CATS (AND CREDITORS) DO NOT EXIST

Christopher S. Wood

And the grocer, thumping his accounts book with his fist, would reply. Don’t come to me with that old story, I have heard it before, the summer comes and goes, and the dog will still be barking, because debts are like dogs, what a funny idea, I wonder who first thought of it...

Literature is an unclosed transaction in the sense that one party, the reader, considers the work a gift outright and not a loan, that is, a provisional displacement of property which must one day be replaced. For this reason, literary debts are understood as chimerical obligations that need not be repaid. Plagiarism is theorized away as imitation; successful creative performances redeem larceny. “Toute l’histoire des arts pourrait être envisagée sous l’aspect d’un jeu d’emprunts et de prêts—qui font moins problème que leur restitution—, un échange à distance où l’oubli ne joue pas moins son rôle que la mémoire et la vraie ou fausse reconnaissance.”

Every debt, including the everyday monetary debt, becomes a literary debt as soon as it is understood as an unfinished transaction. The creditor wants to know one thing: when will the transaction be closed? Whereas the debtor may prefer to ask another question: does it really need to be closed?

1 José Saramago, Raised from the Ground (London: Harvill Secker, 2012), 82.
2 This essay is based on a paper delivered in March 2014 at the annual ACLA conference, in the session “Literary Debts: On Borrowed Time,” organized by Nimrod Reitman and Kurt Hollender.

In literary terms: the writer/creditor wants to know: when and how will you acknowledge that the text I wrote changed the way you think and write? And the reader/debtor says, in line with Freud’s “kettle logic”: I learned nothing from you, there was nothing new in your text, anyway it is too late, your text has merged with my own thoughts and there is no way to reverse the flow, and moreover the work I am writing now will be much better than yours.

 Literary debts remain unpaid because the reader unilaterally decides to opt out of the transaction. The social institution of monetary debt, however, depends on both parties agreeing that the debtor’s careless attitude is impertinent and that only the creditor’s question—when does the debt get paid?—is meaningful. Today, however, the literary debtor’s question—do I need really need to pay this?—is emerging from its hiding place in the innermost recesses of the despairing monetary debtor’s heart and re-appearing in objectified form in public life: in the debates about student debt, for example, or national debts. Increasingly one hears that creditors also in the real world are wishful thinkers, inhabitants of a self-constructed fantasy, exploiting the superegos of the debtors who have acquiesced in a Protestant-driven internalization, and ethicization, of abstract social goals. The polemics of the anthropologist David Graeber and the sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato are exemplary of this tendency. For Lazzarato, the modern person’s very capacity for memory, his sense of his own extension through time, has been structured by the institution of debt: “Debt is not only an economic mechanism, it is also a security-state technique of government aimed at reducing the uncertainty of the behavior of the governed. By training the governed to ‘promise’ (to honor their debt), the state exercises ‘control over the future,’ since debt obligations allow one to foresee, calculate, measure, and establish equivalences between current and future behavior.”

In 1919, Germany, since the start of the war no longer on the gold standard, was obliged to pay 226 billion gold marks in reparations, the equivalent of more than 800 billion dollars today. The debt depleted the country’s gold reserves and Germany was never able to return to the gold standard. A few years later, the government produced huge quantities of new currency not backed by wealth and the country spiraled into hyperinflation. The mistake was not repeated: in 1953 Germany’s war debts, including 16 billion marks left over from the First World War, were restructured in terms favorable to Germany. The last payment of 70 million euros was made in 2010.

The creditor is “the one who believes,” in German the Gläubiger. The creditor has chosen to believe in the likelihood that a stranger, unbound by ties of kinship or friendship, will repay a loan. If the creditor is not credulous, he will ask for a pledge, a security, that is, a claim on a real property that can...
be activated in case of nonpayment of the debt. But such a pledge or mortgage cannot always be relied on. The creditor assuages his own uncertainty by convincing the borrower—involving abstract and collectively endorsed principles—that he must not question his obligation to repay. The pledge and the ethical imperative to repay are attempts to stave off forgetfulness, or amnesia. Debt amnesia—amnesty—is an option for the creditor, not the borrower.

