

Parks's reflective essay moves from close analysis of Maggie Nelson's conjunctions in The Argonauts to a meditation on the nature of intimacy, connection, and difference. (Instructor: Bruce Bromley)

AND ON AND ON

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Consciousness is in constant change. I do not mean by this to say that no one state of mind has any duration—even if true, that would be hard to establish.

What I wish to lay stress on is this, that no state once gone
can recur and be identical with what it was before.

—William James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course*

Say you are a conscious anglophone. You have what they call a 'strong command' over English and its grammar, whether it be your first tongue or your second (or third). And if it's not your first, this command is something you've dutifully worked toward, learning a linguistic choreography while the rest of the room is already dancing, fluidly, fluently, around you.

I ask a friend who grew up in a bilingual household, ESL thick and through, about what it's like to reach toward the language I am writing in now, especially when much of the culture that commands this language is hostile towards those who might not, yet. And anyway, such 'command' is a farce to begin with, for how can one tame a thing as metamorphic and fickle as language?

Before she answers, I offer her my own lazy simile about learning Spanish in *un país hispanohablante*: like learning how to swim only after you've already kicked off from the dock. She recognizes my propensity for premade systems of reference; I can tell by her laugh, and her response is considerably more self-actualized in its darkness and constraint. She says that learning English—as a non-hobby, without choice—is like babysitting a child and being forced to play one of their games. A few rounds in, you start to recognize the child is making up the rules as you go along, she explains, and, though the

child is quite smart, each new rule still seems to contradict the ones prior. You are always unfairly disadvantaged, and this makes you a suspect learner, but you play along because—for some reason—it's been decided the kid is boss, and his game must be played.

Alas, here we are, playing unfair games with our strong commands, our understanding of flexible syntax and dynamic diction and the imperative tense and all the different, wonderful things a colon can do. (*We are pleased to say: you've been hired; I'm so sorry: there's been an accident.*) And, probably, some of the linguistic facets of your primary mode of communication are less than named to you. You know the thing and how it works before and beyond you know what to call it. You learn when to use 'on' instead of 'over,' 'for' instead of 'with,' before you come to call these tiny words by a larger name, 'preposition.' From within, you recognize the dire importance of connecting words in both spoken word and written language, yet you may not remember your lesson on 'conjunctions' from grade school. And, admittedly, even those who cling tightly to their command might not reflect deeply about their language's grammatical nuances, prepositions and conjunctions among the many, many others.

I rarely do, at least. Well into my undergraduate studies, I find myself nose-deep in Maggie Nelson's recently published *The Argonauts*, and I'm enraptured by this singular moment in the middle of the book. A blatantly notable feature of the book is the centrality of Nelson's citational practices, which are poignant, consistent, and layered with meanings. The overhaul of referenced work and quoted prose render the work one long conversation between her, the many minds that have come before her, and the world she lives in today. Sometimes, Nelson directly engages with the cited material and the thinkers behind it; other times, scenes and quotations loom and linger among Nelson's own writing, sharp as a katana, and her thinking, clear as the Caribbean.

In this moment I find so special and particular, Nelson is citing another great mind, one from a century before herself. It's the late William James, father of modern psychology as we know it, and his words, a blend of conjunctions and prepositions and the viability of each as affect, are doing something remarkably important for Nelson:

We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold. (54)

These words are from a chapter titled “The Stream of Consciousness” in James’s 1892 collection *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, in which he describes awareness and subjectivity as linked to time and space. His prose, reflective of James as a figure, “is a rich blend of physiology, psychology, philosophy, and personal reflection” (“William James”). The deftness with which James blends these elements is one thing, among many others, that makes him an undeniably important influence on Nelson and *The Argonauts* as a whole.

Yet, before we begin to ask what ‘feeling’ these prepositions and conjunctions anew might allow us to do, first we might wonder why Nelson herself found it important to linger, explicitly, with James. Not all of her minds in conversation receive this treatment. As an immediate answer to James’s cited prose, Nelson adds:

We ought to, but we don’t—or at least, we don’t quite as readily. But the more you do, the more quickly you can recognize the feeling when it comes around again, and hopefully you won’t need to stare as long. (54-55)

Though we find James’s words quoted about halfway into the work, feelings of ‘and’s, ‘if’s, ‘but’s, and ‘by’s run like currents through the entirety of *The Argonauts*. And as Nelson riffs off so many brilliant, prolific, troubled, and celebrated minds—her many gendered mothers—her work is a constant ‘them and.’ By ‘them and’ I mean that her citational practices, along with the book’s paratactic-paragraph form, their side-by-side arrangement, separated each by intervening white spaces, make *The Argonauts* an experiment in moments and movements. It is not only the/them/this, depending on the nature of her many references; it is always a the/them/this and more, and so, and what?

