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Another Kind of Light: A Loving Attention in Modern British and Irish Fiction

LEE, CHERYL,JULIA,WEI,LING

<u>**Material Abstract**</u>

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Cheryl Julia Lee

This dissertation positions itself in relation to the long-running dialogue between philosophy and literature as it has evolved in recent decades. It is a study of how the kind of sometimes immersive, sometimes perplexing uncertainty involved in reading literary texts can be seen as exemplary of and an analogue to the mystery of lived experience, embodied as it is in the human other; and how a critical engagement with this aspect of the reading process might inform the way we conduct our ethical relations. Refracting this matter through the lens of aesthetic form, I draw on the work of a range of thinkers—including Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Simone Weil, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes—to read the novels of Iris Murdoch, Ann Quin, Aidan Higgins, Alan Hollinghurst, and Ali Smith. Through a discussion of these fictional works of romantic love, I posit a new kind of ethical, loving attention to the world that respects and responds to the mystery inherent in experience.

The thesis begins by redefining ethics, in light of modern intellectual thought, as always exceeding morality. This facilitates the adjustment of the parameters of ethical inquiry in order to reclaim space for the aesthetic. Framing ethics as a problem of aesthetic form, the thesis goes on to consider the implications of this proposition by examining what constitutes an ethical image. Concluding that an aspect of blindness is essential to ethical perspective, the potential of literary works to illuminate this notion of blindness-as-seeing is then considered and a category of literature, *blind literature*, is proposed as a kind of writing which exemplifies it. The thesis concludes by considering how this newly defined ethical perspective might be seen to constitute an aesthetic activity that takes place in part in the dark and is a formal accomplishment of beauty.

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Lee Wei Ling, Cheryl Julia

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And to my family and friends—for their love, patience, and kindness, and for their conversation: my love and thanks.

To introduce a meaning into Being is to move from the Same to the
Other, from I to the other person; it is to give a sign, to undo
the structures of language. Without that, the world would know
nothing but the meanings that inform the minutes or reports of corporate
board meetings.

– Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*

And this more human love (which will fulfill itself with infinite
consideration and gentleness, and kindness and clarity in binding and
releasing) will resemble what we are now preparing painfully and with
great struggle: the love that consists in this: that two solitudes protect and
border and greet each other.

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Letter 7

Your lips come as some surprise,
that they would want to come and meet mine.
They never taste like the last time.
Your lips come as some surprise.

– The Cake Sale, "Some Surprise"

Introduction

> [Love is] neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge. One must recognize its exceptional place among relationships. It is a relationship with alterity, with mystery—that is to say, with the future, with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there when everything is there—not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity.

> – Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*

Throughout history, the matter of ethics has largely been framed in relation to the idea of the Good, a concept that philosophers have never quite managed to properly define. Emmanuel Levinas, less interested in pinpointing the exact nature of the Good than in exploring the conditions in which any such conversation could even begin to take place, co-opted this apparent vulnerability in ethical thought and reconceived of ethics as a relation built on the fact of *mystery*—specifically, the other's mystery, and mystery not in the sense of a void but of what always escapes us and what is yet to come, that which "consists in slipping away from the light" (*Time and the Other* 87).[1] Prior to discussions on the applications of ethics, or its standards and prescriptions, or even the origin of ethical principles, ethics must first concern itself with the relation to mystery, which for Levinas, amounts to the sum of ethics; he locates a form of the ethical relation in the "absolutely original relationship" of love, which "is impossible to translate into powers and must not be so translated, if one does not want to distort the meaning of the situation" (88).

If we accept Levinas's proposition that the relation to mystery is the manifest foundation for ethics, we can perceive in art, despite Levinas's protestations to the contrary, another paradigm. When art and love confer, as they sometimes find time and space to do, they discover they have this at least in common: an absolute unknowability that refuses to be reduced by epistemological inquiry, and therefore, an absolute alterity. In *The Arts without Mystery*, Denis Donoghue describes artistic vision as being "in some way

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[1] Another philosopher who shared similar concerns is Martin Buber, in whose work the relationship between the self and the other is articulated as the I-Thou relation; see Buber's *I and Thou*. Levinas, however, elaborated more on the ethical implications of this relationship and it is for this reason that I have chosen to build my arguments around his work.

ineffable, unspeakable, it deflects every attempt to pin it down by knowledge or to define it in speech" (13); when he defends and champions this mystery that surrounds the arts, he notably does it in words that recall Levinas's on ethics: "not as a problem to be cleaned up but as the very condition in which they appear at all . . . [something] to be acknowledged, not resolved or dispelled" (11). Theodor Adorno, Susanne Langer, and Herbert Marcuse are but a few theorists who have made similar arguments, albeit in different terms, concerning the autonomous nature of art.[2] *The Arts Without Mystery* is Donoghue's indictment of what he sees as modern society's domestication of mystery, particularly in contemporary artistic life, and its "vanity which supposes that everything can be known or that only what is knowable has a claim upon our interest" (21): "The resentment against mystery is mostly against its absolute difference from ourselves," he argues (32). Both Levinas and Donoghue seek to safeguard the essence of mystery in ethics and art respectively against an epistemological bias that would forget, ignore, or erase it in the name of knowledge and Truth. What is at stake here is the quality of our truths, the authenticity of our relationships with the world and those who inhabit it, and the value of our experience—even our freedom as political beings (Marcuse 3ff).

In this study, I look at examples of modern British and Irish fictions of romantic love that seek to reorient our line of attention away from the light of knowledge and towards that which flees from it—if only to enable us to see with greater clarity the mysterious conditions of experience, and therefore, to inform our meaning-making procedures. What follows is an ambitious and wide-ranging aesthetic-ethical inquiry, the grounds of which must first be set with a prologue of sorts, a backwards glance to where it all began that simultaneously anticipates the arguments to be made. Through the selective history of art's entwinement with philosophy that follows, I work my way, taking leaps and bounds through time, toward the eighteenth-century concept of the beautiful soul, the discussion of which allows me to make several gestures: to take steps towards the redefinition of ethics as exceeding discussions of the Good in light of modern intellectual developments; and therefore, to adjust the parameters of ethical inquiry in order to reclaim space for the aesthetic; and subsequently, to redirect,

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[2] See *Aesthetic Theory*, *Feeling and Form*, and *The Aesthetic Dimension*.

by way of the aesthetic, our inquiring gazes towards the mystery inherent at the heart of that which is other—all in an effort to posit a new kind of ethical, loving attention to the world.

Prologue

At the origin of painting lies a woman who is in love with a man; learning of his impending departure, she traces an outline around his shadow. This first of all artistic endeavours begins with love, is an act of love. The myth of Butades (or Kora, or the Corinthian Maid) is one of many posited origins of art but is remarkable for the number of art works it has inspired, paintings and literary works alike.[3] The myth is itself an origin. Butades's moment of loving aesthetic creation inaugurated not just *the* tradition of art and *a* tradition of art, but also a tradition of love's entanglement with art. Her narrative anticipates and sets up some of the key aspects of this tradition variously elaborated in later artefacts, such as the question of fidelity, the trope of the lover's gaze, the role of perception in negotiating reality and the ethical nature of art, to name but a few.

Poised at the beginning of this discussion is Plato who, though only obliquely addressing the relationship between art and love, spoke enough on each individual topic that we might surmise his thoughts on it. In *Phaedrus*, for instance, Plato lists "possession by the Muses" (245a, *CW* 523) as a madness that comes as "a gift of the god" (244a, *CW* 522) and is the means by which we honour our past achievements and preserve them for posterity (245a, *CW* 523). His overall attitude toward art however remains largely hostile or at least suspicious—specifically towards those arts that are unencumbered by an explicit or self-reflexive philosophical commentary or justification. Tracing her lover's shadow, Butades might be seen to enact what Plato perceives as the greatest danger of art: its potential to divert man from his pursuit of the good. In turning away from the reality of her lover's body (as she must in order to draw) as well as the reality of his departure (for what is her tracing but an attempt to stay loss?), she adopts the posture of the artist who is always "far removed from the truth" (*The Republic* Book X 598b, *CW* 1202). The shadow that Butades draws

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[3] Robert Rosenblum's "The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism" (1957) provides a history of the representation of this myth.

in lieu of her lover inevitably evokes Plato's allegory of the cave. The distance between art and reality is such that the artist creates what is at best "a somewhat dark affair in comparison to the [truth]" (597, *CW* 1201); at its worst, art is a deceptive illusion that "blurs the distinction between the presence and the absence of reality" (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* 446).