Literary and artistic debt is an imperfect analogue to monetary debt. The artistic creditor transfers not property but rather something unquantifiable and unbounded: meaning. The literary text or artwork is not targeted, like a loan, but disseminated. It is displayed, made public, exposed to any passing plunderer. The one who crafts the work can only retain a kind of title to the work by remote control: by tagging the text with a referential sign that is proof against the devastations of dissemination, namely, a name. The creditor believes, hopes, that in the flow of allusion and recombination her name will be remain attached to her text, or to some recognizable fragments of her text. This hope is clouded by ambiguity about what is being tagged. What is the unit of text that the onomastic label attaches to? Not the word, usually, but possibly the phrase, certainly the sentence or paragraph. But what about the conceit, the shape, the sound of the text; can they be borrowed in bad faith, or stolen?

At stake in the literary transaction is not the location of property, as with monetary debts, but the acknowledgement in some public forum of the adhesion of the authorial name to some aspect of a text, which takes the form of “crediting,” or “giving credit,” to the author. This usage is ambiguous, because in the monetary sphere “credit” is a quality that adheres to the borrower. The borrower enjoys credit when lenders believe that he will repay his debts. In the sphere of creativity, the borrower repays his debt, and so realizes the lender’s prior belief, by signaling that he is aware that the lender was an originator, a generator, a cause, a source who implicitly—simply by virtue of publishing his text—“believed” in the fair play of his readers. The author is never actually “repaid.” It is considered enough simply to enjoy the status of the creditor. The fair assignation of such “credit” is too important to be left to borrowers, however. The assignation of credit is policed by a community of readers, editors, critics, and scholars who share an interest in the just estimation of literary causes and effects. In the case of artistic or literary debt, where there is usually no paper trail that marks the transaction, meaning are by their nature perceived differently by everyone. Intertextuality flows relentlessly away from its source; the flow ramifies. It is interesting that the lender (author) may not insist that the borrower herself acknowledge her debt, so long as the borrower’s debt is publicized by the community. It is not

so different with money: the creditor does not care where the money comes from so long as the debt is repaid.

This essay focuses on a little drama of real and imagined debts that played out between 1919 and 1921 on the shores of Lake Geneva. Only in a child’s world is a drama so simple and so ambiguous. In June 1919 Rainer Maria Rilke paid a call on acquaintances living in Geneva, the art historian Erich Klossowski and his wife Elizabeth, known as Baladine. Rilke and Baladine began an affair that would last until the poet’s death in 1926. Over the next year he saw a great deal of Baladine and her talented sons Pierre and Balthasar, known to the family as Baltusz.

Rilke was struck by a series of drawings, in black ink, by the eleven-year-old Balthasar, narrating the appearances and disappearances of a stray cat. The boy found the cat while on a family excursion to the Chateau of Nyon. He named the cat Mitsou, cared for her, clutched her jealously, lost her, found her again, and then lost her for good. The cat’s namesake would seem to have been the eponymous heroine of the novel published by Colette in 1919, Mit-
The little tale played out against a background of parental, domestic, and financial instability; many unpaid debts, not enough money for servants, and the like.

Rilke’s judgment about the talent of his new lover’s son was surely clouded, and how could it not have been? Yet he had not overestimated the eleven-year-old’s gift.

Rilke arranged to have the Mitsou drawings published with a press in Zurich, Rotapfel. The contract arrived on November 24, 1920, and two days later Rilke composed an introductory essay. This was the first text Rilke ever published that he had originally written in French, the language that would dominate his last years.

Mitsou: Quarante images par Baltusz, a book measuring 9 x 7 inches and reproducing the boy’s drawings one to a page, without captions, appeared in summer 1921. The drawings won many admirers, including the painter Pierre Bonnard. On December 21, 1921, the publisher Kurt Wolff wrote to Rilke: “Das Vermögen dieses kleinen Jungen, seinem Erlebnis zeichnerischen Ausdruck zu geben, ist wunderbar und fast erschreckend.”