Whether Nelson describes an anecdote, cites the work of a theorist or artist, or admits an at-first unpopular opinion, stasis is never an option. There is a shark-like quality to the work, reflected in the form:

the space between one paragraph's end and a new one's beginning might lure a reader into thinking they have a moment to breathe, or dog ear the page for their next ride on the subway. But these breaths are less breaks and more brakes, and turns, accelerations, reversals, and deepening. Between paragraphs, the reader, taking Nelson's lead, crosses vast temporal, semantic, logical, and spatial distances. Sometimes the distances are short, from a moment today to the week prior, from an artist's piece to one of their interviews, yet other times they cross centuries, disciplines, artistic mediums, and distinct emotions. Like a shark: if the work was to stop, it would die.

To think alongside James and Nelson, of prepositions and conjunctions and the powers within each, I head to the web. A simple search yields an "English 101" grammar exercise by CU Denver, documented in a faculty-distributed white sheet titled "Prepositions Versus Conjunctions (a few examples with potential pitfalls)." With this, the obvious is put into words: "a preposition 'glues' a noun or pronoun into a sentence," while "a conjunction can connect any two like elements together in a sentence," meaning "conjunctions can connect two sentences together" ("Prepositions"). Put simply, a preposition is indeed a vital grammatical feature for spoken and written language, yet conjunctions are even more vital if one's command is to move from the simple to the complex. Even more simply put, the life and liberty of complex sentences depend on conjunctions. We weaponize conjunctions against simplicity. We might conclude, then, that complex ideas and arguments are built on our ability to feel with these conjunctions, but this isn't enough. Considering the paper's forewarning of "potential pitfalls," we remember that to use, command, learn, or love a language is a risky affair, and the stakes are never the same for two different individuals. Within the realm that Nelson is conjuring through the prose of William James, I'd argue that we mustn't conflate all conjunctions as equals, or position the feelings they might spark within us as sending us across the same distances, and especially not to the same places.

This travel is at the *The Argonauts'* core. And how does Nelson sustain such momentous motion for 143 pages? One intellectual propellant that moves Nelson (and us in her wake) is that she refuses to satiate our unfortunate human appetite for 'either/or' polemics. Sure:

'or' deserves the same conjunctive rights as 'and' and 'but.' 'Or,' objectively, will allow a speaker to build a complex sentence or two. But, in my opinion—and I like to think Nelson's as well—holding on to 'or' as a primary mode of thinking rarely allows us to build complex arguments. Instead, Nelson's work shouts a 'yes, and' into our binaric void, along with a 'yes, but.' This is primarily why I find James's prose—and his work at large—so integral to Nelson's conceptual and writerly labors.

While written theory might feel abstract to many, detached from our lived realities and miles above the ground we walk around on, Nelson's "autotheory"—a word found on the book's back cover—is an effort to close the gap, rectify this rupture. *The Argonauts* uses Nelson's "own experience as an engine for thinking that spins out into the world and backwards and forwards in time" (Lorentzen). Instead of a theoretical route akin to her forebears in critical theory and queer theory (the kind that can read as totalizing and alienating for anyone not already in the know), Nelson's web of theories and arguments and burning questions flow from the self, first, so they rarely claim to know the truth of another. (In part, we might take a moment to buck against the possibility of one's 'truth,' a whole or absolute truth, ever even existing.)

That hunt for the one truth can get the better of any of us. The moment directly before William James's prose is cited, Nelson describes how twentieth-century composer John Cage was asked by a (rather simple) journalist to "summarize himself in a nutshell" (54). Cage responded, "Get yourself out of whatever cage you find yourself in" (qtd. in Nelson 54). Though Nelson never uses Cage's words as analogous or representative of her own work, Nelson's autotheory represents, among many other things, one of a million ways to pick the lock of one's own cage. Of course, we must first be able to see the shape of the bars, the space of the cell. We look to the gaps between the bars, sun spilling through them, to remind us of our own trapping. The syntax of Cage's answer here is interesting; Cage places the imperative to "get" oneself out before the clause "whatever cage you find yourself in," and a listener may find an emphasis on either verb in their reading, "get" or "find." As I consider myself a reader more interested in endings than beginnings, I find that "find[ing]" to be the

core of Cage's answer, the "get[ting] oneself out" a mere entrance. To think of his answer syntactically reversed—"Find whatever cage you are in and get yourself out"—Cage is read with a considerably distinct effect. (The finding part, for me, indeed sounds more difficult.)

Thinking of locks and cages, bars and spaces, I'm reminded again of why I so often find that little word 'or' to be so dirty, in all its tinniness. Such a small word's capacity to limit, such a tiny idea—this, or that—can be its own intellectual and ideological cage. Considering the crushing, totalizing constraints of our many binaries (gender's and sexuality's among the many), the centrality of 'or'-ness in our cultural ideology enacts violence galore. (For instance, it is not only queer folks, women, and those outside normative gender identities who feel binary-based violence. Feeling with James here helps: it is them and them and them and them; the space opened by an 'or' is more claustrophobic than we like to believe, and even those in the dominant, those on the 'right' side of whatever 'or,' understand the riskiness of divide, too.)