Moreover, in Plato's view, by art's hand, "every . . . sort of confusion is clearly present in our soul" (*The Republic* Book X 602c, *CW* 1207). Art "arouses, nourishes and strengthens" (605b, *CW* 1209) the "irrational, idle, and [cowardly]" passions of man that it might be furnished with material for its work, when these impair reason and ought to be regulated for the good of the State (604d, *CW* 1209). Charles Perrault's rewriting of the Butades myth brings out just these potentially exploitative and self-indulgent characteristics: at the news of her imminent separation from her love, "[c]rushed, [Butades] grew pale and in floods of tears lamented her sad fate with sighs, and, thinking of the pleasure she had in seeing him, could only envisage horror and despair in the future" (trans. and qtd in Muecke 299). Such passions consume the time which should be devoted to the practice of philosophy and introduce "confusion and fear" into the course of investigation that "prevents us from seeing the truth" (*Phaedo* 66d, *CW* 58). Plato is careful to distinguish love from these passions. He separates it from sexual desire, which is directed toward the body rather than the soul; the goal of sexual desire is "the lover's sexual satisfaction and pleasure . . . and the satisfaction desired is excessive" (Nussbaum, "*Eros* and Ethical Norms" 67). "[A]ssociated with the absence of good reasoning and self-government" (67), sexual desire belongs with the rest of the dangerous passions. Love, on the other hand, is highly regarded by Plato. In its most consummate form, it is the "desire for the perpetual possession of the good" (*The Symposium* 86).[4]

To this end, art is intellectually and morally detrimental because it "baffles the motive to probe" and "fascinates and diverts the Eros which . . . conduct[s] us to philosophy," which in turn is always moving toward goodness (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* 425). In Perrault's poem, as in others such as Franciscus Junius's version of the myth in *De pictura veterum libri tres,* Butades is "taught by Love" and her hand is guided by Love (Muecke 299). As

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[4] Quotes from *The Symposium* are taken from Walter Hamilton's 1951 translation.

Frances Muecke notes, Francois Chauveau's engraving after Charles Le Brun's *The Origin of Painting* and Simon Gribelin's frontispiece to Charles Alphonse Defresnoy's *De Arte Graphica: The Art of Painting* both depict Cupid physically guiding Butades. Butades is "inspired" by "Ingenious Love," writes Perrault (qtd in Muecke 299). Plato invests love with this ability to inspire but what it inspires is wisdom, the "intellectual pilgrimage" (Hamilton, "Introduction" 24) from appearance to reality rather than creative endeavour. Turning her back on her lover, Butades appears to move in the opposite direction.

Platonic love is the wise man's prerogative. It has a singular and fixed object, and the Platonic lover charts a singular and fixed path. "This is the right way of approaching or being initiated into the mysteries of love," says Diotima to Socrates, "a man, starting from this sensible world and making his way upward by a right use of his feeling of love . . ." (*The Symposium* 94). The lover loves to the height of truth or not at all and his gaze is fixed in that one direction, toward the sun, that "offspring of the good, which the good begot as its analogue": "What the good itself is in the intelligible realm, in relation to understanding and intelligible things, the sun is in the visible realm, in relation to sight and visible things" (*The Republic* Book VI 508b-c, *CW* 1129). The light of the sun "reveals the world, hitherto invisible" (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* 389); it also reveals in this world the beloved, singled out by sight among the masses by his beauty. And so the wise man's gaze is perfected in this direction, for the beauty of the beloved is a trace of absolute beauty—that is, of the divine. Where the wise man "sees beauty with the faculty capable of seeing it, [he will] be able to bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness [as an artist does] but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection but with the truth" (*The Symposium* 95).

To be clear, the wise man (the lover) loves the beautiful but beauty is not his object: the object of love is "to procreate and bring forth in beauty" (*The Symposium* 87). In *The Symposium*, Diotima speaks specifically of physical procreation (the begetting of children) and spiritual procreation (the attainment of wisdom and virtue). Artistic creation is only mentioned briefly in relation to the latter and is subsumed in the next breath under the kind of wisdom that is "concerned with the due ordering of states and families, whose name is moderation and justice" (90). Art then is almost entirely excluded from

Socrates's discussion of beauty: as Iris Murdoch writes, "Plato wants to cut art off from beauty, because he regards beauty as too serious a matter to be commandeered by art. . . . Plato restricts art [. . .] to get it cleanly out of the way of something more important" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 401).

If the honeyed muse is to be allowed entry into Plato's "well-governed" State, she needs to be of the kind that instructs and promotes that which is of use to society (*The Republic* Book X 605b, *CW* 1209). Just as Platonic love is a matter of discipline in which the lover runs a fixed course, art too, in Plato's view, needs to be disciplined. Butades's trace, made out of love for a person— and not for the State and its people, nor for Truth—would presumably result in her being escorted to the border of Plato's city-state. Plato is explicit about what sort of content is considered useful but he is also quite clear that such content needs to be delivered in a specific style. Socrates refers repeatedly to modes, manners, and conventions: for instance, in Book III of *The Republic*, Socrates defines the speaking style of the good man as

> involv[ing] little variation, so that if someone provides a musical mode and rhythm appropriate to it . . . the one who speaks correctly remain[s]—with a few minor changes—pretty well within that mode and rhythm throughout . . .. (307b-c, *CW* 1034)

A little later on in the same dialogue, he posits that

> for our own good, we ourselves should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and story-teller, one who would imitate the speech of a decent person and who would tell his stories in accordance with the patterns we laid down when we first undertook the education of our soldiers. (398a-b, *CW* 1035)

This governing of style is a symptom of Plato's larger formal control over his city-state (asserted through institutional structures such as the education system), which is, in turn, in the service of his greater agenda of attaining the Good.

Form is that which permits a city-state to become something useful, that which allows art to become an object of beauty. When Plato refers explicitly to 'Forms,' he is speaking of absolute, fixed ideals that constitute pure knowledge. These Platonic Forms "[dwell] among the gods above" in an unchanging eternal world as opposed to the physical world, which is always in a state of flux and is

hence where falsehood dwells (*Cratylus* 408c, *CW* 126). In the physical world then, the Forms figure as a problem to be worked out:

> Indeed, it isn't even reasonable to say that there is such a thing as knowledge, Cratylus, if all things are passing on and none remain. For if that thing itself, knowledge, did not pass on from being knowledge, then knowledge would always remain, and there would *be* such a thing as knowledge. On the other hand, if the very form of knowledge passed on from being knowledge, there would be no knowledge. And if it were always passing on, there would always be no knowledge. Hence, on this account, no one could know anything and nothing could be known either. (*Cratylus* 439e-440b, *CW* 155)

The exact status of the Platonic Forms is hazy but Socrates's meditation in *Cratylus* reveals a central tenet of the problem of Platonic Forms to be a concern with the translation of abstract ideals into practical reality: to speak of something is to parse it in the language of a known reality so that to speak of an ideal which belongs in a world other than known reality presents itself as an impossible task. The problem of Forms then can very much be seen implicitly as entailing the problem of (aesthetic) form.

The Rise and Fall of the Beautiful Soul

> Once praised as the epitome of human existence, acclaimed by poets, philosophers, and artists alike as the ultimate achievement of individual endeavour, the 'beautiful soul' has by now been all but forgotten.
>
> —Robert E. Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*

In the eighteenth century, the problem of Platonic Form as a problem of aesthetic form was made explicit as the perception of the Good underwent a profound transformation from being seen in terms of ideals to being conceived of in more earthly terms, as a part of everyday life. This idea was eventually embodied in the *beautiful soul*. The idea of the beautiful soul began with the philosophical concept of moral beauty, the origin of which can be traced back to the Hellenic ideal of *kalokagathia*, which roughly translates to 'beauty-and-goodness,'[5] but as

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[5] The Irish philosopher, Dean George Berkeley, was the first in the eighteenth century to note the historical basis of the beautiful soul in the moral theory of Antony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury. In *Alciphron, or, the Minute Philosopher*, Berkeley describes *kalos kagathos* (from

Robert E. Norton shows, it was in the eighteenth century that moral beauty (and eventually, the beautiful soul) really took root and flourished as the political, intellectual, and cultural climates were particularly conducive. As Norton observes, the publication of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* in 1651 precipitated the change in ideas of morality by dissociating it from the divine and locating it squarely within the sphere of the human. Hobbes asserts that man's natural state is one of brutal warfare that can only be checked by the surrender of individual freedom to a social contract that dictates our moral norms; Hobbes admits neither the presence of universal values of Good and Evil, nor God.

Working in the aftermath of *Leviathan* (which he opposed but nevertheless had to reckon with), Antony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, reshaped morality around the idea that man has an innate capacity to distinguish between what is right and wrong, and, having full autonomy over his life, the capacity to attain the good by his own hand; the extent of the divine's intervention is limited to the furnishing of this capacity. Constructing his moral theory upon the analogy of aesthetics in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Shaftesbury conceives of beauty as the expression of this capacity for rational discernment, which he refers to as *taste*; since the presumption was that our rational processes will always leads us to the Good, beauty was therefore a reflection of the Good. Moreover, as Norton points out, for Shaftesbury, "the only instance of 'true' beauty . . . occurs only in a mind that has trained its formative powers *on itself* [as opposed to other people or objects]" (36). In *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, Francis Hutcheson consolidated Shaftesbury's argument on the unity of moral virtue and beauty by making it one of "a vital, necessary unity": "[A]s Hutcheson defined it, our natural, immediate response to the 'beauty' of virtue *guarantees* that we will seek goodness for its own sake, and not for some ulterior motive stemming from some sort of Hobbesian self-interest" (Norton 42).[6]

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which *kalokagathia* is derived) as "that man in whom are to be found all things worthy and decent and laudable, purely as such and for their own sake, and who practiseth virtue from no other motive than the sole love of her own innate beauty" (qtd in Norton 49). In Chapter 3 of his study, Norton notes the difficulty eighteenth-century philosophers had with pinning down the exact nature of this concept, as was the case in antiquity.