Rilke framed the project, drawings and publication, as a miniature “crisis of debt.” He began his essay by asking: “Qui connaît les chats?—Se peut-il, par exemple, que vous prétendiez les connaitre? J’avoue que, pour moi, leur existence ne fut jamais qu’une hypothèse passablement risquée.” Cats are a risky hypothesis. What is a hypothesis? It is something “placed under,” from the Greek verb *hypotithéin*. The Latin translation of this word gave us our word “supposition.” A hypothesis or supposition is a statement that is taken to be reliably true and so capable of serving as an explanation for a set of phenomena. A hypothesis can possess more or less solidity. If it is likely to be true, it is a basis for further reasoning. If its truth value is yet to be established, then it is merely a theory and will need to be verified by further ob-

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7 Schnack, *Rilke: Chronik*, 750. “The capacity of this little boy to give his experience graphic expression is wonderful and almost terrifying.”

8 Rilke’s preface is reprinted in *Sämtliche Werke*, 6: 1099-1103 as well as in the catalogue of the Paris exhibition of 1983.
A theory may not have much value as a pledge. Hypotithénai also means to place a pledge or security under a debt. The pledge is a claim on real (not theoretical) property in favor of the creditor. If the borrowed sum is not repaid, the lender can seize the pledge, sometimes called a mortgage, a “hypothec,” or a security because it relieves the lender of his cares (the word “security” derives from the Latin sine cura, “without care”). The hypothec is something real that allows for the carrying out of the unreal, subjunctive transaction, namely, the loan or the “argument.”

The cat, for example, is a pledge or hypothesis that is offered by nature, or the gods, that permits the “argument” that is humanity. But Rilke doubts the solidity or reality of the pledge. To be real, the placer of the pledge must risk something. The word “pledge” derives in part from the Old English pliht, meaning danger or risk. “Pledge” is cognate both with the word “plight,” as in “to plight a troth,” and the German Pflicht, duty or obligation (from Old High German pliht, care, obligation, risk). The etymology reveals that to engage oneself, to take on a debt, is to put oneself in danger. The offer of the mortgage is a way for the borrower to share the risk with the lender. In societies where honor is highly valued, a borrower might also offer a pledge in the form of a promise or oath. Today, honor is cheap. To be sure, a credit rating, which is a quantification of honor, is valued. Nevertheless mere oaths are not usually accepted today as substitutes for securities.

The existence of cats, according to Rilke, is a risky hypothesis. He means that a supposition about the reality of cats—as opposed to the phenomenon of cats, or the subjective experience of interacting with cats—is not a solid basis for proceeding with life. Cats are deceptive. The artist who tries to create art based on his experience of cats, but offering the real existence of cats as his security, runs a risk. The artist who takes the cat as his hypothesis may never fulfill his debt to the rest of us, namely, to deliver the truth.

Balthus tried to hold onto that supposed reality, tightly, jealously, tried to make it real and lasting, a little less like a hypothesis and more like an established fact. The boy needed facts in his unstable life. A hypothec, mortgage, or pledge is a burden imposed by the past on the present. The boy needed his own past, brief as it was, to provide some ballast in his present life. He needed to create and recreate his childhood as a stable whole such that it could later serve to stabilize his adult life. Rilke notes the risk involved in admitting the cat into one’s life, in accepting the burden of the hypothesis of its reality, as you clasp it to yourself and try to force it to stabilize as a reality in your world.

The cat was insouciant, says Rilke in his essay, “careless,” and therefore secure. The cat appears to be a solid reality that we can bank on. The cat soothes our cares because it has no cares. Balthus has precociously subscribed to a logic of indebtedness to nature in his jealous displacement of his youthful cares onto his careless cat, waiting for adulthood when nature will supposedly pay its debt to him, give him knowledge and wealth and so pay the debt it owes to the child, the debt underwritten by the cat. This, I think, is Rilke’s conceit.
Do not forget that this is a story about loss. In his preface, Rilke recounts the simple narrative, giving words to the forty drawings that depict the discovery, captivity, and two flights of the cat Mitsou. In the end, the cat is irremediably absent, and yet (presumably) not dead. The cat survives in the child’s memory, and then survives again in the drawings, a burden not on us adults but on the child.

