

TO LIVE FOREVER: ABJECT HORROR IN DONNA TARTT'S *THE SECRET HISTORY*

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In 1992, Donna Tartt, with her debut novel, *The Secret History*, not only created a masterpiece of American literature but also planted the seed for an aesthetic movement and a literary subgenre that would serve as an inspiration to many 30 years later during a time of global pandemic and societal upheaval. Through macabre sensibilities and “morbid longing,” Tartt acutely taps into the innate fear of and attraction to death in Western culture. In *The Secret History*, Tartt demonstrates the theory of the abject—the notion put forth by theorist Julia Kristeva in her essay *Powers of Horror*—that humans are drawn towards death, horror, and disgusting things in a desperate attempt to restore order in society. Throughout the novel, the protagonist Richard becomes a stand-in for the reader, allowing them to approach subjects such as death, intense relationships, and existential dread, mirroring readers’ own fears and encounters with the abject, and creating a kinship between reader and theory.

It is little wonder why *The Secret History* is experiencing a resurgence in popularity and has stoked the Dark Academia aesthetic movement sweeping through popular apps such as TikTok and Instagram while also influencing a wave of fiction under that same subgenre. In the novel, the reader steps into the shoes of Richard Papen as he looks back on the most influential time in his life at a private New England college when he and his friends, all Classics students, murdered their friend in an attempt to cover up a previous murder committed in a Bacchanalian fugue state. Through Richard’s point of view, the reader experiences the horror of murder tinged

with romantic notions of scholarship and fascination with the macabre, hallmarks of the Dark Academia subgenre. In a 2020 *New York Times* article titled “Academia Lives – on TikTok,” journalist Kristen Bateman describes an aesthetic movement of dark tweed and *The Secret History* as an “essential text.” A 2021 *BookRiot* article entitled “What is Dark Academia?” by Abida Jaigirdar credits Tartt’s novel as the beginning of the movement and categorizes it as a “focus on the pursuit of knowledge, and an exploration of death and morbidity.” Journalist Scottie Andrew remarks in a 2022 *CNN* article that students are drawn to the Dark Academia aesthetic in an effort to “romanticize” their former scholarly pursuits and escape a pandemic that forced them into their homes. Even publishing giant Penguin Random House jumped on the trend by creating their “Essential Dark Academia Books” list with *The Secret History* having the distinguished first spot. In the years where schools were being shut down and society itself was retreating from a deadly virus, the world began to confront its own mortality and the crumbling of societal structures. During a global pandemic that caused millions of deaths and ultimately changed societal norms, many experienced the borders of the abject that *The Secret History* reflects, and it is that translation of the abject that draws readers to this book over and over again.

To begin, one must define the abject despite its resistance to definition. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva introduces readers to the theory of abjection by claiming it is neither subject nor object (1). She is building off of Lacan and Freud’s theories, proposing that there is a place between subject and object, between “I” and “Other.” As humans try to make sense of the world around them and enter into what Lacan famously theorized as the symbolic order, there are

spaces where subject or object cannot be assigned. In those spaces lies the abject. As Kristeva explains,

The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning...makes me homologous to it, what is *abject*, to the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.

(1-2)

On a base level, to feel abjection is to reject and be repulsed by reminders of our own mortality. Seeing decay, garbage, rot, or even a corpse repulses us because it causes us to recognize our own death as inevitable. When we feel repulsion, the symbolic order of language, laws, and rules collapses in the face of the nothingness of death. Horror, then, derives itself from this loss of meaning. When we experience crime and deviation from the social order, as Richard does in *The Secret History*, the fear we feel is the abject. Just as easily as we are horrified, we are, in Kristeva's words, the abject's "fascinated victims" (9). That ambiguity, the border between I and Other, draws us in because there is a sort of ecstasy or "violent passion," what Kristeva refers to as "*jouissance*," in that space where there is no meaning yet (9-10). When we set out to experience horror, as in going to a scary movie or reading true crime (or watching the news these days), we seek out the abject, either subjecting ourselves to it for the experience itself or seeking to have our own abject horrors reflected back to us so as to see and name them as is the case with the popularity of *The Secret History*. During the novel, readers experience the abject manifesting in different characters and Richard's perceptions of the world. Told in first person, Richard's

story is a masterclass in abject horror. Although he encounters the abject, he is not able to name it, to identify it for the reader, but he instead mirrors the reader's own horrors so that they might identify and assign meaning themselves. In this text, readers – especially the pandemic era reader – find a translation of the abject horror they feel, a catharsis even.

