 120-122).

The absurd episodes in Lin's novel at first do not seem to fall under the category of incomplete information. If the normalized, pre-animal interruption sections were to contain more information, they would not give a greater idea as to what would happen next. There is a cut, a separation, a removal from time between the two sections in the sense that there is nothing in the former that gives a hint to the latter (cf. Malabou 2012, 6). However, it will be seen that actually the novel is a case of incomplete information.

But to see why, first we need the counter argument. The citation above in connection to the second reading of randomness, meaning randomness as a removal from probability, was Quentin Meillassoux. The French philosopher's 1997 PhD thesis, *L'existence divine*, posits that, although there has never been and there is not a god, that does not mean a god cannot appear in the future. He makes this argument by stating that our world has undergone three fundamentally random changes, meaning that no hint of what happened before indicates what will happen next. These three random changes are the emergence of something from nothing at the beginning of the universe, the emergence of life out of non-life, and the emergence of human intelligence out of animal life (Meillassoux 2011, 189). The argument follows that another massive change could occur (but also could not), and that massive change could be the appearance of a god (although it could also be absolutely anything else) (192). Since nothing does not contain any hint of something, just as non-life has no features, no matter how small, of life in it, the emergence of something and of life are random events rather than examples of incomplete information since that they could in no way be predicted by what came before (cf. Willems 2017, 151-152).

In order to help decide whether the appearance of the absurd elements in *Eeeee Eee Eeee* are random or due to incomplete information, another book from Lin in which the appearance of absurdity functions differently is essential. Lin's short-story collection *Bed* (2007), published the same year as the novel *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, offers a variety of narrative techniques to incorporate the unexpected into a text, but none are as successful as in the novel because none create the same sense of unexpectedness, and hence, as argued below, of the vulnerability of the reader to what happens in the text. The first technique for incorporating the unexpected is metaphor. In the story "Love is the Indifferent God..." when Sean is asked to fast-forward through the previews of a movie on a VCR tape, he becomes sadly nostalgic, and "felt the tiniest sadness—the sadness of an ant, a mite, and a mosquito—stamping lightly against his heart, like a little rain" (Lin 2007a, 131). While this description is unexpected, it is relegated to the realm of metaphor, and therefore has no actual relation to the plot (his feeling of nostalgia might have an effect, but the ant, mite, and mosquito do not become characters). This is similar to the other main example in the text, that of dreams, which also introduce absurd

elements into the story. For example, in “Nine, Ten,” nine-year-old Jed and his friend LJ both dream of giant squids. In Jed’s dream, “he was a tiny shrimp, a krill. He floated in blackness and was confused. A giant squid went by slowly” (197). Still, the dreams these two have are inspired by an actual giant squid found on the beach, an odd event for sure, but nothing in the realm of what happens in Lin’s first novel in terms of strangeness and absurdity.

Help to decide between randomness and incomplete information is explicitly provided by a character near the end of *Eeeee Eee Eeee*. Andrew and his friend Shawn run into the current president (who is also an alien from a different galaxy) outside of a subway station and they all go to a sushi bar for something to eat. The president begins a long monologue, part of which can be used as a clue to the role of incomplete information in the novel:

how do you know if an action will increase or decrease net pain and suffering in the universe from? now until the end of time? You can’t know. Impossible. You don’t know if drawing your friend a picture will or will not cause fifty thousand years of suffering to ten million organisms on Alpha Centauri one billion years from now. So you create context. A common context is one’s life plus the next few generations, not including animals, plants, or inanimate objects, and only on Earth, with emphasis on one’s own country. So now you’ve made an assumption and also blocked out more than 99.9% of the universe, 99.9% of all life on Earth, and an infinite or unknown amount of time. You live a horribly distorted life. You don’t know anything. [...] You are stupid and boring. (194)

The president’s speech is not about the appearance of something totally new as described by Meillassoux (2011, 189). Even though the president is an alien from another galaxy, he is still from our universe, and not from a mystical, unknown plane. But the president is discussing how we have incomplete information about the universe around us, and how in fact we need the context of incomplete information in order to function. It is in this context that we should read the interruptions of absurdity in the novel. Talking bears are not the most important aspect of the story, however, which is why they have no bearing on the “normalized” parts of the novel. Rather, Lin’s book is about seeing other worlds that already exist around us, but are “blocked out” in order to create a context for understanding. When these worlds appear to us they might seem random and absurd, but this is really just born out of a blindness to 99.9% of the existing universe. *Eeeee Eee Eeee* is a novel that tries to remind us of that fact. It does so by creating a narrative that is vulnerable not to the randomness of a coming god or some other unforeseeable event, but rather to the epistemological limits of humans themselves. Or, as Andrew says elsewhere in the novel, “Everything was to be accepted. The world was here. Everything was here” (104).