Rilke chides the child, but provisionally, gently, and in the end accepts the conceit of a debt to nature. He raises the possibility that Balthus owes the artwork to the cat. Rilke explains to the child directly that this is an unpaid debt: Mitsou “survit en vous, et sa gaieté de petit chat insouciant, après vous avez amusé, vous oblige: vous avez du l’exprimer par les moyens de votre tristesse laborieuse.”

The cat’s gaiety oblige you, he says to Balthus. You had no choice but to “express” your debt by making these drawings. And yes, Rilke says, here you are a year later, consoled, the slate wiped clean.

What does it mean to say that the boy made the pictures because he owed the cat a debt on account of his having been “amused” by the cat? Is that why artworks are made in general? Are they a way of repaying nature or the world for having given us some pleasure or knowledge? If so, who receives the payment? The conceit requires an anthropomorphism, in this case of a cat, an entity moving back and forth between nature and culture. The cat is not so like a person that it would think to collect on its debt. The cat is less than a person, but also more than a person: like a god, as we already noted. The cat is like a god who has appeared but then withdrawn. The cat is eccentric to our lives. Martin Heidegger commented on the liminal status of the pet, a creature that lives among us and yet not entirely:

Let us consider the case of domestic animals as a striking example. We do not describe them as such simply because they turn up in the house but because they belong to the house, i.e., they serve the house in a certain sense. […] We keep domestic pets in the house with us, they ‘live with us.’ But we do not live with them if living means: being in an animal kind of way. Yet we are with them nonetheless. But this being-with is not an existing-with, because a dog does not exist but merely lives. Through this being with animals we enable them to move within our world. We say that the dog is lying under the table or is running up the stairs and so on. Yet when we consider the dog itself—does it comport itself toward the table as table, toward the stairs as stairs? All the same, it does go up the stairs with us. It feeds with us—and yet, we do not really ‘feed.’ ‘It eats with us—and yet, it does not really ‘eat.’ And yet with us! A going along, a transposedness—and yet not.11

All this is even more true about cats. Balthus with his leash tried to steer the cat into the human sphere, but he failed. The cat is eccentric and therefore auto-centric: the cat is its own center and as such can serve as a figure for the modern artwork itself. “Car si modernité voulait dire quelque chose,” suggests Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, “ce pourrait être surtout cela, cette remise en cause d’une centralité qui croit se maintenir par l’établissement de l’excentrique ou du marginal comme tels.” The narcissistic dandy, like the cat, “refuse l’idée même d’excentricité parce qu’il refuse d’être situé par rapport à une centralité qu’il rejette.” The cat, Lebensztejn points out, “qui affecte de ne considérer l’homme que le satellite de sa propre centralité, fut longtemps considéré comme un être diabolique…” “L’époque classique avait fait du chat un symbole de l’altérité; elle assurait ainsi sa propre centralité.”12 In the classical period, the ancien régime, state and church maintained a strong centripetal pull on art, creating as eccentric that diabolic art that would, in modernity, find its own feline self-assurance. Balthus, not quite yet a modernist at age eleven, feared not the cat’s alterity but was unprepared to let the cat drift in and out of his life as modern artworks do. He wanted to pull it toward the center, make it share in his own childish auto-centricity.