Tartt confronts the reader with the abject from the very first lines of the prologue, “The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation” (3). Before we know any characters or plot, we are confronted in the opening paragraphs with images of a crime committed, a broken neck, and walking on top of a 10-day old corpse. All of these things are wrong, in contradiction to the norm, abject. Before the reader knows Bunny as a character, he could be anyone, but Tartt has already implicated the reader in his death by saying “we.” The reader could be a part of that grave situation. Then, through the first person perspective, Tartt puts the readers firmly into that existential dread Richard feels: “...walking away, unfortunately, has proved to be quite another, and though once I thought I had left that ravine forever on an April afternoon long ago, now I am not so sure...I have come to realize that while for years I might have imagined myself to be somewhere else, in reality I have been there all the time” (4). Richard, thus, becomes a stand-in for the reader and immediately allows the reader to encounter the abject. When society is disrupted through crime or death, the meaning from the symbolic order that was once there is gone, and what is left is the abject (Kristeva 4). Readers encounter abject horror every day. They are drawn to it like Richard is drawn over and over again to the most horrible and sublime period of his life. Richard cannot move on from the murder he was party to or his friends that reshaped his whole social order and, therefore, lives in an inescapable state of abject fear. To start the

novel in this way signals to readers that the dread Richard feels will be an overt theme throughout the entire novel. While no one but Tartt can definitively say she is exploring Kristeva's theory through this novel, the theme of abject horror will appear again and again from the prologue on.

When readers meet Richard, they find a listless everyman. Tartt's decision to write the novel in first person perspective forces the reader into all of Richard's feelings of restlessness. By doing so, Tartt puts the reader right against the border of the abject with Richard to experience it together and have their own experiences of the abject reflected back to them. Richard describes himself as "consumed by a more general sense of dread" and that his "existence was tainted in some subtle but essential way"(Tartt 8). The feelings of the abject in his life, however small, are present and inescapable. Richard even writes about the abject as if he is quoting directly from Kristeva:

Not long ago I found this passage in an old notebook written when I was eighteen or so:  
"There is to me about this place a smell of rot, the smell of rot that ripe fruit makes. Nowhere, ever, have the hideous mechanics of birth and copulation and death—those monstrous upheavals of life that the Greeks call *miasma*, defilement—been so brutal or been painted up to look so pretty; have so many people put so much faith in lies and mutability and death, death, death." (10-11)

For instance, Kristeva describes what causes feelings of abjection in everyday life—"Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung...The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck"-- and then builds up to the ultimate

cause of abject horror– death (2). As with food aversion and refuse, Kristeva theorizes that encountering reminders of death like a corpse, blood, or decay (the smell of rot in Richard’s case), upset our own, personal social orders, and therefore, we try to escape reminders of our own imminent demise (3). Richard, in being a conduit for the reader, shows his current setting is abject and that he is trying to escape. From his fraught relationship with his parents to his lack of friends, constant reminders of how outside the societal norm he is, Richard’s path seems aimless. He is what Kristeva refers to as a “deject,” someone who “places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (8). He is someone who is trying to free himself from these abject feelings but inevitably draws himself closer to them. Just as death is inescapable, so is the abject.