[6] As Norton notes, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson did not go unopposed: among one of their strongest and most notable detractors was Berkeley (see Berkeley's *Alciphron*). So conducive was the environment and so attractive the appeal of the beautiful soul that, contrary to his intentions, Berkeley only succeeded in establishing the relationship between virtue and beauty as

Emerging alongside (and to an extent, from within) this new moral discourse was the discipline of aesthetics, which was, at its inception in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica,* a theory of sense perception. Sensation was evidently already on the minds of intellectuals contemplating moral beauty; Baumgarten sought to establish it as a subject of serious inquiry, and to demonstrate the ways one might perfect these faculties in oneself— without recourse to morality. Baumgarten's theory set the precedent for an autonomous discipline of aesthetics.[7] That said, his elevation of sense perception, taste (i.e., the ability to judge based on sense perception), and beauty (in which his theory culminates) to philosophical significance undoubtedly facilitated the on-going investigations into moral beauty. These two intertwined traditions of thought, moral discourse and aesthetic theory, culminate in Friedrich Schiller's body of work, spanning poems, dramas, and essays, in which he advanced a thorough theorizing of the beautiful soul as an aesthetic phenomenon with moral significance.[8]

Thus, the stage was set for the rise of the beautiful soul: although moral beauty was still an abstract philosophical concept, it allowed thinkers to begin to conceive of the Good apart from religion, and of a practical existence, and thereafter, a human form for it. This transition not only attests to the foothold moral beauty established as a reality for the eighteenth-century cultural imagination, but also made the Good appear infinitely more attainable. The modern novel—especially Christoph Martin Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, or the new Heloise*—was instrumental in making this final leap (although not without considerable effort since philosophy and literature were seen as two distinct fields with the latter being the infinitely more inferior of the two[9]), seeking not only to represent an individual undergoing

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a problem deserving serious critical attention, and in placing that problem at the center of the Enlightenment (Norton 45).

[7] Baumgarten's ideas were furthered by Immanuel Kant in his *Critiques*, which were infinitely more influential than *Aesthetica.* Though today Baumgarten and *Aesthetica* are little more than footnotes in the history of aesthetic development, Baumgarten's privileging of the perceiving subject, which conforms to the general philosophical trend of the time of 'humanizing' morality, serves as the basis of much modern aesthetic theory.

[8] See, for instance, the poem, "The Gods of Greece"; the series of letters titled, "Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner"; and the essay, "On Grace and Dignity."

[9] "Apart from very few exceptions, novels were considered inappropriate reading for people who were virtuous, for those who lived according to the dictates of reason and religion, and for those who were concerned about good taste" (Wolfgang Martens qtd in Norton 139n70).

moral development but also to stimulate the same process in the reader. This double gesture constituted the goal of the *bildungsroman* at the incipience of the genre in the eighteenth century (Norton 153).

That said, as evident in Norton's historical survey, in both literary works and philosophical treatises alike, moral beauty, even in the embodied form of the beautiful soul, remained finally out of reach—even though it was the very desire to make moral ideals more concrete that gave rise to it. Although both Wieland and Rousseau sought to imbue their ideas with substance by giving them tangible form by way of allegory, the device, which presupposes the essential abstraction and therefore inaccessibility of ideas, served only to highlight the irreconcilable gap between lived reality and ideas. In his novel, Wieland eventually settles for a compromise, conveying the promise of moral improvement but denying Agathon the fulfilment of his goal of perfection; in Rousseau's *Julie*, virtue itself—in the form of the Edenic Clarens and its stewards, Julie and her husband, Wolmar—is achieved only by way of deception and manipulation.[10] Meanwhile, in the field of philosophy, evasion, concessions, and further abstraction were common tactics as intellectuals, including Schiller, capitulated to this conceptual impasse. "We have become accustomed," notes Norton, "to encountering such silence, actual or implicit, at the very moment when a full and adequate definition of the beautiful soul is most needed" (194). Although Schiller conceded that the beautiful soul exists only as an idea in "On Grace and Dignity," this did not prove a serious obstacle to his wholehearted embrace of the concept: Norton suggests that in his passion for the beautiful soul, Schiller "quite simply abdicated the domain governed by the laws of logic and rational argument and fled into a world of his own creation" (243).

Although moral beauty and its corresponding expression in the beautiful soul continued to intrigue the public, the unresolved ambiguities surrounding them contributed to an increasing scepticism. Unable to hold up under the scrutiny, the beautiful soul was finally put to rest, not least of all by G. W. F. Hegel, who refused to look past the discrepancies. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel argues that the ideality of the beautiful soul is its undoing:

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[10] Norton's stance is that Rousseau did not mean to deconstruct the idea of the beautiful soul; on the contrary, the reader is not meant to realise the insidious nature of the moral education that takes place in Clarens.

> The 'beautiful soul,' lacking an *actual* existence, entangled in the contradiction between its pure self and the necessity of that self to externalize itself and change itself into an actual existence, and dwelling in the *immediacy* of this firmly held antithesis—an immediacy which alone is the middle term reconciling the antithesis, which has been intensified to its pure abstraction, and is pure being or empty nothingness—this 'beautiful soul,' then, being conscious of this contradiction in its unreconciled immediacy, is disordered to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning and pines away in consumption. (406-07)

In the physical world where it cannot take form since to do so would be to "[besmirch] the splendor of its inner being," the beautiful soul is reduced to a "hollow object" and a "lost soul," and "vanishes like a shapeless vapour that dissolves into thin air" (400). There is a fatality attached to the transcendent, abstract ideal of the Good that necessarily pursues itself to its logical extreme, which is similarly suggested in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's critical portrayal of the beautiful soul in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (published three decades after Wieland and Rousseau's novels), as someone who becomes increasingly isolated from her own material existence and society as she pursues her moral ideals. Like Hegel, Goethe was suspicious of the "unknown and unknowable motive[s]" behind the beautiful soul (Norton 263), and his beautiful soul is figured as a warning to his protagonist against the abstraction of the ideal.[11]

For Hegel as much as for the other eighteenth-century philosophers who engaged with the matter of moral beauty and the figure of the beautiful soul, the dilemma that these presented—the seemingly impossible reconciliation of the abstract world of ideals and the empirical, sensual world of everyday reality—was a problem of aesthetic form. To be clear, the beauty in question was not aesthetic beauty but "the claims of moral self-consciousness to have an inner grace or purity," as Drew Milne notes with regard to Hegelian thought (67). That said, Hegel's desire (and that of his contemporaries) to "bridge the chasm

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[11] In addition, Norton argues that Goethe might also have been advancing a critique of the inherent potential of the beautiful soul toward "vacant aestheticization" when emptied of its ethical significance (262): he points out that "there is not a single instance . . . in which the Beautiful Soul performs an act that could qualify as a 'good' deed or that could even count as common kindness" (261). "On the contrary," writes Norton, "because of her initially praiseworthy determination to preserve her absolute independence, which then came increasingly to nourish a consuming self-absorption, she has tended to bring unhappiness to others rather than the opposite" (261).

between conscience and doing" necessarily involved the aesthetic task of bringing something into form; Milne indicates as much by drawing an analogy with Hans-Georg Gadamer's Kantian claim that "the ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real" (67).

Before Hegel, it was, of course, Immanuel Kant who, in *Critique of Judgment* (or *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, as Paul Guyer translates it), intimates that we need physical analogues for abstract ideas in order to come to terms with them, and who suggests that the aesthetic provides these very analogues that mediate between rational concepts and the imagination. On one hand, aesthetic representations "seek to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (of intellectual ideas), which gives them the appearance of an objective reality"; on the other hand, they simultaneously exceed every concept available to them, making them akin to "inner intuitions" (192). Unlike Hegel, Kant surely counts among those swept up in the desirability of moral beauty, and in *Critique of Judgment*, makes a tenuous argument for the "symbolic [moral] import of beauty" by thinking of morality on the analogy of the aesthetic (Norton 223); the difficulty Kant faced in demonstrating the validity of this assertion, evident on the page, precipitates Hegel's confrontation with the flawed ideology behind the beautiful soul a decade later. Prior to *Critique of Judgment*, Kant also conceived of *transcendental idealism* in *Critique of Pure Reason*, which has some bearing on the present discussion: it combines the belief in the objective existence of things external to our cognitive representations of them with the belief that these things do not exist in the specific forms of these representations outside of our minds. It is on the basis of this distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal that Hegel mounts his critique of the beautiful soul.