One of the most compelling 'yes, and' moments (movements) in *The Argonauts* revolves around Nelson's very complicated relationship with pregnancy and motherhood. As an intellectual descendant of so many radical thinkers of the twentieth century (Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Walter Benjamin, and more)—and a queer theorist in her own right—Nelson's relationship with family as a whole is one of the most fruitful tensions driving *The Argonauts*. Nelson offers her peculiar, potentially never before admitted position: "Never in my life have I felt more prochoice than when I was pregnant," and she posits an unfathomable (feminist) bumper sticker: "IT'S A CHOICE AND A CHILD" (94). This is radical, and different, and beautiful; it is also an impossible intellectual leap within our belovedly human (unproductive, futile, lazy) either/or polemic. It's this type of movement that makes Nelson such a remarkable speaker; the fact that someone could write something that feels so radically new within such a tired, repetitive, yet still vital discourse around abortion is precisely due to Nelson's ability to hold onto 'and' as an affective, artistic, and writerly mode. And, if we were to think of Nelson's having read William James in this moment's explicit context, we might look to his own

writing on parenthood and childbearing. On parenting's perils in his *The Principles of Psychology*, James writes:

Our father and mother, our wife and babes, are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. When they die, a part of our very selves is gone. If they do anything wrong, it is our shame. If they are insulted, our anger flashes forth as readily as if we stood in their place. (292)

Writing from decades before, walking through the earth in a different body, a differently gendered body, than Nelson, we might not value James's words in the context of our modern abortion debate. Yet I think we can hold onto James's notion of what one loses upon the death of a child, along with Nelson's words of "a choice *and* a child." We might even consider the empathic potential of centralizing this in our abortion discourse, and its potential to make us feel more complexly about this impossibly difficult decision to begin with. Such a difficult decision (and a direly important one to have the capacity to make) deserves a more complex discourse than 'child or choice.'

And, because she refuses the either/or, Nelson also knows how to write 'but.' Of the debate surrounding whether sexuality is biological and genetic or fluid and self-determined, Nelson cites Mary Lambert and Macklemore's "Same Love," a song adored by the masses. Mary Lambert's chorus, in part, speaks to a conception of rigidity in popular renderings of queerness, the absence of choice and (at times, if we're lucky) the absence of a desire to change. Thus, someone steeped in queer theory may not find it to be the all-too-powerful, reifying deterministic discourse and assimilative plea for acceptance into the dominant. Nelson writes gently:

But while *I can't change, even if I tried*, may be a true and moving anthem for some, it's a piss-poor one for others. At a certain point, the tent may need to give way to field. (74)

That 'but' is critical, here. These discursive distinctions Nelson identifies around sexuality and identity politics are held at equal value, in each of their own rights. One might conclude that Nelson sides

more with the latter, but those who wish to sing along to Lambert with pride and passion still find themselves on Nelson's pages. Her writerly capacity to do so speaks to the "feeling of *but*" she found compelling in James in the first place, and in feeling this 'but,' Nelson holds onto 'and' as well. The two feelings are mutually nourishing; feeling of, feeling with, and feeling through these conjunctions open rather than close, extend rather than stunt. And thinking of growth, of this quality of being in bloom that prose like Nelson's makes one feel, I can't help but notice the love (familial, romantic, sexual) that charges *The Argonauts*.

I remember that paper from CU Denver once more, how prepositions "glue" and conjunctions "connect." I remember the type of loves I want to feel, and how adhesion sounds frightening, whereas contact, connection, feels enlightening. "To connect" rather than "to glue": I'd say that conjunctions are considerably sexier than prepositions. In a linguistic sense, the former do in fact carry in them a usage from outside our English grammar, regarding a type of meeting, of synchrony or simultaneity. This noun's etymology is steeped in sex: "from Old French *conjonction* 'union, joining, sexual intercourse'" ("conjunction, *n.*"). Again: without them, how could we get the groups of letters we call words, and the groups of words we call clauses, to flirt, buck, and fuck?

And the fruits and pleasure and residues of those tensions are never the same, were never and will never be. "Consciousness is in constant change," notes James ("Stream" 154). But? And? "*Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people,*" Nelson quotes Sedgwick, then adds: "This is a crucial point to remember, and also a difficult one. It reminds us that there is difference right where we may be looking for, and expecting, communion" (93). Maybe all we are is bottled difference. Trials, feelings, and echoes: at times, the glass is known to shatter. We cling to the recycle, an effort to return, and contain, but the clutch is futile. Spillage is vital, that mess of effort, in practice and performance. In her deep recognition of (awe for) that difference, Nelson affirms our welling over. The tent gives way to the field; the bottle to the sea.

But? And?

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