WITHDRAWN CONTEXT

The argument developed in the previous section is that a vulnerability to the world arises from incomplete information. Margrit Shildrick contrasts vulnerability to “the security of closure” (Shildrick 2002, 1), finding a porous fluidity in both bodily features such as the skin (102) and cultural agreements such as normativity (124). The figure that makes such disruption possible is the monster, since the appearance of monstrous figures insist on a binary difference between self and other that “should alert us to the instability of the categories that ground the normative human subject” (9). However, although Lin’s first novel is populated by talking bears, hamsters, and alien presidents, it is not a monster that disturbs the closed-off context of a subject, but rather the world. Jean-Michel Ganteau describes Shildrick’s work as delineating “an image of the self as ceaselessly interrupted by the event of the other, indefinitely open and refusing totalising effects of closure” (Ganteau 2018, 6). However, Lin’s novel does not feature a closure to the monstrous other, but rather a closure to the everyday, mundane world around us, which, as Lin’s alien president says, is 99.9% blocked out.

Another work of Lin’s, his novella *Shoplifting from American Apparel* (2009), functions as a stress-test for the ability to block out the world. However, the story is not populated by talking animals or anyone from another planet. Rather, the characters are vulnerable in their own world, and this vulnerability takes place between the sentences of the text rather than between one scene and another.

Sam is a young author who spends a great deal of time on Gmail chat and is not a great shoplifter. The story begins with “Sam woke around 3:30 p.m. and saw no emails from Sheila” (Lin 2009, 5). The most obvious semantic elements of this sentence are: Sam, waking up, 3:30 p.m., and no emails from Sheila. But the next sentence only connects to the main character, and nothing else. It goes: “He made a smoothie” (5). This combination of similarity (the main character appearing in both sentences) and difference (making a smoothie is not connected to anything in the previous sentence) might seem minor, but it is a consistent and defining characteristic of the style of the novella. This syntactic disconnection is related to vulnerability in that the context created by one sentence is challenged by what happens next. The reader is left to fill in the blanks between sentences, to guess at a world that lies outside of the context provided in the text. So when we get to the third sentence of the novella, “He lay on his bed and stared at his computer screen” (5), we do not know what happened to the smoothie. Was it consumed, abandoned, thrown out the window, put on a nightstand next to his bed to sit for the rest of the day, untouched? No clues are given. And the same happens again with the next sentence: “He showered and put on clothes and opened the Microsoft Word files of his poetry. He looked at his email” (5). No context is provided

about what happened between staring at his computer screen and taking a shower, just as a blank is drawn in the time between opening the poetry file and looking at his email. Did Sam work on his poetry for an hour, and then check his email, or is email a distraction from working on what Sam knows he should be working on? The events described are mundane, but what happens between the events is unknown.

Lin's narration provides a very tight focus, with the jolts between sentences undoing the "suture" of the reader's unconscious seemingly effortlessly putting the pieces of the story together. *Suture* is a concept of psychoanalysis which is often employed in film theory to describe how the spectator stitches together the disjointed nature of the images that flicker before their eyes (Heath 1981, 14; 78-80). Lin's novel attempts to make visible some of the features of suture by foregrounding the jump from one sentence to another rather than making it seamless. Lin foregrounds not, as Jacques Rancière states in a discussion of cinema, "the manifestations of the properties of a certain technical medium" (literature in this case), "but operations: relations between a whole and parts, between a visibility and a power of signification and affect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to meet them" (Rancière 2009, 3). Even so, perhaps the highlighting of the operations of moving from one sentence to the next is not just a cinematic element of Lin's work, but also a reflection of the digital age in which it was written and set. Espen Aarseth has described the "non-trivial" nature of navigating a digitally native text for the first time. With print, the conventions of starting at the top of a page and moving downward, as well as turning a page of a book, have been normalized. But in the digital world, navigation can become its own task, leading Aarseth to describe the effort of reading such literature as *ergodic*, coming from the Greek terms *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning both *work* and *path* respectively (Aarseth 1997, 1-2).⁴