Though Richard acts as a stand-in for the reader, one cannot completely separate him from his identity as a white man at a private college studying Classics instead of what his lower-middle-class parents would call more "practical" pursuits. While it is true that Richard brushes against more abject horrors surrounding his identity such as his not total disinterest in his male companions and that he spends most of the novel thinking about his lack of wealth compared to that of his companions, Richard cannot speak to or reflect societal horrors such as racism because of his inherently privileged state. He is from a working-class background, and is only in danger of abject poverty once within the novel when he nearly freezes to death during winter break due to a bad housing situation, but even then, by virtue of his position within the school and his position with the Classics students, readers see Richard rescued from the horror of being poor in a capitalist society time and time again (Tartt 120-24). Readers, through Richard, do find a deject, a stray, but he is not entirely separate from the society he benefits from. One

especially sees this in his interactions with members of the college outside the Classics students. In a particularly interesting scene, Richard is able to wield the trust given to a white man by society to his advantage by convincing a male professor to give him an advance on his pay to fix a car that Richard does not have. The professor does not even question the decision even when Richard is not able to give adequate details about the car (24-26). Throughout the novel, Richard openly partakes in illegal drugs, lies to police, and is able to move within these circles that may not have been available to him had he not held the privileges he does. With Richard, the reader is in the unique position to experience the abject through his perspective and also experience abject horror by virtue of his existence. To see the crimes and various lies and facades Richard is allowed to get away with due to the nature of his privilege can bring about a disillusionment with the societal order the reader likely experiences. The reader, knowing that Richard is only allowed the things he is throughout the novel because of his privilege, can envision the true horror someone without Richard's privilege would experience had that person been in his position. Society works largely as intended for Richard in the grander scheme of things, which is particularly ironic seeing that things still go so wrong for him and his group of friends. While Tartt does take great pains to show class issues separating Richard from the other students, Richard's inherent privilege cannot be ignored and presents a horror even he doesn't understand to the reader.

Once Tartt changes Richard's setting from rural, lower-middle class California to the upper echelons of a private New England college, the abject does not simply go away. Meaning isn't just suddenly assigned. Upon arriving at Hampden College (the primary setting for the rest of the novel), Richard finds himself just as alienated and out of sync with the rest of the

university. Although he says he has friends, he does not name them and gives the reader no information about their physicality (Tartt 17). He only seems to be drawn toward a group of exclusive Classics students who are themselves abject, other. When Tartt introduces the five other main characters of the book, austere Henry Winter, "epicene" twins Camilla and Charles Macauley, "angular and elegant" Francis Abernathy, and ill-fated Bunny Corcoran, she automatically sets them apart from the rest of society. The group of students and their enigmatic professor are deemed "highly unapproachable" (19). They are anachronistic in tweed, English suits, and old-fashioned glasses (staples of the Dark Academia aesthetic movement now) (17-8). Richard describes them with morbid comparisons like "a cross between a student prince and Jack the Ripper" and "long-dead celebrants of a forgotten garden party" (18-9). By signaling to the reader through Richard's immediate fascination with them, Tartt is drawing the reader back to the border of the abject. Even though they are set apart from the other students and are outside the social norms, he is drawn to them. This comparison is a metaphor for the abject as the students exist outside the known social structure of the university. Richard is drawn to those who don't yet have meaning in his life. Their otherness draws him. When Richard finally joins their exclusive Classics course, he must cut ties with the rest of the university, further upsetting the social order as he knows it. To be with the Classics students is to be in a constant state of trying and failing to find a foothold amongst them. He attends classes with only them, is invited to their private retreats, and has meals with them, but he is at the perimeter of their friend group, included but not a confidant. He seems to have no place in their social order. They are the abject while Richard remains the wandering deject like the reader. He is, as Kristeva would call him,

their "fascinated victim." The closer he gets to the Classics students and their professor, the closer to abjection Richard becomes.

