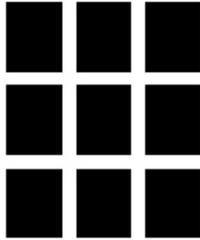


# Of Gaps and Ghosts

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—Hermann's Grid Illusion<sup>1</sup>

**L**eopold Gursky, the writer-protagonist of Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*, is both life- and love-giver, a duality made obvious by the small illustration of a human heart that opens each chapter he narrates. It is “[Gursky’s] love” for Alma Mereminski that, through a whirlwind of felicitous encounters and events, inspires a woman to name her daughter Alma (12). It is Gursky’s entrusting of his novel, also called *The History of Love*, to his friend Zvi Litvinoff that gives the latter the means to woo his own object of affection, Rosa, by publishing Gursky’s work as his own. And it is Gursky’s virility that allows Alma Mereminski to bear a son, Isaac, who, by contacting Alma Singer’s mother Charlotte, inadvertently gives Gursky the chance to meet his lover’s nominal descendent and reach a kind of heartbreaking serenity (252). His actions are pulmonary pulsations, catalysts that allow events to course through Krauss’s work like warm blood.

But Krauss’s protagonist isn’t just the life-force of the novel: he is also its wraith. After he becomes “invisible . . . [to] escape death” at the hands of the Nazis, he flies to New York to discover that Alma Mereminski has moved on because she “thought [he] was dead” (12, 13). Gursky, in his sadness, says that he has “vanished completely” from the face of the earth, as if his invisible state

is made permanent by his heartbreak. Even Isaac, his own son, “didn’t know he existed” (13).

Afraid of being *persona non grata*, Gursky tries “to make a point of being seen,” his actions often bordering on the ridiculous, the attention grabbing, and the desperate (3). But he also fantasizes about dying, “imagin[ing] all the ways [he] could go,” “[forcing himself] to picture the last moments” of his life (124). Visiting Gursky in a Polish hospital after a particularly bad cardiac arrest, Zvi Litvinoff finds amongst his friend’s writings a self-penned obituary: “Leopold Gursky started dying on August 18, 1920,” the day he was born (255). He fades, even as his blood flows through the rest of *The History of Love*.

Litvinoff interprets Gursky’s auto-obituary as an “announcement of death,” and steals the piece to “keep his friend safe from the angel of death,” but he misses the point entirely (117). In Gursky’s dreams about the end, his “penultimate breath . . . [is] always followed by another,” and he becomes suspended in a phoenix-like state, living to see his own death (124). In this simultaneous state of fear and longing, we see a man who craves not the end, but that glorious moment just before the terminus, when he vibrates on the cusp of two supernatural forces, balanced for just a second between the life he evaporated from and the death he has been craving and eluding for so long.

The novel’s other star is just as torn between dual cosmic forces. Alma Singer, named “after every girl in a book . . . called *The History of Love*,” the book written by Leo Gursky to commemorate Mereminski, learns quickly that her namesake is dead, as are the other people whose names inspired hers: “Alma Mereminski, and my father, David Singer, and my great-aunt Dora who died in the Warsaw Ghetto, and for whom I was given my Hebrew name, Devorah” (35, 176). Much of Alma’s life in the novel sees her morbidly preoccupied with her nominal ancestors: questing for traces of Mereminski and her son Isaac; finding a new man for her mother Charlotte; and, finally, meeting the purgatorial Leo Gursky.

As both avatar and agent, Alma Singer embarks on her own tentative journey of love, even as she sinks into the romantic history of her predecessors. Through this journey, she too becomes enmeshed in limbo. Her two moments of intimacy, each with a different boy, end with her feeling “happy and sad in equal parts” and declaring enigmatically that she “was falling in love, but not with” the person she was with (202). This ambivalence, this amorous distance, resonates with Gursky’s tragic invisibility: both individuals lie in a gray zone between life and death, and both pine for a love that is neither in the past nor in the future, but forever in some unattainable corner of the universe.

James Hillman calls such a place the “hiatus,” the moment that “at once divides and unites” (“Further Notes” 181). It is the confluence of opposites, the “unknown” in which “arcane activity [is] at work” to transform an image into something completely different. If there is something unknown, something mysterious at work in the novel, we may find it in the shadows of the lacuna or Hermann’s grid. And if “absconding Mercurius”—that most protean of the pantheon, he who can grant the impossible symbiosis of life and death—dwells there, then this is where Krauss must place her spectral protagonists (“Further Notes” 182).