Hegel recognised that the beautiful soul, as an aesthetic phenomenon, "marks out a limit of representation" (Milne 63): it is a liminal figure, its domain the chasm, its activity a persistent fleeing and yearning. Insisting emphatically on the impossibility of its actualization, Hegel was instrumental in the process by which the beautiful soul would cease to be upheld as a moral ideal. The discussions the beautiful soul had initiated regarding aesthetic form as the mediating agent between the realm of abstract ideas and physical lived reality, however, persisted through modernity.

To be able to say, "Now, now, and now": The Problem of Form

The beautiful soul is constantly falling toward reality, forever in the process of annihilating itself. Suspended in no man's land, it embodies the difference between the philosophical ideals espoused by Plato and his kin, and the constraints of practical reality. As an embodied impossibility, the beautiful soul recasts the question of ethics as a question of representation, the problem of Platonic Form as the problem of aesthetic form. The Good is an ideal to aspire to but, paradoxically, it can only exist for us in a meaningful way if we can give it some kind of instinctively recognisable form, some means of earthly existence. In *Wings of Desire*, Wim Wenders's 1987 film about angels in contemporary Berlin, the angel Damiel expresses just this sentiment:

> It's great to live by the spirit, to testify day by day for eternity, only what's spiritual in people's minds. But sometimes I'm fed up with my spiritual existence. Instead of forever hovering above I'd like to feel a weight grow in me to end the infinity and to tie me to earth. I'd like, at each step, each gust of wind, to be able to say 'Now, now, and now' and no longer 'forever' and 'for eternity.' To sit at an empty place at a card table and be greeted, even by a nod. Every time we participated, it was a pretence. Wrestling with one, allowing a hip to be put out in pretence, catching a fish in pretence, in pretence sitting at tables, drinking and eating in pretence. Having lambs roasted and wine served in the tents out there in the desert, only in pretence. No, I don't have to beget a child or plant a tree but it would be rather nice coming home after a long day to feed the cat, like Philip Marlowe, to have a fever and blackended fingers from the newspaper, to be excited not only by the mind but, at last, by a meal, by the line of a neck, by an ear.

Ideals that cannot be given shape, no matter how tentative, in word or deed, result in pretence. Even God was made into a man. Form "proves, manifests truth," declares Roland Barthes (*Preparation of the Novel* 25). In *Theaetetus*, Socrates recounts the story of Thales, the founder of Greek natural philosophy, who failed to notice a well at his feet and fell into it because his eyes were fixed on the stars (174a, *CW* 193). As Cicero puts it, *Quod est ante pedes nemo spectat, caeli scrutantur plagas. No one sees what is before his feet: we all gaze at the stars*. In pursuing his "winged way, as Pindar says, throughout the universe, 'in the deeps below the earth' and 'in the heights above the heaven'" (Plato, *Theaetetus* 173e, *CW* 193), the philosopher spurns the common affairs of

man; when his knowledge of earthly matters such as law is tested, he is revealed to be wilfully ignorant. Socrates chooses to see this ignorance as a symptom of the philosopher's "true freedom and leisure" (175e, *CW* 194), and as evidence that "a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven" (176a-b, *CW* 195). Yet for all his esoteric knowledge, for all his intimacy with the divine, the philosopher is a laughing stock in the eyes of the ordinary man and his words carry neither weight nor depth. "To look is not to look from on high but at eye-level," says Damiel to his fellow angel, Cassiel (Wenders, *Wings of Desire*). This is the message behind the fall of the beautiful soul: ethics needs to be brought down to eye-level. It needs to be given form for without it, there can be no possibility of meaning, much less of goodness and virtue.

To aspire to lead a good life then is essentially an aesthetic endeavour, and the height of this aspiration culminates in what we call *art*, which Murdoch describes as that which

> show[s] us the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its supreme importance; the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue. The pointlessness of art is not the pointlessness of a game; it is the pointlessness of human life itself, and form in art is properly the simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe. (*Existentialists and Mystics* 371)

Her use of 'pointlessness' and 'aimlessness' in describing art and virtue challenges the idea of transcendence and suggests that the only direction proper to our existence is towards one another, our fellow human beings stumbling beside us in the darkness of the cave. Art "exhibits to us the connection, in *human* beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion," declares Murdoch (371). Here, art reveals another tenet of the call to look at eye-level: it is the need to see eye-to-eye, in the sense of confronting and acknowledging the existence of the other as neighbour, as fellow human. Form (and meaning) can only take place in the relationship between the self and the other-as-neighbour, the other-as-human; it cannot exist in *agape*, in the impossible distance between the self and the divine Other. Art needs must be a *human* endeavour. Art returns us to our point of origin: before the struggle to goodness, there was the struggle to see and to create meaning through form; before we prostrated ourselves at the feet of the Other-as-divinity, there was the encounter with the other-as-neighbour. It insists

on and offers us an alternative means of seeing, in the dark and with others, which carries the promise of fuller and hence more ethical sight. As Wallace Stevens puts it in "Chocorua to Its Neighbour,"

> To say more than human things with human voice,
> That cannot be; to say human things with more
> Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
> To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
> Of human things, that is acutest speech. (300)

Seeing Eye-to-Eye

In *Love's Knowledge,* Martha Nussbaum posits that the attention we pay to art is a kind of moral attention as it is focused on the particular, specifically the human particular. Citing Aristotle, she proposes that "the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's particular situation" is "at the core of what practical wisdom is, and . . . an ethically valuable activity in its own right" (37). Acting on this ability constitutes, for Nussbaum, "a kind of striving appropriate to a human life," as opposed to the kind of striving that "consists in trying to depart from that life to another life" (381); the latter is what hubris is, "the failure to comprehend what sort of life one has actually got, the failure to live within its limits (which are also possibilities), the failure, being mortal, to think mortal thoughts" (381). The crime, then, was Icarus's, the "artless boy," who "steered his course/ Beyond his father's lead: all the wide sky/ was there to tempt him as he steered toward heaven" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book VIII, 212). The fault did not lie with Daedalus, the architect, who crafted the wings out of feathers to resemble those of eagles, who "flapped [the wings] cautiously to keep his balance" (Book VIII, 212).

Art is always already mired in the human particular. It is man-made: made by the hands of man, made in the world of man. It "deals with what we see . . . it plucks its material . . . in the garden of life" (James, *The Art of the Novel* 312); for this, Plato would exile the artist in favour of the stargazing philosopher. One might even say that the extent to which art can be guilty of hubris is curtailed by its necessary confinement within life's limits, manifested as they are in the frame of a painting, the edges of a page, the end of a composition, the

reach of the body. These same limits also signal to us that "[i]n seeing and hearing we are . . . seeing not the world as it is in itself, apart from human beings and human conceptual schemes, but a world already interpreted and humanised by our faculties and our concepts" (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 164). Art makes evident the structures that implicate our perspective.

A certain degree of blindness is necessarily a part of artistic vision since the underground cave of the human particular is shrouded in darkness. The divine, the ideal, as a consequence of not being part of our reality, already exceeds our attempts to give it form—it is beyond form—but the mystery of experience, on the other hand, remains within reach, however tentative. It is to the latter that we must direct our attention. Hubris exists in us in varying degrees for we cannot understand the conditions of our existence perfectly. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," warns Hamlet (*Hamlet* I.v.167-8). We need not look very far for evidence of our limited understanding. Levinas would argue that one need only turn to his or her nearest neighbour to experience radical unknowing: the other, the not-I, is "absolutely other" (*Totality and Infinity* 39), and in our face-to-face encounter with the other, we experience this epiphany. The face of the other "breaks with the world that can be common to us" (194) and constitutes a *blind* encounter insofar as one experiences that which exceeds the limits of known reality. "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it," states Levinas. "It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity" (51).

It is only by means of the aesthetic imagination, rather than our limited knowledge of experience, that such an infinite response as the other demands can be forged: the imagination is that which exceeds, which breaks through the mere fact of existence. In the face of the other, in the face of mystery, all too often we hasten to open our eyes, to interpret and name, to reduce to an economy of the same; when this fails, we close our eyes, shut out the sight of the other, refuse to see. Art on the other hand participates in a sustained confrontation with otherness and exists in a permanent state of imaginative potential in a way that actual experience can only do so momentarily. In the relation between the self and the

other, art figures as the very first moment in my encounter with the other, the split second between me and my attempt to name.