When enigmatic professor Julian asks his exclusive group of Classics students (and by extension the reader) if we are ready to enter the sublime, he begins the first translation of the abject in *The Secret History*. He is Tarrt telling readers that the novel's underlying thesis is about to be expounded upon. If Kristeva's theory is that the abject is the place that is separate from the "I" and that we experience horror because of that loss of meaning when we lose our sense of "I," it is reasonable to see Julian's lesson on the "loss of self" as an explanation of Kristeva's theory. In the most extensive lesson of the novel, readers are asked to explore madness, "the loss of self," and our own mortality. Kristeva remarks that the "abject is edged with the sublime" (11). She argues that sublimation is the "possibility of naming the prenominal" (11). With both instances, abjection and sublimation, humans fall into a state of meaninglessness. Joy and horror, both indescribable and with no object, draw us to that border of a space without rules, society, and order, a place without self. On the one hand, with sublimation, there is the potential of order that brings us joy (such as the pandemic era reader taking up new hobbies or routines), but on the other hand, with abjection, there is the loss of order that makes us fear (such as losing our routines and social orders). We walk up to the border of oblivion and find that abjection and sublimation are two sides of the same coin, which could explain why Kristeva and Tarrt believe that we are drawn to that oblivion in the first place. Julian, in the lesson, begins by describing encounters with the abject and the sublime as something humans are drawn to so as to lose themselves, to get away from their own humanity. He asks about our struggles with the voice in our head that dictates our language (and perhaps what Lacan would suggest as Name of the

Father), “Could it be because it reminds us that we are alive, of our mortality, of our individual souls – which, after all, we are too afraid to surrender but yet make us feel more miserable than any other thing?” (Tartt 37). Throughout this lesson in the novel, Tartt gives readers direct contact with the theory with little interjection from Richard so that the reader can become the Classics student in this moment and possibly draw connections between the theory and their own lives, as if Richard is having his own sublime experience. In fact, the only thing that Richard does remark on in this period of the book is his classmates, particularly his primary love interest, Camilla. He describes her in terms of her terrible beauty by saying, “[H]er fine features were only illuminated until it was a shock to look at her” and that her voice “in Greek was harsh and low and lovely” (38). These contradicting words have readers landing in a place where they are drawn to Camilla’s shocking nature and loveliness in equal measure. As the lesson continues, Richard’s classmate Henry remarks on things like corpses being beautiful in works of art but painful to view, which leads the discussion to the fine line between the abject and sublime. Ultimately, this discussion leads readers to the very nature of the abject:

“And if beauty is terror,” said Julian, “then what is desire? We think we have many desires, but in fact we have only one. What is it?”

“To live,” said Camilla.

“To live *forever*,” said Bunny, chin cupped in palm. (39)

Through this exchange, Tartt is explaining the abject. All our desires are to live by rejecting the abject, but abjection is inevitable. We are drawn to it, and even Richard, the vessel for the reader, draws attention to a savage Greek play, the *Bacchae*, that so disturbs him by calling it “a triumph

of barbarism over reason: dark, chaotic, inexplicable” (40). All of these qualities—primal behavior, the loss of self, the dark, beautiful terror we are fascinated with—are qualities Kristeva uses to define the abject. Abjection, according to Kristeva, “preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (10). Beyond the separation between "I" and "Other," Kristeva writes that abjection is the "recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5). Narrowing down the definition of desire as to live forever simplifies the theory of the abject for the reader. We cringe away from reminders of our mortality and the meaningless death in order to live yet we still seek oblivion to escape our own little voice inside our head that torments us. Whether that oblivion ends in hope or terror does not really matter because the act of going up to that border between subject and object, that place where meaning is lost or yet to be created, is human nature. Julian goes on to highlight that the Romans lived in “abject terror” of Christians and their violent disruption of the social order. Through the *Bacchae*, the Romans’ “fierce denial of darkness, unreason, chaos,” or mentions of the madness caused by the Furies, Tartt brings up these examples to set up Richard’s motivations for the rest of the novel (Tartt 37-41). Up to this point, Richard has felt adrift with no particular symbolic order, and it is through this lesson that we understand he is encountering his classmates and his now only professor at Hampden College as abject, as both horror and sublime. Julian says what appears to be the most quoted line from the novel, “Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful we quiver before it” (42). Through these sentences, we understand that Richard’s new friend group, so different from the provincial, middle-class existence he is accustomed to, is both

terrifying and beautiful to him. He is drawn to them seeking order in his life, but will find out that this friend group will disrupt his symbolic order in perpetuity.