The imperfect concept of the debt owed to the cat, or nature, is Rilke’s way of screening two other, real debts, which are every artist’s debt, child or adult: first, the debt to other artists, and second, the debt to the rest of humanity in

12 Lebensztejn, “Centre perdu,” in Déplacements, 91-93.
exchange for the "gift" of distinctive talent which justifies exceptional status. Paul Cézanne said in a letter of 1905 to Émile Bernard: "Je vous dois la vérité en peinture et je vous la dirai" ("I owe you the truth in painting and I shall tell it to you.") Cézanne's formula is obscure, for "truth," unless it is a secret, can be shared without loss of value. Cézanne did not seem to be interested in keeping secrets. His truth was a truth that he could possess even after the payment of his debt. Why does Cézanne "owe" the truth? Because he alone knew where to find it, and how. The word "truth" emerged out of a matrix of words denoting ties between people: trow (to believe, archaic), troth, truce, trust. The roots are the Old English treow, faith, pledge, truce; Old English true, steadfast, trustworthy; and Middle English trusten, to trust. Middle English trowthe, pledge, is a doublet of "truth," that is, a similar word derived from the same root. "Truth" implies solidarity between people. That is why Cézanne owes it. It is a subjective, non-scientific understanding of truth. "Truth," if one follows the etymology, is by definition owed, so Cézanne's assumption of debt is supererogatory.

Rilke, comfortable within the circle of his feline conceit, pulls out of this heavy relationship to the rest of humanity, instead pretending for a moment that the creditor is located in an extrahuman sphere. Rilke theorizes the work of art as a sacrifice made in gratitude to an eccentric god, who may or may not drift back into our sphere. It is a votive offering that balances the accounts with the god. The cat is the placeholder within the fiction for a god-like creditor, a Gläubiger, who believes the boy will repay his debt but who, eccentric god that he is, does not bother to stick around to collect it. The cat himself parodies Rilke's image of him as a god when he tenders the classic, pointless sacrificial offering, a gift that the cat's god, the boy, does not want: the dead mouse.

Rilke's entire framing fable about cats as god-like apparitions is a consoling fantasy because it offers an impossible image of a self-contained system of literary or artistic value that does not resemble the tangled, unresolved poetry and life of the adult. Rilke with his caprice about cats as fugitive gods is installing himself as a meta-god who is twice removed from the fray, because he can survey with equanimity and with complicated but de-eroticized love for the boy Balthus and admire—without envy!—his naive but perfect drawings. Rilke, through this publication project to which he devoted himself, removes himself temporarily from the transactions of envy, ambition, and poetic creation.

In a "pedagogical" model of art, the teacher learns innocence from the pupil. Rilke learns from the boy, the boy learns from the cat. The pedagogical model is an attempt to escape the adult model where all are equally respon-


girls draped on chairs, not to mention cats. The boy-genius of Geneva survives in the grown-up oeuvre as his own Other, his pre-teen Eve. The adult Balthus displaced the animal/human threshold onto the child/adult threshold.

It is notable that Balthus’s family name, Klossowski, did not appear anywhere in the publication, except encrypted in Rilke’s fanciful dedication to “Arsène Davitcho B. K.” It was the boy’s father, Erich, who insisted on this anonymity. Erich Klossowski was an art historian whose dissertation of 1902 had mainly involved attributions to a nearly-forgotten German painter of the seventeenth century, Michael Willmann, known as the “Silesian Rembrandt,” a completely unoriginal, derivative painter. The suppression of the name must have contributed to the artist’s later self-mythologizing self-appellation as simply “Balthus,” an artist known, like Rembrandt, or like a god, by a single name.

The father Erich’s jealous concealment of his own family name, refusing to lend it to Rilke’s fantasy, reminds us also that Rilke was conducting this entire adventure within the context of a ménage à trois, an acrobatic performance under any circumstances. The father Erich in these years was slipping in and out of the lives of the mother Baladine and her two boys, as they struggled to pay their debts. Besides Rilke there was also Baladine’s brother in the picture, the successful but derivative portrait painter Eugen Spiro. This constant switching of father figures in the lives of the boys may account for the mysterious substitutions of the adult male characters in the drawings: there are at least three, and it is not sure which is the real father. (The brother Pierre, by the way, is completely absent from the drawings.)

The precarity of Rilke’s position in the family elicited his intense, loving solicitude toward the boys and especially the younger one, Balthus, his favorite. Rilke’s generous sponsorship of the eleven-year-old prodigy, putting his own reputation for artistic judgment on the line, is an attempt to pay a debt he owed to the cuckolded father, a compensation which the father handsomely rejects; and to the disoriented boy himself, of course. To the mother, Baladine, his lover, Rilke presumably owed no debt.

