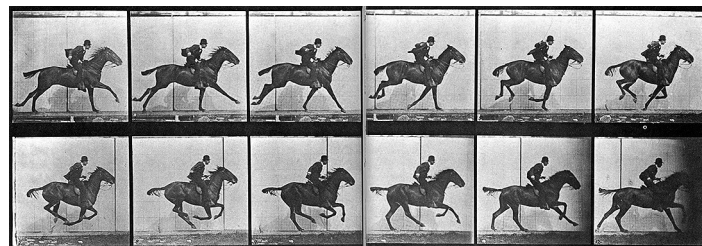


On Hannah Regel's Oliver Reed
Olivia Kan-Sperling

At age eighteen, a freshman in college, I signed up to be taught how to read, look, and watch. In the introductory lecture course of what used to be called the Semiotics department of my university, the first image that appeared in our coursebook was Eadweard Muybridge's "Horse in Motion,"¹ which captures the galloping gait of a horse and its gentleman rider over the course of twelve black-and-white photographs. We learned how this document sequencing an animal's movement was, in a way, the first film. By the end of the semester, we'd see how reading done well is basically always about cutting things up very slowly and/or refracting them in many mirrors held at different positions. I fell in love easily with this game of signs and scissors, looking vs. looked-at; it came to me naturally; after all, growing up, I was a ballerina.



1) Sequence of a horse galloping by Eadweard Muybridge (d.1904). Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Muybridge_horse_gallop.jpg.
Muybridge was a wild kind of man who became even more so after suffering a blow to the head in a stagecoach crash caused by a runaway horse.

I think the first poem I ever read on my own was Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," in which she explains how her father—or maybe, every father—is like a Nazi. And how hot that is! Famously: "Every woman adores a Fascist / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute

like you.” It’s a great poem because it’s such an obvious one. Like Plath’s “Ariel,” the poem that titles the post-humous collection in which “Daddy” first appeared in 1965, *Oliver Reed* is poetry about girls and horses. Girls like Sylvia Plath love horses, and Regel writes about how they are *like* horses: pretty, glossy, submissive—though sometimes not—and totally disgusting.

The collection is the story of an education like mine. This familiar fairy tale recurs over several sections, the titles of which imply a kind of protagonist: “Sorry Gets Hooved,” and then “Sorry is a Girl, Grown Up.” Like so, Regel brilliantly transmutes that most feminine of linguistic gestures or reflexes into a name and a character. Sorry discovers “the furnished dream of a hip bone / softly concave under pale jeans.” Sorry drinks glittery apple cider vinegar. Sorry learns many lessons; Sorry forgets them. Sorry’s “little costumed lines are incisions against the urge,” and of course she loves to play dress-up! This scene of our reading, an “allegory of bleeding”²: Regel cuts quickly from image to image, and her syntax is simple and brutal, somehow constrained—a grammar for girls. Between the tight lines of her sentences, she materialises an awful, sorrowful need, but also a cold and perverse satisfaction.

2) In “Allegories of Bleeding,” the introduction to his *The Violence of Reading* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming in 2024), Dominik Zechner writes: “Instead of putting up a resistance to language as such, pain divests linguistic structures of their unreliable secondary functions”—communication, representation, etc—“and discloses an occurrence of language divided from the constraints that subjugate its experience under the supremacy of phenomenal representation.” In other words, pain is poetry. As every Tumblr girl already knows.

Sorry might be on *Skins*; she also reminds me of the “pale blogs” that first introduced me to Sylvia Plath, which mostly depicted underweight, underage girls with pale pink lines striating their thin wrists. These girls were later banned from Tumblr and from polite culture more generally for promoting aesthetics and ideas that are simultaneously dangerous and distastefully self-indulgent. Sorry, I think, much like pale bloggers and horse girls, would be an annoying kind of girl, especially in 2024. Girls are incredibly annoying when they apologise too much. I am sure many gentlemen riders have told her she does not need to say sorry, but Sorry just can’t stop. The blurbs on the back cover describe Regel’s poems as “discomforting,” and their subject as the “all too familiar subjugation of women.” If they are discomforting to some, it is because, in 2024, women’s subjugation, especially poetry about it, is truly “all too familiar”—like beating a dead horse, perhaps—and maybe such poems are all a bit too much to hear? But Sorry just will not stop saying her name. Perhaps this is why Regel’s collection, clever and darkly funny, often has the sound of the kind of slapstick comedy we have learned is misogynistic. But Sorry does not come when she is called! “Sorry!” is just the instinctive flip of the mane a pony makes when in pleasure or pain.