Nevertheless, we perhaps do not need to stray so far from print literature to make sense of what is happening in Lin's story. In Stanley Fish's initial formulation of reader-response theory, meaning "*an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time*" (Fish 1970,

4 Lin's use of digital culture in his novels is one the reasons that Miriam Fernández-Santiago, in "Narrative Exhaustion and the Posthuman Narrative Self in Tao Lin's *Taipei*," connects the narrative strategies of his writing with posthumanism: "the only Paul that can be portrayed through the indirect free style used in the novel, are the diverse technological and biological symbioses taking place through Paul's narrative self-consciousness. [...] I interpret Lin's narrative strategies in *Taipei* as instancing a posthumanist aesthetics of exhaustion, targeting the humanist idea subscribed to transhumanism and the diverse narrative techniques through which this idea is both constructed and confirmed" (Fernández-Santiago 2019, 59). In an earlier work on Lin's novel *Taipei* (2013), an argument is developed regarding being hospitable toward the risks of the "full disclosure" demanded by our surveillance society (Willems 2016, esp. 236-238).

126-127, italics in original), he posits the notion of “progressive decertainizing” (124), in which the reader’s expectations of “the sentence’s future contours” (ibid.) are constantly challenged. Therefore, “The prose is continually opening, and then closing, on the possibility of verification in one direction or another” (125). Even so, while Fish is specifically interested in intra-sentence relations, Lin focuses on inter-sentence ones. What Lin shares with Fish, on the other hand, is an interest not so much in the question of “what does this sentence mean?” but rather in the performative question of “what does this sentence do?” (125). At this point we come back to Ranci re’s “operations” which describe what happens “between expectations and what happens to meet them” (Ranci re 2009, 3).⁵ Much of the prose of *Shoplifting from American Apparel* is about setting up expectations and then refusing to meet them. Even so, this is not a minimalist approach in which “the absence of context can allow readers and viewers to imagine their own context” (Stephens 2020, 1), but rather one sentence suggesting a context that the next sentence decertaintizes. And just as the alien president explicitly laid out the narrative strategy of incomplete information at the end of *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, the final pages of *Shoplifting from American Apparel* have a similar function.

Sam and Audrey—the latter “a person. [...] who he had talked to on the internet” (Lin 2009, 76)—are sitting at a table outside of Sam’s friend Chris’ house. They have a short exchange that can be read as an explicit statement about the removal of context in the novel: “There was a thing on the table and Sam touched it. ‘What is this,’ he said. They touched the thing and looked at it” (94). The next sentence is Audrey asking “So you’re going back tomorrow?” (94). The thing on the table is never described, or mentioned again. This can be taken as a statement about context, about foregrounding how 99.9% of the world is always blocked out. Lin could easily tell us what the “thing” is that Sam and Audrey see on the table, but that would not change the fact that there is a whole world of other things, never mentioned or explained, that will always escape us both in literature and in life. In this way *Shoplifting from American Apparel* is a novella that takes incomplete information not so much as a theme, but as a mode of operation.

JUST SAY IT, OR THE VULNERABILITY OF MONSTERS

Eeeee Eee Eeee was read as an illustration of the vulnerability of incomplete information which took place in the relation between passages describing absurdity and the normalized world. *Shoplifting from American Apparel* tightened the focus, creating a sense of precariousness decertainizing within the removal of context

5 Another approach would be through the communication theory of Niklas Luhmann. See Nika Radi c’s “Niklas Luhmann: The Improbability of Communication” (2011).

between the sentences. The last novel taken into consideration in this essay, Lin's *Richard Yates* (2010), announces its narrative strategy in the title: the use of real-world people as characters, although the actions of these characters then have nothing to do with people they are named after. Using real-world people as characters functions as a removal of context, although not between sentences, but rather for the whole book. It shows how vulnerability is not located at any specific moments in the novel, but is rather an operator of the text as a whole. This operator will then be shown to be part of the novel's traumatic relationship to the author's real world.

Regarding the book's title, Richard Yates was an American novelist, most well-known for *Revolutionary Road* (1961), which was turned into a film starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio a few years before Lin's novel was published. Although Yates is mentioned a few times in the book, mainly because characters are reading him, his presence in no way warrants the novel being titled after him. His name is given as the title of the book, as its interpretive key, and despite the similarity in focus between it and Lin's novel on the trials and tribulations of a white, heterosexual couple, there is not much to learn about Lin's work from diving into its title.