Art is capable of staging an encounter with the other-as-mystery, of giving form to our essential blindness, because it is the realm of the other, of difference, of blindness, of the imagination, as much as it is the realm of the human particular. Adorno, Langer, and Marcuse have separately described art as being other to reality but they also clarify that this otherness is in no way alienating (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 2; Langer, *Feeling and Form* 46; Marcuse 10). Rather, as Richard Kearney suggests, it is only "by alienating itself from reality" that art can "liberate the alienated dimensions of reality" (*Navigations* 302). For Langer, it is specifically the depths of human emotional experience that art puts us in touch with by abstracting from reality. Existing as *semblance*, or 'pure appearance,' art forms are abstracted from "a context of real circumstance and anxious interest," and are therefore "free[d] from their normal embodiment in real things" in order that they might work towards the expression of feeling, which is what Langer identifies as the artist's 'ultimate aim' (50-51). Meanwhile Marcuse argues that it is, more broadly, the "repressed potentialities of man and nature" that art reveals (8).

Art hence can be said to capture the moment of blinking, the moment of blindness-in-seeing, when we see what we can see and glimpse that we cannot see at the same time. It puts our sight in jeopardy and in doing so, cracks the veneer of material reality, which discovers in itself a depth hitherto unrecognised. It is the better way of seeing because it "makes a space for those images which *our sense of reality* excludes" (Donoghue, *The Arts without Mystery* 16, own emphasis). As Philip Weinstein writes of Adorno, in seeing art objects as "singular entities," "One attends to them best by respecting their singularity . . . without sentimentalizing them, but also without immersing them (and losing their distinctiveness) within an archive of innumerable other discourses to which they are related" (5). "Such engagement," Weinstein argues, "is best understood not as knowing but as *acknowledgment*—the other not objectified and mapped, but encountered nevertheless" (5). Speaking of artistic forms as symbols—concrete "hard and clear," but undefinable (58)—Peter Brook suggests, "We get nowhere if we expect to be told what they mean, yet each one has a relation with us we can't deny. If we accept this, the symbol

opens in us a great and wondering O" (58). This 'great and wondering O' is the response that art invites, which is also its meaning; it is the O of incomprehension mixed with deep feeling. It is always what is other that eludes us and that returns us to ourselves; as Langer writes,

> [Art] is immediately given to perception, and yet it reaches beyond itself; it is semblance, but seems to be charged with reality. Like speech, that is physically nothing but little buzzing sounds, it is filled with its meaning, and its meaning is a reality. (52)

To accept blindness as a component of our sight is not to lose oneself in abstraction. To aspire towards ideals is to pretend to truth because ideals cannot take form; blindness-as-seeing, on the other hand, is not an eradication of sight but, to borrow Langer's words, the liberation of perception and "with it, the power of conception—from all practical purposes" (49), that we might see more clearly and fully the conditions of our experience. It is in this sense that we might say that blindness or darkness is "another kind of light," after Jeanette Winterson in *Art and Lies* (117). Giorgio Agamben notes that the neurophysiology of vision indicates as much:

> Neurophysiologists tell us that the absence of light activates a series of peripheral cells in the retina called 'off-cells.' When activated, these cells produce the particular kind of vision that we call darkness. Darkness is not, therefore, a privative notion (the simple absence of light, or something like nonvision) but rather the result of the activity of the 'off-cells,' a product of our own retina. (44)

Blindness-as-seeing positions itself as a departure point: by inviting a reconsideration of our 'knowledge' of reality, it returns us to what we have at hand.

Love, or The Aesthetic Event of Co-Being

To recapitulate, Plato advocated a brand of ethics that proved to be ultimately unviable because of its impracticability. His Theory of Forms posits goodness as an abstract moral ideal that is fundamentally unknowable and hence, unachievable by man. Although the philosopher was himself guarded in his view

of art and excluded it from much of his discussion of morality, the problem of Platonic Forms is essentially a problem of aesthetic form. We cannot know, in any meaningful sense of the word, what we cannot give form to, and goodness as a shapeless and hence unrecognisable goal is no goal at all for man. Articulated as the problem of aesthetic form, ethics is relocated to our mortal plane of existence. Consequently, the aspiration for goodness takes a backseat to the need to understand first of all the ways in which we forge meaning from human experience. The ethical conversation also ceases to take place between the self and the Other-as-divinity and instead, concerns the self and the other-as-neighbour. Refocalised through the lens of aesthetics, ethics establishes the individual's responsibility as the creation of meaning through form. As such, art is not just a useful analogy to be employed in ethical discussions but can inform our very practice of ethics; its autonomy, as Kearney points out, "should not be misconstrued as an *indifference* to [ethics]" (*Navigations* 302). Insofar as ethics prioritises meaning over the Good, it engages with the task of dismantling systems of knowledge that have hitherto dictated the value of experience. "[I]t is precisely the aesthetic dimension of [difference] that keeps us perpetually dissatisfied with the established order of things," Kearney argues, "The *difference* of art reminds us that the world too can be *different*, that there is always something *more*" (302). Art is a striving towards the mysterious, the unknown, the ineffable. It constitutes less a finished product than an instance of infinite potential, a *process*. "Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form," writes Adorno (*Aesthetic Theory* 3). More specifically, he argues that art "exists only in relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with the other" (3). Art is, in other words, inherently dialogic in nature. Systematically theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogism is, as Michael Holquist puts it, "an epistemology based on the assumption that knowing an entity (a person or a thing) is to put that entity into a relation of simultaneity with something else, where simultaneity is understood as not being a relation of equality or identity" (*Dialogism* 157). As opposed to monologism, dialogism presumes and prioritises the existence of the other.

For Bakhtin, dialogism is the principle by which our very consciousness operates. Existence is always a shared or intersubjective experience, always *co-existence*, and our "very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*"

(Holquist, *Dialogism* 29). The self and the other are yoked together: the 'I' is a phenomenon that consists of "a center, a not-center, and the relation between them" (29) and it is in the continued negotiation of these three entities in which it becomes a unique self, in which it forges meaning from its experience. Existence, conceived of as dialogic, "presents itself to us as a project, something to be completed through creative human practice and an ongoing process of value-creation" (Gardiner 139), which is to say, it presents itself to us as an aesthetic endeavour. The other-as-neighbour participates in this event with me and is whom I am dependent on for meaning, from whom I am potentially alienated: "*To be means to communicate*. Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognised" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* 287). "The world addresses us," writes Holquist, "and we are alive and human to the degree that we are answerable, i.e. to the degree that we can respond" (*Dialogism* 30). Insofar as the other responds to me and receives my attempt to give my experience a form and hence meaning, I succeed; insofar as there is no other to respond to as such, or the other rejects me, I fail. Here, the problem of form figures as the problem of loneliness.

Ethics takes place in the event of co-being, in the in-between, the space-time of the third term. Its meaning is the relationship between the self and the other; its most triumphant form is a proposal of love. The other comes to me as a fellow human being and asks, "Will you love me?" I answer, "Will you love me in return?" This is what Nussbaum refers to when she speaks of "internal transcendence" as opposed to "extrahuman transcendence" (*Love's Knowledge* 380). It is perhaps not heavenly grace we should strive for but earthly grace, which we know by the name of love; and by love we refer not to Platonic love, which is little more than a pseudonym for heavenly grace, but rather human love, particular love, love directed to a recognisable face. Plato was right in separating love from the other passions. Love does not possess the stable monolithic identity of the individual passions. An emotion like anger can be defined and its concomitant actions can be charted: a person is angry and therefore, he or she screams, throws objects, destroys. It is more difficult to find a shape for love. A person is in love and he or she . . .. There is no *therefore* to speak of, only a multitude of possibilities.

Love is Brook's concrete but indefinable symbol, 'hard and clear,' and its substance Langer's semblance charged with reality. It is the means by which we come closest to resolving the problem of form, the problem of loneliness. In love, we learn to work with the borders of the self, to "experience the world on the basis of difference and not only in terms of identity" (Badiou, *In Praise of Love* 17). Love is not the tearing down of walls that separate us from another but the placing of hands against these walls and feeling someone else's hands on the other side. In Wenders's *Paris, Texas*, Travis Henderson, an amnesiac, attempts to rekindle his relationship with his estranged wife, Jane, and son, Hunter. In one scene, Travis picks Hunter up from school. For most of the way home, they walk on opposite sides of a road, their physical separation enacting their emotional estrangement. When Hunter begins to mimic Travis's way of walking, a deep intimacy between the pair that exceeds their present situation is established. In another deeply moving scene, Travis locates Jane in a peep show club where he speaks to her from behind a one-way mirror. Jane cannot see Travis from her end and Travis in turn turns his back on her as he recounts the story of their tumultuous relationship, in which they struggle with issues of possession and freedom. When he finishes, Jane comes near the mirror and Travis turns his back toward her; for a few beautiful, startling moments, their faces are superimposed on each other's in the mirror. These are the images of love that Wenders offers us: two people, each their individual selves, finding meaning in their relationship with each other—a relationship in which, as the latter scene implies, both are constantly negotiating the risk of losing his or her own self to the other, as well as the risk of imposing his or her own self on the other. Love is the ultimate aspiration in the ethical relationship, the occasion on which the practice of ethics has the highest stakes; it is the triumph of human imaginative potential. To love, which is to say,

> to open oneself to the possibility of another,
> the potentiality of being in communication with another;
> an other that might be completely other not just to one, but to itself.
> Where the otherness of another is perhaps what keeps this communion
> from being a consumption;
> even as both are attempting to touch. (Fernando, *in fidelity* 155)

In the making of art and the living with love, "so many of the same requirements seem to pertain—the looking after, the honesty, the commitment, the endless search for the authentic," observes Timothy O'Grady.[12] It is no coincidence that we speak of aesthetics in the same terms that we use for love: we speak of intimacy, encounter, difference, and fidelity. We fail to speak of aesthetics in the same way we fail to articulate love: we fall into silence and yield to a great and wondering O. As Shakespeare puts it in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "[t]he lunatic, the lover, and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact" (V.i.7-8). By framing love (and therefore, ethics) as an aesthetic problem, we can reconceive of the Good in a way that makes it recognisable and relevant: as meaning that is forged in an ethical relationship with the other. Moreover, by drawing from the potent vocabularies of aesthetics, of words, sounds, touch, and images, we can begin to give the height of our human potential a form and hence, make our way closer to achieving it. By speaking of art lovingly, we are led to pay due respect to the attempts of others, and of ourselves, to make something of our lives.

