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Narcolepsy in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Nicholas Griffin

My Year of Rest and Relaxation by Ottessa Moshfegh. 2018. 288p. £9.99.
Jonathan Cape. ISBN 9781787330412.

The unnamed protagonist of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) just wants to sleep. Faced with the death of emotionally distant and now physically absent parents, a glittering but shallow New York social scene, and unfulfilling work at a Chelsea art gallery, she vows to undertake a year-long drug-induced hibernation. It is a provocative idea from a writer who is not averse to controversy; Moshfegh's 2015 novel *Eileen* has been described as a 'twisted body horror-saturated mystery'.¹ Her next work retains a similarly grotesque sensibility, featuring chapters replete with emetic excess. The reader could be forgiven for thinking the intention is to shock. However, Moshfegh's protagonist is not interested in the overwhelming sensations of the scandalous. She seeks a sleep characterised by an enveloping blankness. But can this blankness itself be a source of shock? Can this shutting down of emotions – a shift into a mode of unfeeling – be an effective form of resistance to, and rupture of, the perpetually new and fleeting sensations that characterise modernity? The novel's sleeve claims that it shows us 'how reasonable, even necessary' her quest is.² If this is accurate, it perhaps results from Moshfegh's placement of her narrative in the

¹ Iversen, Kristen, 'Ottessa Moshfegh's Year of Anything But Rest and Relaxation', *LitHub* (2020).

² All quotations taken from the 2018 edition, published by Jonathan Cape, hereafter cited parenthetically.

space between the solipsistic self and the world of the social – the gap between the delicate, sensitive consciousness and the intruding world around it.

In this medial zone, Moshfegh emphasises this quest is one of, and for, the individual self. Arranged as an insular psychodrama, delivered in the first person, the narrative comes to us entirely through the narrator's observations and feelings, so that we perceive its protagonist's project of unfeeling as one intrinsically linked to her own biography. Consequently, we bear witness to the origins of her trauma in an upbringing characterised by negative and overwhelming sensations. Her mother, an alcoholic, and her father, a distant patriarch, are both emotionally unavailable. Of her mother, she tells us 'She was usually passed out in her bed with the door locked' (147). The narrator carries this inheritance forward into her personal and romantic life, forming emotionally lopsided relationships with her best friend, the bubbly and energetic Reva, as well as a reticent lover from Wall Street. It is no surprise, therefore, that when disaster befalls the family, her response is emotional refusal, an ontology of unfeeling, as her experience of negative emotions leads to their equation with the whole spectrum of emotional possibilities. The loss of her mother and father brings this association to its apex and leads to her descent into drug-assisted sleep.

As her narrator's hibernation proceeds, Moshfegh stresses moments of touch to emphasise the boundaries of the self as a zone of emotive and interpersonal transference; the decision to stem or lose these flows thereby becomes a matter of philosophical inquiry. These moments primarily take place through Reva, one of her only links to the outside world: 'I'd been hibernating for almost six months. Nobody but Reva had touched me' (90). Indeed, such is her solipsism that emptying the bin into her apartment building's collective waste disposal becomes a moment of social connection:

Having a trash chute was one of my favourite things about my building. It made me feel important, like I was participating in the world. My trash mixed with the trash of others. The things I touched touched things other people had touched. I was contributing. I was connecting (114-5).

Such superficial moments of connection, moments that will lead to no response, that will require no reorientation of the self around a conscious other, seem to be the product of a psyche that strives to be hermetic as a means of overcoming what is perceived as an externally located suffering. Indeed, even the most banal stimuli appears overwhelming: ‘TV aroused too much in me’ (3).

It is perhaps inevitable, then, that Moshfegh’s protagonist would turn to drugs – an object that allows for a reorientation, at least initially, on the user’s own terms. Once the subject of Romantic revelation (in DeQuincey’s opium-infused wanderings and Coleridge’s narcotic epiphanies), drugs acquired new meanings in the twentieth century following their criminalisation. Beginning in the 1970s, the War on Drugs saw a realignment of legal and corporal power that criminalised drugs and their effects on the bodies of users. This biopolitical rearranging of acceptable and unacceptable bodies was a reordering of the material world, but it was also a means of controlling affects and emotions, which themselves are rooted in material processes. Drugs are polyvalent technologies, scattering and realigning the brain’s chemicals into a plethora of ups, downs, ecstasies and epiphanies, as the self realigns itself into psychologically altered territories. But it is also useful here to acknowledge that affects and emotions are shared. Moreover, the recognition that an external object – the drug – can fundamentally alter the self, problematises the notion that feeling comes solely

from within, and can be established as an object for individual ownership. If we instead consider the process of feeling as a moment of exchange between interior and exterior, there remains the possibility of an emotional mode of shared collaboration. Yet this relinquishing of ownership also opens up the possibility of emotional control, as was particularly apparent in the War on Drugs, when the apparatus of the state entered into this dynamic. As the state holds more influence than the individual user, the status of drug use slips from one of collaboration into one of manipulation, predicated on the illegal status of a chosen drug. Moshfegh's narrator, however, avoids this problem, as the drugs she uses are legal: rather than providing illicit affects, they instead draw attention to their absence.