In trying to do so, she is in the company of Gabriel García Márquez, perhaps the writer most attuned to the infinity of love and the novel. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, which is a history of love after a fashion, Gabriel García Márquez manipulates the hiatus to dizzying effect, creating a precedent with which we may juxtapose Krauss’s work. The novel’s two beating hearts, Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza, are lovers whose courtship, falling out, and eventual reconciliation span decades, too, and García Márquez creates a series of gaps through which their relationship flows. When Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza first encounter each other, the writer hints at what is to come: “the casual glance [between the two] was the beginning of a cataclysm of love that still had not ended half a century later” (55). The statement, which has the air of a theatrical, conspiratorial aside, is deceptively innocuous; in nineteen words, Marquez both creates and destroys a bridge to the lovers’ eventual confrontation and union. Their mutual, amorous gazing is transfigured, by some unidentified, “cataclysmic” force, from the virginal to the consummative. The “juxtaposition . . . makes the spark of consciousness leap across empty space”—or, more precisely, across the black hole of words, from one state of love and being to another (“Further Notes” 182).

Indeed, we do not tarry too long in García Márquez’s gaps, because they eventually fill up with the coarse crystals of detail. The “cataclysm” is demystified as *Love in the Time of Cholera*’s narrative flows, and the beginning and ending of Fermina and Florentino’s courtship is woven before us. They, like us, do not linger in the hiatus.

But if Leo Gursky and Alma Singer are to succeed in their search for the confluence, they *must* linger, and Krauss’s gaps, compelling in their confounding stasis, allow them to do just that. Leo Gursky’s narrative is peppered with the conjunction “and yet,” close to 50 of which appear in his 69 pages. These conjunctions, in their seductive mystery, are where the powers of the hiatus are most acute. They afford the dying man moments of hesitation and repre-

sentation. When, in a macabre mood, Gursky checks to see if he is alive, he “conduct[s] a quick survey”:

No to the question: Can you feel your legs? No to the question: Buttocks?  
Yes to the question: Does your heart beat?  
And yet. (232)

The conjunction is left unanswered and unaddressed, and in the next sentence, Gursky changes the subject. From this moment on, Gursky’s heart becomes enshrouded, menaced by a caveat that remains unsaid, and all the more potent for it. Where García Márquez’s sentences are Charon-like, ferrying his characters from one realm to the next, Krauss’s (and Gursky’s) conjunctions are Sirens, promising ecstasy and transformation but delivering nothing.

And if we drag Hillman’s idea beyond the realm of the conjunction and to all “disjunctive break[s] in the written story,” the absence of words could also be considered a hiatus (“Further Notes” 182). As a story told from four perspectives, *The History of Love* continually disrupts one person’s narrative to move to the next: from Gursky to Alma Singer, from Singer to Zvi Litvinoff, and so forth. Krauss marks the beginning of a new chapter with a title and an emblem unique to the person whose turn it is to speak: a human heart for Gursky, a compass for Alma, an open book for Litvinoff, and, later, a wooden ark for Alma Singer’s brother Bird, who is convinced that a second Great Flood is imminent. The most potent harbinger of narrative change, though, is unwritten. It is the white space between the final paragraph of the preceding section and the opening paragraph of the current one, the whorl of white that surrounds the headings.

We experience the mysterious power of this blankness in the middle of *The History of Love*, when we discover that Litvinoff and Leo Gursky are in fact friends. The final paragraph of this revelatory chapter, which describes events that occur decades before Alma Mereminski condemns Gursky to eternal invisibility, sees Litvinoff pilfering the handwritten “Death of Leopold Gursky” to “buy a little more time . . . for his friend, for life” (118). The opposite page, triply heralded as the re-commencement of Gursky’s narrative, finds the man trying to pick up “the pages [he’d] written so long ago [and which had] slipped from [his] hands and scattered on the floor” (119). An act of concealment becomes an act of recovery via an invisible turning point. Gursky’s obituary, folded out of sight in Litvinoff’s coat, travels through the white space to Gursky’s run-down apartment forty years later. This spatial

distance strengthens the bond between Litvinoff and Gursky and intensifies the mystery of “The Death of Leopold Gursky.” The absence of words causes the novel to pivot, as if the blanks were themselves conjunctions.