Contemporary Conversations: The New Ethics

> These theorists all agree that to open a novel is to open oneself up to a type of decision-making that is itself inherently ethical. For the new ethicists, the novel demands of each reader a decision about her own relation to the imaginative experience offered by novels: Will I submit to the alterity that the novel allows? An affirmative answer launches the novel reader into a transactional relation with another agent, an agent defined by its Otherness from the reader.
>
> — Dorothy Hale, "Fiction as Restriction"

In exploring the idea of love as the triumph of the ethical relation through literary texts, I assume parallels between the irreducible otherness of the text and that of the human other, a matter that Derek Attridge discusses in some detail in *The Singularity of Literature.* He suggests that both the human other and the textual other are encountered as something from beyond the self's grasp and therefore, as challenges to the self's capacity as a rational agent (33). Additionally, both

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[12] Timothy O'Grady, e-mail message to author, June 2016.

encounters prompt a response of 'a creative refashioning of norms' such that the otherness of both text and human other becomes an occasion for on-going relations with the self, or 'act-events,' in which the statuses of both the self as known and the other as unknown are open to change. That said, like Jill Robbins who performs a similar manoeuvre in *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*, it is not my intention "to propose that a text has alterity in the same way that the other person does" (xxiv). Rather, my goal is, again after Robbins, to examine the ways in which literature (and works of art, in general) "alters—or interrupts—the very economy of the same that the other interrupts" (xxiv). In doing so, I seek to clarify the means by which we form relationships and make meaning in life—that is to say, the ways in which literature might contribute to ethical thought and living.

This dissertation inserts itself into the long-running dialogue between philosophy and literature that has gained renewed traction in the recent decade[13]—a movement for which Dorothy Hale coins the term, 'New Ethics.' Summarizing the main impetus of New Ethics as presented in the epigraph, Hale adds that these new theories ultimately make the claim that literature, and literary criticism along with it, is a "crucial pre-condition for positive social change" ("Fiction as Restriction" 189). To make an ethical defence of literature is no new gesture, of course: as Hale notes, it was "the first defense of the English novel" (190). What differentiates New Ethics is, in part, the means by which such a defence is presently being built. The contemporary conversation negotiates between two main axes.[14] On one hand, there is what is often referred to as 'humanism,' fronted most notably by the American critics Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum. Generally speaking, humanists claim for literature a continuity with lived experience, engage with narratology in their discussions of the ethical implications of literature, and tend to posit narrative empathy as "the pinnacle of ethical relation and the reason for art's ethical relevance" (Serpell

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[13] See Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack's *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *Getting It Right: Language, Literature, and Ethic*, and Lawrence Buell's "Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics" for some accounts of this 'turn.'

[14] The field of ethical criticism, even when narrowed down to literary ethical criticism, is too wide and varied to be done justice to in the few pages I have afforded it in this introduction; what follows is a selective survey of contemporary criticism in which I cover only the discussions related to intersubjective relations as mediated by the text.

71).[15] Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, for instance, is grounded in the belief that an ethical relation with the text is enabled only when a reader is 'taken over' by the narrative: the author's thoughts become the reader's thoughts, the characters' dilemmas the reader's. This "submersion in other minds," or "fusions of spirit," is what constitutes responsible behaviour towards the author (142) and is crucial to our sense of self as human beings with emotional lives (257). It is hence that he speaks of books as 'the company we keep' and of the reader's 'friendship' with the author. In a similar vein of immersive reading, in *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum moves to reinstate the centrality of emotions in morality (an Aristotelian gesture) and argues that it is literature's ability to engage the emotional dimensions of moral experience that makes it indispensable to any conversation about ethics. She suggests that literature (novels, in particular) not only participates in our moral task by giving us the space and the permission to dwell in our emotions and to make them a priority, but also engages us actively by demanding an emotional response. For Nussbaum, this is the novel's call to action: "to respond vigorously with senses and emotion before the new," and therefore, "to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them" (184).

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[15] As Suzanne Keen points out in *Empathy and the Novel*, 'empathy' first appeared in English in the early twentieth century as a translation by psychologist E. B. Titchener of Theodor Lipps's *Einfühlung*, "which meant the process of 'feeling one's way into [an object or person]'" (39n3). (See Juliet Koss's "On the Limits of Empathy" for a history of *Einfühlung*.) Before that, 'sympathy' was the operative word for philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith, whose philosophical treatises, *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments* respectively, served as seminal texts for the basis of the particular tradition of ethical defense of the novel in terms of empathy. In the eighteenth century, this tradition was embodied in the form of sentimental literature, which "exploited its consumers' appetites for feeling, taking on a pedagogical role and training its readers in emotional responses through exemplary response of characters" (Keen 46), and developed narrative empathy in the direction of immersion. Such literature was a natural complement to the concept of the beautiful soul as it promised to bring the reader closer to moral perfection by immersing him or her in the lives of virtuous heroes and heroines; one such is the titular heroine of Samuel Richardson's 1741 novel, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, whose "exceptional beauty is the visible sign of her quasi-divine status" (Pavel 16). This particular tradition of narrative empathy continued into the nineteenth century, though not unproblematically, in the form of Victorian social novels and sensation fiction, along with Romantic poetry, and it is unsurprising that humanists tend to look back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century for their examples: Charles Dickens and Henry James are oft-cited by both Booth and Nussbaum. Beyond sentimentalism, the broader field of narrative empathy advanced in various forms throughout the modern period: writers continued to draw on the potential of empathetic connections between texts and readers but eschewed immersion in favour of estrangement and experiment, reinstated the importance of thought in addition to sensibility, and pushed the limits of what could and should be represented outside of 'morally accepted' emotional and mental states.

Other critics whose general orientation is humanist include Richard Rorty,

Suzanne Keen, and James Phelan.[16]

As C. Namwali Serpell notes in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, a prevailing

charge against literary humanism[17] is "the accusation of a self-validating

solipsism that bolsters the subject, rather than attending to the other" (71),

influenced in part by Freud's view of identification as "a hostile erasure of the

other" (Chabot Davis 405).[18] To be sure, empathy, in its earliest articulation,

demonstrates a bias toward the same and the familiar. In *A Treatise of Human

Nature*, David Hume observes, "The sentiments of others have little influence,

when far remov'd from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them

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[16] Richard Rorty's humanist stance can be discerned in "Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises" in *The Rorty Reader* and "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," collected in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2*, where he proposes that imaginative literature can give us access to experiences usually denied us, thereby potentially enabling the individual to overcome itself and to cultivate a moral relation with those who are different from it. More specifically, Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* is an account of the relationships between literature, empathy, and altruism; in Chapter 2, she provides a useful survey of the debates surrounding these issues. Keen offers a theory of narrative empathy grounded in the concept of affect, theories of which have been articulated by Charles Altieri (*The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*), and Isobel Armstrong (*The Radical Aesthetic*). James Phelan's *Narrative as Rhetoric: Techniques, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* continues in the traditions of reception theory and reader-response theory, explored by Wolfgang Iser (*The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*), Louise Rosenblatt (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary*), and Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*), among others. Phelan's study examines the ways in which the narrative-as-rhetoric elicits or inhibits the reader's empathy and shapes the reader's ethical and ideological responses.