And the use of real-world names does not stop there. On the first page of *Richard Yates*, we are introduced to the two main characters, Dakota Fanning and Haley Joel Osment. In the real-world, these are the names of two actors: Fanning made her film debut in Sean Penn's *I Am Sam* in 2001 and was more recently in Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2009), while Haley Joel Osment is most well-known for his roles as a young boy in *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999). However, in Lin's novel, neither character has anything to do with their namesakes. Neither character is an actor. Their movies are never mentioned. And there is no mention of the similarities of their names with famous people in Hollywood. The real Dakota Fanning and Haley Joel Osment do not exist in the novel. While the specificity of their names, and the fact that both of them are referred to by their full names throughout (never Dakota and never Haley, unless another character calls them by their first name only), is a constant reminder that these real-world people exist, but that they are not the people of the novel. I argue that this scales up a sense of vulnerability from the sentence and passage to the novel as a whole.

In the final quote from *Shoplifting from American Apparel* above, the name of an object was not provided. This lack of a name indicates how 99.9% of the world is always withdrawn. In *Richard Yates*, the opposite operator is in effect. Names are given but they do not mean what they are supposed to mean. This is different than what happened in the novella. In that story, the store American Apparel appeared much as it did in real life: a trendy and ethical clothes retail outlet (although after

filing for bankruptcy in 2016, the brand has become an on-line only retailer). If this happened in *Richard Yates*, it would be like featuring American Apparel but its having no relation to the real-world store. It would not be trendy, it would not sell clothes, it would not be easy to shoplift from (usually anyway). In *Richard Yates*, names can function as what Slavoj Žižek calls ‘obscene postmodern objects,’ meaning that the novel is “displaying the object directly, allowing it to make visible its own indifference and arbitrary character” (Žižek 1999, 41). This arbitrariness is also a kind of vulnerability, a vulnerability of objects to their own meaning.

Put otherwise, *Richard Yates* foregrounds a *primary vulnerability*, a concept which can also be found in Judith Butler’s thinking about vulnerability and resistance. In “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” Butler shows how initially we think of vulnerability coming after resistance, as with demonstrators who gather together to resist a cause and then are vulnerable to police violence. Still, we can also think of vulnerability as coming first (Butler 2016, 12). The precariousness of job insecurity, disease, and racism, for example, index an initial vulnerability that can then lead to acts of resistance. In one sense, Butler is discussing the way that many people do not have the privilege to block off 99.9% of the world. The unpredictability of the world is much more obvious to some people than to others. This is also a key point of debate in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, although he clearly does not mean to universalize his position, Levi Bryant argues that the pandemic has destroyed the security of how “Crisis was always Elsewhere and always happened to Someone Else” (Bryant 2020). The inequality of vulnerability is also an issue both in Lin’s novel and in the real-world circumstances surrounding it.

On the back cover of *Richard Yates*, the novel is marketed thus: “What constitutes illicit sex for a generation with no rules?” The “illicit sex” refers to the statutory rape of the character Dakota by the character of Haley, since the former is 16 in the novel and the latter over 18 (he is seemingly in his twenties). The fact that this aspect of the novel makes it onto the back cover indicates that the theme of statutory rape is a major theme of the novel (which it is), and that it seemed to be a marketable transgression. The situation becomes more serious when it is learned that the events of the novel have a basis in fact, since in 2014, or four years after its publication, E.R. Kennedy, the basis of Dakota Fanning, accused Lin of both rape and plagiarism in a series of Twitter posts. No attempt is made to either apologize for Lin nor to recognize the apology he made.⁶ However, the end of Claire Dederer’s 2017 article “What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?” can provide both a clue as to how to read both *Richard Yates* and its author, as well as to

6 The most comprehensive coverage on the issue, including screenshots of the now deleted Twitter-posts and Lin’s responses on Facebook, can be found in Jones (2014).

the role that vulnerability plays in this. The last sentences of Dederer's essay read, "What is to be done about monsters? Can and should we love their work? Are all ambitious artists monsters? Tiny voice: [Am I a monster?]" (Dederer 2017). Lin's novel at least in part addresses the self-questioning found in the brackets at the end of this passage, since the novel's main character, Haley, is shown to be manipulative, constantly worried about being arrested for statutory rape, who spends most of his time faulting Dakota for the same problems that he has, but will not admit. He is represented as a true monster.