The group envelopes Richard but at the same time holds him at arm's length for a good portion of their relationship. They invite him to Francis's country home, a place far outside society where their days blur together in a haze of alcohol and laziness. Although these were Richard's "happiest times," retreats with the group have an undertone of indescribable unease (89). Richard rejects their behaviors that upset him, turning away from the abject to maintain his happiness and not confront the terror of losing this friend group he holds dear. As Kristeva puts it, "my living universe, is supposed to save me from death" (4). Richard, in reflecting on those times, says, "Physically, there was very little indication that anything was happening at all—they were too clever for that—but even the tiny discrepancies that squeaked through their guard I met with a kind of willful blindness" (91). When confronted with a base level abjection, Richard is both drawn to and rejects the small horror in front of him. In a visit to the nearby lake, Camilla ends up stepping on glass and injuring her foot. When describing the incident, Richard is both romanticizing Camilla as "beautiful and lifeless" as if she is a tragic heroine while rejecting the evidence of her mortality. When Camilla's blood drips on Henry's pants, Richard cannot allow himself to see it as blood; he rejects what is in front of him by describing the blood drops as, "the size of quarters, too red to be blood, as if he'd had a paintbrush slung at him" (99). The idea that Camilla can do anything but "live forever" is incomprehensible to him but forces him to walk to the border of abjection. Similarly, whenever a friend in the group is doing something that destabilizes the relationship they all share, Richard excuses the behavior or ignores it in order to continue living. For instance, the titular antagonist of the book, Bunny, who humiliates Richard

and often teases him for his lack of wealth, is easily forgiven, “It never occurred to me to be offended; this was Bunny, my friend, who had even less pocket money than I did and a big rip in the seat of his trousers besides” (222-3). With Henry, Richard longs so much to be in his good graces that he assists with planning Bunny’s murder so as not to lose Henry as a friend. Upon realizing that Charles and Camilla have had an incestuous relationship, Richard blames himself and his own “mental perversity, some degenerate vagary of thought, a projection of my own desire” to ignore the act that upsets his social order (455). He excuses Francis, who smokes heavily and is often sickly, instead of acknowledging he has problems. Tartt, throughout the novel, demonstrates how we turn away and ignore these things that upset our social order. For Richard, this rejection of the abject is extreme, especially as it concerns the two murders that his friends commit.

When we look at the larger scope of the novel, we see that these small incidents of the abject are encompassed by 28-year-old Richard looking back on the whole incident, dwelling on the abject horror his life has become. He even says, “I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.” Once he realizes the undercurrent of dread throughout his time with his friends was because Henry, Francis, Charles, and Camilla killed a farmer after taking drugs and having a Bacchanalian romp through the woods, he confronts the abject directly. Kristeva, in describing a work by French writer Antonin Artaud, states “For it is death that most violently represents the strange state in which a non-subject, a stray, having lost its non-objects, imagines nothingness through the ordeal of abjection. The death that “I” am provokes horror” (25). Their act of violence disrupts Richard’s entire sense of self. He fears their animalistic action but does not wish to be separated from them.

In the culture Richard grew up in (presumably the same as most readers), murder is an unlawful, taboo act. Kristeva explains why this is so: “Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility” (4). All the circumstances surrounding the two murders of the novel are naturally abject but each in their own separate way. The first murder of the farmer is committed in an oblivious fugue state. In admitting the crime to Richard, Henry describes the feeling of being in the drugged state after the Dionysian ritual they performed,

“It was heart-shaking. Glorious. Torches, dizziness, singing. Wolves howling around us...seasons passing in the wink of an eye, entire years for all I know...Time is something which defies spring and winter, birth and decay, the good and the bad, indifferently. Something changeless and joyous and absolutely indestructible. Duality ceases to exist; there is no ego, no “I,” and yet it’s not at all like those horrid comparisons one sometimes hears.” (Tartt 168)