[17] Critics of narrative empathy specifically have also variously expressed other doubts such as the suspicion of the efficacy of empathy to produce altruistic effects: Keen and Greg Currie, for instance, are warier than Nussbaum and Booth of making claims for the practical benefits of literature because of the difficulty of obtaining credible and substantial evidence (see Currie's "Does Fiction Make Us Less Empathic?"). There is also concern that immersive literature dulls the reader's moral attachment to the real world and potentially translates into apathy instead (as in Gallagher's argument about literature's 'no bodies' in *Nobody's Story*; see also the portion on 'Self-Licensing' in Currie 59-62), as well as misgivings about literature's potential to serve voyeurism (Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*). Currie also points out that the internal demands of narrative (for coherence, for interesting subjects, etc) are not necessarily compatible with humanist goals. More generally, critics of ethical criticism have also addressed humanism's reversion to the dated concept of mimetic realism (and consequently the limitation of their theories to the medium of prose), its propensity to misread art as philosophy especially when the morality of the work is the basis for its evaluation as art, as well as its misguided tendency to conceive of life as a unified, graspable whole. See, for instance, Robert Eaglestone's "One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics, and Truth" and Leo Bersani's *The Culture of Redemption*. In "Against Ethical Criticism," Richard Posner dismisses (humanist) ethical criticism altogether (his points of contention are with Nussbaum and Booth). He argues that empathy is amoral (19), and that to tether empathy to altruistic effects and to place that relationship at the heart of literature, and consequently to either validate or condemn this latter gesture, is misprision in the highest degree. The in-ward looking nature of empathy is reflective of literature's purposes, which is, as he sees it, to impart not practical moral knowledge but self-knowledge: "[L]iterature helps us . . . to become what we are," Posner declares because what is in it that appeals to us is already a part of us (20).

[18] See Freud's "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego."

communicate themselves entirely" (318), and that empathy involves the defining of ideas in relation to oneself (320).[19] In *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670-1820*, Catherine Gallagher notes "the paradox of Humean sympathy"—"another's internal state becomes 'intimately present' only by losing its distinct quality of belonging to somebody else" (170)—and suggests that literature facilitates empathy because its representation of 'no (literal) bodies' allows for "the illusion of immediately appropriable sentiments, free sentiments belonging to nobody and therefore identifiable with ourselves" (171).

Gallagher's argument anticipates criticism that points out the potential of empathy to attenuate otherness, erase the fact of separate realities, and to essentialise experience according to dominant ideologies. It is possible that, in one instance, "'[e]mpathy' becomes yet another example of the Western imagination's imposition of its own values on cultures and peoples that it scarcely knows, but presumes to 'feel with,' in a cultural imperialism of the emotions" (Keen 147-48). In "Who Has the Right to Feel?: The Ethics of Literary Empathy," Kathleen Lundeen suggests that "[w]riters or readers who appear to empathize with another's life experiences are often accused of arrogating a cultural authority to which they have no natural claim" (83). She examines Felicia Hemans's "Indian Woman's Death-Song" and William Keating's *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River* as literary texts in which the story of the native woman is "[strained] through a sieve of Western conventions" (264).

Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" also offers the contention that empathy is merely the guise for "the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (15). Achebe famously condemns Joseph Conrad's novel as an example of such self-aggrandizing desire, depicting Africa as 'the other world' to European

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[19] Adam Smith also recognised this limitation to his structurally similar but otherwise different theory of sympathy: in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he points out, "Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. . .. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them" (23). Whereas Hume conceived of the judicious spectator and his 'general point of view' (581-82) to correct the partiality of sympathy, Smith describes an impartial spectator (152).

civilisation that yet offers up some communal meaning: the River Thames is drawn into kinship with the River Congo as "[having] been one of the dark places of the earth" (qtd Achebe 15), and the narrator is "thrilled" by the thought of his shared humanity with the "wild and passionate" people, the "Ugly" people (qtd Achebe 17).[20] The same kind of absorption leading to the perpetuation of the status quo can also take place across gender and class lines.[21]

As opposed to the humanist ethics of empathy, poststructuralist ethics offers a defence against such appropriation of the other. Against the humanist empathic model for a relation between the self and other, the poststructuralist branch of New Ethics defines its ethical imperative along the lines of opening up spaces of difference: it is concerned in part with showing the limits of empathy and with "[delineating] the impasses of an ethics of alterity or Otherness" (Serpell 15). Hale suggests that for the New Ethicists as a whole, "the ethical value of literature lies [more evidently] in the felt encounter with alterity that it brings to its reader" ("Aesthetics and the New Ethics" 899). If the humanists

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[20] Michael Marais similarly draws a parallel between representational violence and colonial violence, and suggests that representation of the other (in the realist text) effects an effacement that "reveals a nexus between the universalizing drive of European structures of knowledge, the representational procedures of the realist novel, and the history of European colonialism" ("Introduction" 3). Marais raises J. M. Coetzee as an exemplary novelist who successfully engages with the difficult ethics of representing the other; see, for instance, "Writing with Their Eyes Shut: Ethics, Politics, and the Problem of the Other in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee" and "'Little Enough, Less Than Little: Nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee." See also Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which he discusses the West's reductive representations of 'The East' as they are tied to the imperial contexts in which they were produced; as well as Marcus Wood's *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, which indicts the way in which the history of slavery has been debased into what he refers to as 'plantation pornography' since the eighteenth century, serving the "Sentimental 'highs'" (16) of its perpetrators.

[21] For instance, in *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, Susan Moller Okin criticises the kinds of narratives Alasdair MacIntyre names as necessary to a child's moral education in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*—folktales that reinforce dated gender stereotypes—for being "basic building blocks of male domination" (*Justice, Gender, and the Family* 45). In "Zadie Smith's *NW*: Unsettling the Promise of Empathy," Tammy Amiel Houser examines Smith's critique of the way in which empathy can be used to construct and shore up middle-class identity in her novel. Audrey Jaffe's *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* is a similar exploration of the relationship between empathy and social identity in Victorian novels, which often involve "a spectator's (dread) fantasy of occupying another's social place" (8). See also Karl F. Morrison's *I Am You: The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology and Art*, Elizabeth V. Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* and *Fruits of sorrow: Framing our attention to suffering*, and Lauren Berlant's "Poor Eliza." For an argument to the contrary, see Kimberly Chabot Davis's "Oprah's Book Club and the politics of cross-racial empathy"; while in *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*, David Parker defends conventional humanist criticism's "allegiances to the interests of a particular race, social class, and gender" (4) as an unconscious bias. It also needs to be pointed out that Nussbaum, the preferred target of most critics of humanist literary criticism, explicitly states that her sense of empathy includes "awareness of one's separate life" (*Upheavals of Thought* 327).

stress the possibility of connection in this encounter, the emphasis falls on *alterity* for the poststructuralist ethicists; and if the humanists see the reading of narratives as a means of getting our ethical bearings, the poststructuralist ethicists consider the literary act—of writing as much as of reading—to be the ethical response itself, hence their investment in the investigation of the instabilities of language and meaning, and their close links with deconstructionist theories.

Figures broadly associated with this latter position include Robbins, Attridge, (early) Eaglestone, Michael Eskin, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, and J. Hillis Miller[22]—whose works are influenced not only by Levinas but also by Jacques Derrida, Bakhtin, Paul de Man, Maurice Blanchot, and Barthes, among others. Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* is representative of a career informed by Levinasian ethics (mediated through Derrida) and grounded in the belief of the *singularity* of the literary text as "a wholly new existent that cannot be apprehended by the old modes of understanding, and could not have been predicted by means of them" (29).[23] "If we could apprehend [literature's] otherness directly, the shock would indeed be traumatic," he argues, "but direct

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[22] Robbins's *Altered Reading; Levinas and Literature* is an interrogation of Levinas's non-totalizing thought through the lens of language and literature, the latter which Robbins argues is fundamental to any reading of Levinas's ethical theories despite the philosopher's hostility toward art. Similarly, Eaglestone's 1997 study, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*, is a reorientation of Levinas's work toward the asthetics. By the time of his 2004 contribution to *Poetics Today,* "One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics, and Truth," however, Eaglestone had distanced himself from this stance as much as from the humanist position, arguing that both envisioned aesthetic and ethics as separate fields that ought to be bridged rather than as "one and the same," as Wittgenstein put it (qtd in Eaglestone 595). Both are seen to take for granted that the literary text offers, albeit opposing, forms of positivist knowledge. They both, therefore, fail to engage with the 'world revealing' aspect of literature, which Eaglestone draws from Heidegger. Levinas and Bakhtin provide the theoretical background for Eskin's *Ethics and Dialogue: In the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan*, an exploration of the ethical underpinnings of literature through the study of the poet Paul Celan, as well as Celan's translations of the Russian Jewish poet, Osip Mandel'shtam, both of whose work gives voice to the other. Notably, Eskin figures translation as the ethical activity par excellence. In *Getting It Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics*, Harpham offers an account of the ethical discourse to date, mainly from the perspective of deconstructionism, paying attention to the permeation of 'the phenomenon of otherness.' Harpham identifies a paradox within ethics: its search for clarity is accompanied by an inherent 'unclarity'—that is, its otherness which must be respected—should ethics wish to avoid becoming reductive prescription or utopian ideal. In negotiating this paradox, he argues that ethics is "best seen as a factor of 'imperativity' immanent in, but not confined to, the practices of language, analysis, narrative, and creation" (5). I discuss this at the end of Chapter 2.