In *Richard Yates*, one of the main issues that comes out in the many Gmail chats between Dakota and Haley is that Dakota is bulimic and lies about it. After learning that Dakota lied about eating health food when she really ate junk food, Haley asks her if she has lied about anything else:

She said she lied when she said she only threw up a few times. She had been throwing up almost every day but only once a day. Haley Joel Osment said to tell him everything she had lied about. She said she was afraid and embarrassed and that she felt bad. "It's okay," said Haley Joel Osment. "Just don't lie to me from now on." [...] Dakota Fanning said some more things she had lied about. Haley Joel Osment said she should tell him everything she had lied about so there wouldn't be any lies between them. He asked her to go through all their emails and Gmail chats and find all the lies and write them in one email to him. She said she would do that. He said she should eat and do whatever she wanted from now on and not worry about making him upset and not throw up even if she ate something bad.

"Okay," she said. "I won't throw up anymore." (Lin 2010, 154)

This happens about two-thirds of the way through the novel and is disruptive to the relationship they had built up to that point. Haley becomes scarily obsessive about Dakota's movements and actions, asking her repeatedly to account for every minute of her day, to which Dakota usually responds first with a lie, and then seemingly with the truth (although this truth can then be amended again). Haley is continually frustrated by the incomplete information he is getting about his partner.

At the same time, in the midst of this aggressive digging for the truth, Haley is unsurprisingly giving incomplete information himself, i.e., he is a liar. This is perhaps most vividly seen in a passage that takes place just shortly before the one quoted above. Haley is alone, looking at Dakota Fanning's browser history. Then he uses a different browser to masturbate to porn on her computer, erases that browser's history, and finally, when Dakota Fanning comes home, he attacks her for lying about her search history while never mentioning his own actions (151). At least in part, this scene is about the inequality of who gets to hide information

from whom. In a novel in which the names of real-world actors and a writer are torn away from their real-world context, this should come as no surprise. A Dakota Fanning who is not really Dakota Fanning is not limited by what happened in the real Dakota Fanning's lifetime. Lin's Dakota Fanning can be made to do anything, to be anyone; she is vulnerable to the anything that can happen all the time, although because of her name, there is a feeling that she should not. This tension is the effect of the novel-wide removal of context that the title indicates, and it is both one of the strengths of the novel as well as one of its most disturbing aspects.

THE END

This essay uses the early novels of Tao Lin to connect an absence of context to the vulnerability of the reader to the text, as well as the text to the world. Part of the vulnerability of absence, as Patrick Brown has argued, is that "Whereas the presence of something can be described, discussed and therefore shared, the absence of something is profoundly felt but far more difficult to conceptualize or articulate" (Brown 2021, 131). One of the articulations of absence in Tao Lin takes place through incomplete information. In *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, incomplete information was seen as the reason for the unpredictable jump from normalized passages in the novel to absurd ones. In *Shoplifting from American Apparel*, a precarious decertianizing took place between the sentences, indicating a world beyond our understanding. *Richard Yates* then takes this one step further by removing context on a novel-wide scale. This is done by giving the main characters real-world names but otherwise totally different lives. This is not a removal of context between one passage and another, nor between one sentence and another, but rather a blanket-removal which touches every page. Since Dakota Fanning has nothing in common with the real Dakota Fanning (except for her name), there is no limit to what she can do. This effects not only the actual reader, but the characters too, since they never quite know what each other is doing, saying, or thinking. This is a representation of primary vulnerability, where vulnerability is the fundamental basis of our lives (Butler 2016, 12). Primary vulnerability is the basic state of being, but the fact is often forgotten. Lin's work helps us remember. However, this ability to forget vulnerability is not democratic; it is unevenly distributed. The work of Tao Lin both illustrates this inequality and is plagued by it. In this sense, through incomplete information, withdrawn context, and a monstrous vulnerability, his writings are vulnerable to the very operations that they foreground.

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Ranljivost umika: med stavki zgodnje proze Tao Lin

V zgodnjih knjigah Tao Lin *Eeeee Eee Eeee* (2007), *Bed* (2007), *Shoplifting from American Apparel* (2009), and *Richard Yates* (2010) je ranljivost povezana s pomanjkanjem konteksta, saj so deli teksta in stavki semantično dovolj umaknjeni drug od drugega, da se odpre prostor ranljivosti v katerem se lahko zgodi karkoli.

Ključne besede: Tao Lin, ranljivost, nepopolna informacija