With this murder, in their state of oblivion, the friends discover they killed a man instead of a deer. The terror of having committed such an act outside the rules of society is slow and terrible. The horror in this murder inevitably lies in that loss of self-experienced by the murderers. Though they sought to achieve the sublime, they found the abject instead – the most horrible outcome. Richard, too, is horrified by the murder, but—ultimately—they end up assigning meaning to the murder. They get over it by avoiding talk of it, by ignoring it. However, the abject is not so easily deterred as the murdering set and Richard begin to feel abject horror at the realization that

their vindictive and petty friend Bunny knows about the murder. Thus, Bunny becomes an object of dread. He hints at his knowledge, extorts money from his friends, insults them. Holding the secret above their head becomes the new form of abject horror that they must confront, planting the seeds for the second murder of the novel. Once the threat of Bunny upsets the social order of the friend group, they set out to reject him, leading to the second murder of the novel. To preserve his own sense of self, the identity of someone who is a loyal friend to this group, Richard becomes an accessory to Bunny's murder.

In the second act of murder in the novel, Tartt shows true abjection in every sense, as if she is following Kristeva's definition to a tee. Kristeva writes, "He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law—rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles...a friend who stabs you..." (4). In Bunny's case, it is the friend that pushes you off a cliff into a ravine. This second act of murder is the ultimate abjection for Richard because despite the need to get rid of Bunny's existential threat, the murder ends up destroying the social order the friend group has built for itself. Once planned and committed, Bunny's murder puts the group in a near constant fear of discovery. Richard seemingly suffers the most as the only character in the novel to lose his social order more than once. He is the true deject searching aimlessly for order. After Bunny, Richard witnesses his friends devolve into repulsive behaviors. Henry is detached and more unfeeling than ever. Charles falls into alcoholism. Francis becomes more frail. Camilla oscillates between fraught tension and cool mystery. Even though they get away with the murder, this true abjection is unbearable. All of these feelings culminate in Henry's eventual suicide and the

fallout from this. In a drunken state, Charles attempts to shoot Henry after he discovers Henry and Camilla have been sleeping together. In the fight for the gun, Richard ends up being shot. Even injured, Richard tries to reject what is abject: “I was still standing. *I’m shot*, I thought. *I’m shot*. I reached down and touched my stomach. Blood. There was a small hole, slightly charred in my white shirt: *my Paul Smith shirt*, I thought, with a pang of anguish” (534). Instead of dwelling on the pain, he is focused on his friends as Henry, in an inexplicable turn of events, shoots himself. Readers experience Richard trying, and failing, to assign meaning to all of these events. When asked what it felt like to be shot, he remarks, “I could give him no kind of coherent answer but I remember thinking dimly that it was sort of like the first time I got drunk, or slept with a girl; not quite what was expected, really, but once it happened one realized it couldn’t be any other way” (543). Rather than dwelling on his own injury, Richard tries to assign meaning to Henry’s suicidal act: “I think he felt the need to make a noble gesture, something to prove to us and to himself that it was in fact possible to put those high cold principles which Julian had taught us to use. *Duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice*” (544). But since Richard can never know exactly what Henry was thinking when completing his final act, he is burdened with the abject terror that he will never know why Henry, of all of them, died and spends the rest of the novel dwelling on the reason. In Richard’s attempts to romanticize Henry’s death, Tartt draws the reader back to the overall theme of the novel, “Beauty is terror,” by having Richard say “*Beauty is harsh*” (544). Not being able to assign meaning to his friend group falling apart and by having no sublime hope that he will ever be able to do so leaves Richard with only the abject. Ultimately, Tartt leaves him and readers in the same place where we started the novel, attempting to assign meaning to the events without ever fully being given the answer.

In discussing the use of the theory for analysis, Kristeva writes, “Let me just say at this point...that contemporary literature, in its multiple variants, and when it is written as the language, possible at last, of that impossible constituted either by a-subjectivity or by non-objectivity, propounds, as a matter of fact, a sublimation of abjection” (26). When we try to analyze the abject in texts, we are hoping to assign meaning, which is a sublime act since sublimation is the hope that meaning will be assigned. Although Tartt has written a novel that exemplifies abjection in its many forms, readers approaching the novel with the hope to find some sort of meaning, an escape from their own dark reality, or to see their own fears mirrored back to them are all experiencing that tinge of the sublime. There is hope that meaning will be found amongst the abject horror of Tartt’s text, and it is because of this hope that readers still seek out *The Secret History*.

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