Hillman urges us to “consider each aspect of the dream as image . . . and that these images are all intra-related” (“Inquiry” 69). As collections of images, novels, too, are subject to this intra-relation. The novel is brought together by a collective “inhesion,” a composition of mutually reinforcing images, “the enlightening of any one [of which] sheds light on the others” (“Inquiry” 69). We can almost imagine fictional works as atoms, their lattice-work structures held together by the forces of attraction that govern their imagistic molecules.

In chemistry, atoms are not in a perpetual state of rest; they vibrate about a fixed point. And when these vibrations cause them to come into contact with other atoms, the result is what Newton called a “mechanical world of colliding miniature billiard balls,” which in turn creates friction, heat, and energy (Watson 737). A corollary to this, of course, is that space is needed for these atoms to vibrate and collide.

The gaps in *The History of Love* are such intermolecular spaces. With each “and yet,” the image of Leo Gursky’s beating heart meets head-on the image of something else—an aside, a complication, a refutation, a “final sigh” to be “followed by another,” a suspension between life and death (124). And the white space between pages 118 and 119 sees moments fifty years apart interact invisibly. The novel is inherently unstable, its atoms vibrating in paradoxical paroxysms.

These imbalances bubble over when Leo Gursky and Alma Singer finally meet at the novel’s conclusion on a breezy afternoon in Central Park. Because “it was [Gursky’s] love that named her,” Alma is both Alma Mereminski, “stalled at the age when she loved [Gursky] most,” and Alma Singer, who “didn’t look very much like” Gursky’s angel (252, 242, 249). Gursky, on the other hand, is both “the oldest man in the world” and “a boy who fell in love when he was ten,” both a man who died and a man who went on living when that love slipped from his grasp like grains of sand (251). The two are volatile embodiments of different ideas and people, and the resultant collision is bound to be an explosive one.

In anticipation, Krauss allows her novel to undergo a kind of lysis, creating enough space for an entropic conflagration. Entire pages are left blank save for a single centered line or paragraph, and the alternating, multi-perspective narrative reaches its logical conclusion as Gursky’s narrative is pre-

sented on a single page, Alma Singer's on the next, and so on. This decomposition is the absurdist extension of the novel's obsession with gaps, the shifts in voice occurring every single page rather than every twenty or thirty.

But *The History of Love* violates all kinds of laws, both narrative and physical. In his short exposition on atoms, Peter Watson points out the key flaw in Newtonian atomic theory: it assumes that the transformative reactions caused by collisions are reversible, when the opposite is true. "A decayed house never puts itself back together," he says, "a broken bottle never reassembles of its own accord" (737). The reason for this inexorable entropy is that

time is a fundamental part of the universe . . . [it] means that the universe is one-way only, and that therefore the Newtonian [theory] must be wrong, or at best incomplete, for it allows the universe to operate equally in either direction, backwards and forwards. (737)

How, then, can two moments more than fifty years apart, experienced by two different people, ever hope to meet, much less copulate with ironic passion? How can a seventy-year-old man both live and cease to breathe? And how can two characters, one possessed by ancestral spirits, the other lurking somewhere on the river Styx, ever hope to recreate a love long gone?

Because, as Forster tells us, a novel is "a universe that only answers to its own laws, supports itself, internally coheres" (82). And if we believe this self-sustaining universalism, we would also have to believe that its temporal gaps are part of its chthonic logic—"all parts are co-relative and co-temporaneous," existing outside the laws that govern Nicole Krauss and us, her readers (Hillman "Inquiry" 69). In *The History of Love*, narratives move "backwards and forwards" with reckless abandon, polarized states of being simultaneously exist to the exclusion of nothing else, and old men can be ghosts and lovers. We have to take a leap of faith across the darkness, "suspend our ordinary judgments," and believe that passionate, unifying work is taking place before our eyes, beyond our sight (Forster 82).