The poet’s micro-treatise on artistic debt is entangled in a web of familial emotions, reminding us—in tune with the contemporary critics of debt—of the contamination of the concept of debt as a mode of distribution of wealth.
Cats (and Creditors)

by guilt, a word derived from the Old English *gylt*, crime, sin, which is of obscure origins but seems related to Old Norse *skuld*, sin, guilt, and Old High German *sculd*, debt, which yields both German *Schuld*, debt, guilt, and English “shall” and “should.” “Guilt” in modernity designates no longer the crime itself but the burden of the crime, even the subjective, emotional burden.

Rilke misjudges if he thinks that the boy-artist owes no artistic debts. Rilke reveals his fantasy of artistic originlessness in a letter to Charles Vildrac of December 13, 1920, describing the boy’s “narrative brush which steadily advances from one image to the next like the happy utterance of someone who can, between his memories and his inventions, naïvely select the significant and essential feature which sustains continuity.”¹⁵

The child’s gift is astonishing. The drawings are simple, direct, dense. They strike modernist notes of menace and claustrophobia. Where did this naive but knowing style come from? The elegant, eloquent woodcuts of the Swiss artist Félix Vallotton are an obvious source.

Vallotton developed this style in the 1890s under the influence of Japanese woodblock prints.¹⁶ It is also the style of the Belgian artist Frans Masereel, who published in 1918 in Geneva the very first graphic novel, *25 images de la passion d’un homme*.¹⁷ (It would be published in 1921 in Germany, under the title *Die Passion eines Menschen*, by Kurt Wolff, in the same year that Wolff had admired Balthus’s drawings.) Masereel’s second graphic novel, comprising 165 woodcuts, was published in 1919 in Geneva as *Mon Livre d’Heures*. This appeared the following year in Germany with Wolff.

¹⁵Weber, Balthus, 46.

¹⁶See the recent exhibition catalogue *Vallotton: Le feu sous la glace*, ed. Guy Cogeval et al. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2013), no. 89. See also the series *Intimités* of 1897/98, a portfolio of ten woodcuts.

Masereel’s style is exactly the style of Balthus’s drawings. The scenes are all rendered in a single tone. Line and tone are one substance. The drawings are holistic; everything is connected, fluid. Urgent emotions are spread on the same plane with objects. The near-square format signals the completeness, the microcosmic, claustrophobic, airless quality of the scenes. There is no escape.

On July 7, 1919, in the summer of the blossoming of his romance with Baladine, Rilke sent a copy of Masereel’s *Livre d’heures* to the publisher Anton Kippenberg. In October Rilke saw Frans Masereel in Geneva. In February 1920 Masereel visited Rilke in Locarno. Masereel is everywhere, his woodcut novels are in the Klossowski household. Masereel’s woodcuts revert to a frank, immediate, emotionally saturated pictorial language which he thought he had found in late medieval woodcuts, folk art, and the drawings of children. This is feedback: the child Balthus recognizes the adult Masereel’s pseudo-naive style as the most adequate possible vehicle for his own naive experiences. Who is the child here, and who is the adult?

But Rilke absolved little Balthus of his artistic debts, never mentioning Masereel or any other art historical reference point in his introduction or his letters. Rilke was eager to forgive Balthus his debts, because he wanted everyone else to forget his own debts.

The debt-free insouciance of the work, its solvency, and the finitude of the emotions that generated it are all Rilke’s fantasies. In fact, the real anguish behind *Mitsou* is not so easily rubbed out. The supposed “continuity” of the boy’s experience, praised by Rilke in his letter to Vildrac, is not a quality of the artwork, that is, a quality achieved by the artwork as a repairing compensation, but rather is the very continuity and density of jealousy.

The boy has displaced onto the cat his frustration with his own inability to stabilize his mother. He makes the cat, of all animals, wear a leash. He forces the cat to play. He closes off the cat’s world with vine-covered and wallpapered walls.