If horse girls are disgusting as well as annoying, it’s because of how much they like being like horses: how much they adore “the boot in the face”—and then how much they read, talk, and write about it. Literally ad nauseam. When Sorry vomits, glitter comes back up; maybe we are just as disgusting for insisting on reading it. In short, *Oliver Reed* is a gif-set or refrain recalling what we’re

told in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*: it really is very sad, strange, and specific to be a girl—which is also, as we know from Sofia Coppola's adaption, why it is so awesome. Regel, who cuts up language freely from both movie scripts and their actors' lives, gives us both at once. There is a reason *Rookie* magazine encouraged us all to collage. Horse/girl, book/movie: *Oliver Reed*'s spreads often take form as a diptych the verso of which is graced only by a description, way at bottom, of a cinematic scene, either real or imagined, and starring, for instance, Sarah Jessica Parker. These terse texts are inserted, like captions, below whitespace: and just like that, a blank page is made into a projection screen. "What happens," Regel writes, following a vignette of a horse being butchered in front of Jennifer Lopez, "is as secret as lip gloss." And thus she shows us what we'd rather not tell: the kinds of scenes already on our mind. *Oliver Reed* dramatises once more for us how girls like to play the roles they are given; it also acts on us as multimedia performance. This is what gives Regel's poetry a resemblance in reverse to twelve stills of a moving horse in an over-xeroxed semiotics coursebook. *Oliver Reed* is less a book about Hollywood than its echo or hoof print, a printed copy replaying whatever has been left for dead on the cutting-room floor.

Just like reading the work of a 19th century photographer interested in animal locomotion, flipping through the pages of *Oliver Reed* really fast might feel like watching yourself from the corner of your eye while walking down a street, as a reflection in high heels appearing and disappearing from store windows: familiar. In other words, it might give you the impression of watching a film in which the director keeps screaming

"cut, cut, cut!", of the same lines being said, each clip, anew. In *Oliver Reed*, growing-up happens naturally, *clip clip clop*, at the same time as it requires someone or something—line break or literal incision—to break you in. *Oliver Reed* is about how a pony body gets trained and a pony mind gets educated, over and over and over again. Time, in this book, loops more than it progresses: "Sorry attends her Birth" after "Sorry is a Girl, Grown Up." I wish I'd read *Oliver Reed* at fourteen or eighteen; then again, I sort of feel like I did. This we already know: if looking at young girls never gets old, writing about them doesn't, either.

The originality of *Oliver Reed* lies therefore in Regel's talent for making her stark sentences ring like "expressions." Not the personal kind, those of convention: stock images or sayings. "Sorry" is a word we use daily, abused just a little bit. I think phrases become proverbs mainly because they sound really nice; then they become true. "I take praise the way a baby takes it, with a fist in its mouth"—for example. This is a book that has chewed up our common sense language and spit it back out, much like how teenagers are said to mimic pornography without really understanding it, but of course, they do. "Those days it was just people, places, and things," is the kind of line I can imagine being spoken, in voice-over or in-character, by Lindsay Lohan or Liz Taylor.

Then there are other, quiet lines, ones hard to imagine being spoken aloud at all. Some of them I tried on myself, just to see. You know how in response to a question a girl like Sorry might say "I'm doing just fine," at the same time as beginning to cry? It's strange

how some words can do that, I mean seem easier than they are; I mean bring forth a tremor in your voice you didn't know was there before; I mean also—maybe, like—produce something like an animal instinct, a cry in response. Like what happened to me when I staged myself whispering the following lines, which also double nicely as a scene describing the reading of *Oliver Reed*: “When no one is home I stand unclothed and mimic the movements of swans on Youtube / The dry heave of this fulfilment fills the soft room of time.” In the mirror of ballet class, I arch my back; I dip my neck; I plunge my stupid eyes down below the surface of the water—I'm sorry, I don't know what else to say.

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