This is why Alma Singer, Leo Gursky, and Nicole Krauss haunt the hiatus. Gursky "want[s] to believe" that a collision with Alma Singer reassembles the broken pieces of his heart and reanimates the dead Alma Mereminski, just as much as he "wanted to believe" when he was ten that there was a "huge elephant, standing alone in the square" of his hometown (228). Alma Singer, after conceding that no one "would make [her] mother happy again," yearns for a time in which the only person who *could* make her mother happy was

alive, and searches for someone from that time in the hopes of returning her mother to a bygone state of happiness (181). And Krauss, after creating a love story in decay, rubs the pieces together to reverse the entropic process and rekindle the flame of love. Their atoms need to vibrate, synthesize, and atrophy, and the gaps are the only places that let them do so. In them, the universe does move backwards and forwards, because nothing tells them otherwise.

When Alma says, on one gloriously empty page, that she “was named after every girl in a book called *The History of Love*,” it is the absence of any other words that reveals to us “the hidden connections” of that sentence, and allows us to see the image of Alma Mereminski, as lover, heartbreaker, and cadaver (Krauss 243, Hillman “Further Notes” 182). And when Gursky replies, on the next page and in profound isolation, “*I wrote that book*,” we see the ghosts of the past flooding around the printed letters (244). We pause because that emptiness contains everything and nothing.

*The History of Love* is a series of gaps leading not to “forever,” but to moments in time that could never hope to stand abreast beyond the void of the novel. Krauss doesn’t wait for the temporally linear opportunity to send her characters teetering off the edge of eternity; her structure burns with the friction of a thousand atoms, pushing against each other in the infinity of space and conjunctions.

Krauss’s final hiatus sends us back into the electromagnetic field of her work. When Alma Singer and Gursky culminate their conversation with a hug, and when Gursky’s “heart surge[s]” with the energy of entropy and enthalpy, we are given two wholly blank pages, and then the entirety of “The Death of Leopold Gursky,” written in a different time and place (252). It contains gaps in which reside not the future, but the past—references to him “washing his genitals,” “thinking about Alma,” and “[falling] in love” (255). In the absence of Gursky, and either Alma or Krauss, these molecular moments collide with *us*, sending us back into the novel’s universe, where the process begins anew.

When we return, we realize that Leopold Gursky is *himself* a hiatus. He is the point in which all of the novel’s characters and events collide, the inexplicable gap through which everything must pass to be transformed. Litvinoff solidifies his love for Rosa with Gursky’s novel; a man named Bruno, who died in 1941, is resurrected as “the greatest character [Gursky] ever wrote,” an hallucination who advises him throughout Krauss’s book; and Alma Mereminski is impossibly reincarnated in his eyes as Alma Singer (249).

Gursky, in his absconding, divides and unites, peeking from beyond the novel's space into Elysian and Empyrean realms. Like the ghostly dots in Hermann's grid, the more we try to locate him in the universe of the novel, the more he disappears. It is through our reading of the hiatus that Gursky achieves that sweet, suspended state. And yet, he still eludes us. "Aside from myself, there was no sign of me," he says; in his gaps, and the gaps he creates, we watch him vanish into visibility (169).

Forster says that "the world created by words exists neither in space nor time though it has semblances of both . . . it is not this world, its laws are not the laws of science or logic, its conclusions not those of common sense" (82). *The History of Love* adheres fiercely, flagrantly, to its own laws of attraction and negation. In the end, we do not know if Leo Gursky lives or dies; but we never really knew if he was dead or alive in the first place. The hiatus, the "navel, the spot where [the novel] reaches down into the unknown," offers no answers (Hillman "Further Notes" 182). It instead facilitates the degeneration and regeneration of love, the birthing and the murder of the mysterious. The omphalos unites the divine, the netherworldly, and the mortal, and the reticulated universe of the novel vibrates. Time stops, images collide, and we are forever haunted.

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>When we look at Hermann's grid, a white grid superimposed on a black background, we see ghosts. Grey spots seem to dance at the intersections of the gridlines, but vanish the second we focus on them. The spots are, of course, the product of so much neural mischief in our heads. And yet, we can't explain them away. They linger in the white spaces, taunting us, drawing our obsessive, bewildered minds ever deeper into their confabulating realms. They draw us in without actually ever being there, existing somewhere in that indescribable space between our minds and the page.

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