The claustrophobia of the relation between boy and cat survives the discharge of creativity and persists as a quality of the drawings. The arabesque barriers are like the Greek choruses described by Georg Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel*: “the chorus was able to provide a background which closes the work in the same way as the marble atmospheric space between the figures in a relief closes the frieze, yet the background of the chorus is also full of movement and can adapt itself to all the apparent fluctuations of a dramatic action…. ” In a Greek tragedy, says Lukács, “speaker and chorus are of the same fundamental essence, they are completely homogeneous with one another and therefore fulfill completely different functions without destroying the structure of the work.”

What binds the drawings together, and gives the meaning to that claustrophobia that Kurt Wolff found so “terrifying,” erschreckend, is the boy’s jealousy. In his fear of mistaking his father, he becomes a stern father to his cat. He transforms the scene of play into a scene of pedagogy and discipline. One is reminded of the cat-like, autocentric Albertine Simonet, bringing anguish to Proust’s narrator Marcel by constantly appearing and disappearing. Albertine made her initial entry into Proust’s novel in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, which was published in 1919.

The work of art re-creates the entire triangle of jealousy as the apex of yet another triangle, extending the relay of desire. It is not enough to look at the publication of 1921, one wants to see the original Mitsou drawings. That was not possible until 2013 when where for the first time the forty Mitsou drawings were shown in public, in the exhibition *Balthus: Cats and Girls* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Now we, too, like Balthus,

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have been “amused.” And who is our creditor, the one who fondly “believes” we will repay the debt? That is the predicament that Rilke wants to put us in, us readers and admirers: to owe a debt we can never repay.

Rilke was caught in a logic of debt because in his time the symbolic authorities that underwrite art were discredited. Art in 1919 was seeking a new contract with society. Rilke turned to the business model. Rilke was at first offering Balthus’s graphic labor of grief as an inimitable model— inimitable because we cannot be children again—as an ideal model of artistic production, emancipated from the cycle of debt. Balthus, according to Rilke, repaid his debt to the cat (i.e., to nature, or to the gods) for giving him joy and so found satisfaction and re-integration. And as a child he had supposedly incurred no artistic debts, no debts either to art or to other artists; and these are the debts that one is either unwilling or unable to pay off.

We have seen that none of this was true. In weaving his morality fable, Rilke was trying to balance his own accounts. Balthus did owe debts to other artists. But like other artists, including Rilke, he never repaid, that is, acknowledged, all those debts. One of the ways Rilke managed his literary debts was by overstressing his debt to a non-writer, Cézanne: in a letter he says that “after the master’s death, I followed his traces everywhere.”20 Elsewhere, however, Rilke offers a more subtle model of artistic debt, one that absolves him and all other artists. He observes in a letter of 1907 that “Cézanne’s very unique blue is descended from these [Carriera, La Tour, Perronneau, Chardin], it comes from the eighteenth-century blue which Chardin stripped of its pretension and which now, in Cézanne, no longer carries any secondary significance.”21 In other words, Cézanne borrows the blue of the eighteenth-century painters, but he is not culpable because its meaning has changed: already Chardin dislodged it from its aristocratic context, and Cézanne himself further displaced it. Meaning—unlike money—is unstable in time and this redeems its unscrupulous borrowers.

Art, a web of indebtedness, is screened by fictions of authorial control. The fiction of the author’s solvency obscures the web of artistic debt. The concept of the debt of the artist is as vulnerable, as unsustainable, as was the concept of the religious debt. The idea of the anthropomorphized god who might be “disappointed” by us, a creditor-god, a god who “believes” in us, is an idea long since unmasked as a fantasy. Now, today, monetary debt too is said to be a fiction. It is said that creditors do not exist. But that challenge to reality will be harder to sustain, for the creditors today have long since anthropomorphized themselves. The creditors are those other cats, unlike Mitsou, who are quite content to live among us.

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21 Letter of October 8, 1907; Letters on Cézanne, 30.