As a source of affects, drugs are a matter of dosage. What is a cure can also be a poison, and what is an anaesthetic in the hospital can also function as a means of social escape. But there is a fine line between the doctor and the dealer. The narrator confuses this sometimes-tenuous distinction between the medical and the criminal through misdiagnosis. Seeking the chemical means to facilitate her hibernation, she enlists the services of the chaotic, unsound psychiatrist, Dr. Tuttle. 'Are you DEA? FDA? NICB? NHCAA?' Tuttle asks during their first conversation. 'I think I have insomnia', the narrator replies (19). Of course, it is not a cure that she desires, which would entail a return to the social, but a means to thicken the walls of the self against it. However, by conflating medical authority outright with criminality, Moshfegh leaves us with the question of how the individual and the collective relate. What are the responsibilities of both parties here, and what exactly would lead the individual to reject this relationship?

While Moshfegh presents the narrator's journey as one individual's quest, it is nonetheless rooted in the social by its placement within the communal

economic sphere of supply and demand. This is realised through the narrator's relation to the realm of purchasable objects, in the form of paid-for medical subscriptions. Furthermore, it is not only through the drug economy that the narrator feels this exposure. Her main interaction with the world, beyond the previously mentioned instances of touch, is through the means of commodity consumption. Her perspective, then, is one of a procession of moving images, sensations, and purchases that not so much remove the presence of the pain, as prevent its development into an object of contemplation: 'that was how I mourned, I guess. I paid strangers to make me feel good' (157). The emphasis on feeling here is crucial, as it betrays the narrator's reliance on, and inability to escape, the affect network of the socius. This mode of feeling becomes so hegemonic that her relationship with Reva is equivalent to the consumption of commodities: 'Reva was like the pills I took. They turned everything, even hatred, even love, into fluff I could bat away' (166).

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant writes: 'When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us'.³ This one-sided relation to the object echoes Marx: 'Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., – in short, when it is used by us [...] in the place of all physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses, the sense of having'.⁴ On these terms, the narrator's solo quest of unfeeling fails on the grounds of its individuality. By pursuing this mission on the terms of the

³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011) p.23.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. Third Manuscript* (2000) p.45.

commodity, she cannot escape her own involvement in structures of possession and domination, as well as their concomitant affects. For this reason, a useful framework for considering the text might be Raymond Williams' conception of 'Structures of Feeling', entailing an analysis of the social 'meanings and values which are lived in works and relationships'.⁵ For instance, Williams discusses how a societal imperative of consumption establishes a very particular relationship between the individual and society:

If we were not consumers, but users, we might look at society very differently, for the concept of use involves general human judgments [...] whereas consumption, with its crude hand-to-mouth patterns, tends to cancel these questions, replacing them by the stimulated and controlled absorption of the products of an external and autonomous system.⁶

By this light, the narrator fails to challenge the dominant ideology, perhaps the root of her discomfort: that of capitalistic turn-of-the century New York. Instead, she retreats into the repetitions of this ideology of consumption as it exists at the level of the individual. It is not that Moshfegh denies the influence of this environment; indeed, the novel's setting plays an integral role in its shocking denouement. Yet despite the overwhelming presence of commodity-induced affect on the narrative, the implications are not followed through. Indeed, the novel's conclusion may even appear to affirm its protagonist's choice. This may be seen to reveal not just the limits of the narrator's own unfeeling, but also the

⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Chatto and Windus, 1961) p.293.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.297.

limitations of psychodrama as a genre, in terms of its narrow focus on the plight of individuals.

This is not to say that the novel is a failure. It is an engaging and intriguing investigation of an individual psyche. And one that also manages to evocatively portray the culturally suffocating sensibility of its setting. In depicting a path of self-destruction, I would argue, Moshfegh has indeed set out to shock, and has succeeded. This propensity to shock is perhaps the work's strongest appeal and its lasting achievement. While it may be unfair to criticise the text on terms that it does not engage with, it is nonetheless worth noting its limitations. Shock as a narrative strategy can only go so far before it is extinguished. And sleep can only last so long before we must wake.