[23] Attridge differentiates 'singularity' from mere 'uniqueness,' the difference being that the latter lacks the quality of 'inventiveness': "A work that is unique but not singular is one that may be wholly comprehended within the norms of the culture: indeed, it is the process of comprehension—the registering of its particular configuration of familiar laws—that discloses its uniqueness" (*The Singularity of Literature* 64).

apprehension is exactly what is ruled out" (76). Rather, the experience of literature—its form, specifically[24]—consists in an openness to otherness, which is denied in approaches that "[place] over [the literary work] a grid of possible uses, as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth . . ." (129). The outcome of this openness, Attridge takes pain to stress, is unpredictable and there is no guarantee that it will be beneficial. Hillis Miller similarly pushes for literature to be recognised as wholly other, and also disavows representation of alterity. In *The Ethics of Reading*, he develops an ethics founded on deconstructionist principles, which proffers that it is the reader's ethical obligation to respect the inevitable aporia of the textual artefact from which no knowledge as such can be drawn. "Narrative can be defined as the indefinite postponement of that ultimate direct confrontation of the law which narrative is nevertheless instituted to make happen in an example worthy of respect," he argues, and "[w]hat the good reader confronts in the end is not the moral law brought into the open at last in a clear example, but the unreadability of the text" (3). As such, for Hillis Miller, the responsible response to the text, the ethical response that affirms the singularity of the text (in the Attridgean sense of the word), is "to commit again and again the failure to read" (59).

Poststructuralist ethics' commitment to alterity translates into a resistance to closure, which challenges the determinate, coherent, and unified notions of morality, self, narrative and value cherished by humanists. Poststructuralist ethics, Martin Jay declares, "compels us to reflect on the costs of moral absolutism, the violence latent in trying to construct fully realized ethical forms of life" and "alerts us . . . to the dangers of a totally self-generated ethical code, which fails to acknowledge the passive moment in our feeling the compulsion of prescriptive commands ("The Morals of Genealogy" 46-47). While Jay interprets this aspect of poststructuralist ethics as a gesture for philosophical freedom (40), it has also been figured as a disenabling tendency. In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski attacks the privileging of critique as the most radical form of thought based on its subversive premises. "[T]he barbed wire of suspicion [which characterises the mood of critique] holds us back and hems us in," she writes, ". .

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[24] See also Attridge's "Ethical Modernism: Servants and Others in J. M. Coetzee's Early Fiction," in which Attridge conceives of the literary form as an event and discusses it with reference to modernism's formal experimentations.

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Felski's argument is significant for the way it brings out how, in its eagerness to protect the sanctity of the literary text from pre-emptive closure, poststructuralist ethics attenuates the (humanistic) value and relevance of literature. One field in which the disenabling tendency of poststructuralist ethics is evident is in some modes of feminist critique. In the earlier *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, Felski's argument against an experimental feminist aesthetics looks forward to her thesis in *The Limits of Critique*, as she similarly rejects, among several other models of feminism, a "poststructuralist feminist theory" that identifies the text "as a privileged site of resistance to patriarchal ideology by virtue of its subversion of the representational and instrumental function of symbolic discourse" (4). Felski suggests that such discourse defines without ground linguistic subversion as feminine and in doing so, "renders the term so broad as to become meaningless" (5):

> Any such abstract conception of a feminine text cannot cope with the heterogeneity and specificity of women's cultural needs, including, for example, the development of a sustained analysis of black women's or lesbian writing, which is necessarily linked to issues of representation and cannot be adequately addressed by simply arguing the 'subversive' nature of formal self-reflexivity. (6)

That is to say, in this argument, which sets out to demolish the idea of formal experimentation carrying any inherent political orientation or effect,

poststructuralist ethics fails to yield any cognitive value and thus, in effect, neuters feminism's potential for effecting social, cultural, and ideological change.[25]

Similarly, Teresa L. Ebert argues, "The problem with reading solely in terms of the system itself [as post-structuralism and deconstruction do] is that it becomes an ahistorical, formalist understanding unable to explain the existence of the system and its own terms or the relation of the system to the larger social and historical series" (13). Poststructuralist ethics, Ebert declares, "substitutes a politics of representation for radical social transformation" (3); and particularly in the case of feminism, it reduces what ought to be transformative to "matters of textuality, desire, or voluntarism" (x), thereby curtailing feminism's revolutionary potential. Felski and Ebert effectively throw into doubt the possibility of speaking about a poststructuralist *ethics*: brought to their logical conclusion, their arguments charge poststructuralist ethics with nihilism, making it no ethics at all.[26]

Moving within New Ethics

C. Namwali Serpell suggests that the New Ethics project is thwarted from the beginning since "a paradigm in which literary uncertainty can only demarcate the unknowable nature of Otherness runs counter to the pragmatic, imperative drives of ethical inquiry" (18). She writes, "[W]hen criticism ascribes to literature an

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[25] Doris Sommer, who dismisses empathy as "the egocentric energy that drives one subject to impersonate another" (*Proceed with Caution* 22), argues for the political value of withholding 'cognitive value' when it comes to minority literature in order to prevent the very appropriation of otherness that empathy can lead to. In "Rigoberta's Secrets," for instance, Sommer suggests that a text's refusal to speak can be "a defensive move" (36) against identification and imperialization as it imposes a "respectful distance" (37) between reader and text. It also foregrounds the necessary principle of otherness that resists assimilation and "constructs metaleptically the apparent cause of the refusal: our craving to know" (35)—that is to say, it prompts the ethical response to encounter otherness. See also, "Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers." In Chapter 3 on Aidan Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, I make a similar argument for the author's decision not to correct Elin's poor English, leaving her words indecipherable at times.

[26] This charge of nihilism has been leveled against post-structuralism often enough: see, for instance, Gillian Rose's *Dialectics of Nihilism: Poststructuralism and Law*, in which she suggests that the poststructuralists have deconstructed the law out of existence. Phelan attributes the turn to humanist ethics to this perceived lack in post-structuralism, particularly in the wake of the revelation of the wartime sympathies of the movement's exemplar, Paul de Man ("Sethe's Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading" 94n3); which, as Buell points out, "unleashed a flood of controversy within and outside the academy over whether deconstruction was morally evasive or iniquitous" (8-9).

amorphous alterity, the argument for ethics becomes diffuse, unable to do more than assert uncertainty as a limit case or to recommend a suspension of judgment when we face its high walls" (18). Symptomatic of this 'ruin at the origin' are the signs of "conceptual exhaustion" (17) that she observes in the work of both humanists and deconstructionists as ethical criticism seems inevitably to find its way to the same conclusion (i.e., "a willing submission to Otherness," 17), often via the same paths, such that a school of thought intent on broadening existing critical horizons ultimately comes up against the impasse of itself.[27] Richard Posner, who is altogether against ethical criticism, argues that often, the case is such that "the ethical position is in place before the examination begins, and furnishes the criteria of choice and shapes interpretation" (18). The problem with New Ethics then, as Serpell sees it, is: "how do we talk about literary uncertainty without reducing it to a monolithic otherness and without promoting a paralyzed or suspended indeterminacy?" (18).

I share a preoccupation with this problem. At the same time, I am also interested in addressing what cannot fail to be recognised as an important aspect of a literary-ethical inquiry, one which, as Felski argues, the New Ethicists neglect: the question of how literature enters life. Felski suggests that the especial regard many theorists express concerning the irreducible otherness of texts, all too often results in "a too-drastic response that cuts off the text from the moral, affective, and cognitive bonds that infuse it with energy and life" (*The Limits of Critique* 28). In their hands, literary works are, she declares, treated as "fragile and exotic artifact[s] of language, to be handled only by curators kitted out in kid gloves" (28), and the resulting methodology—that is, critique or suspicious reading, as Felski terms it—risks, in turn, the kind of tautology referred to by Serpell.

Felski's critique is more evidently levelled at the poststructuralists, and yet, there is a sense in which we might also argue that humanist critics also disbar literature from life, upholding their cherished moral exemplars as they do,

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[27] Eaglestone, for instance, suggests that for Nussbaum, "all great texts properly read echo the same Aristotelian moral points, about perception, about community and about identity," and that "her argument forms a self-enclosing circle by defining what to look for in a text which in turn is justified by what it finds during its search" (*Ethical Criticism* 54).

apart and away from the chaos and messiness of experience.[28] Eaglestone argues that in seeing literary narrative as "that which offers and constructs a rounded life, a full sense of the self and the social" ("One and the Same" 603), thinkers like Nussbaum seem to "miss something essential about life" (604). Quoting Wittgenstein, he points out that "a story of a life, told, as it were, from the outside and seen 'in a conciliatory light,' bringing all the aspects of a life together, fails to express that life adequately" (604). This "mismatch between narrative and life" (604) is all the more apparent when texts are held up as instruments of instruction and correction. After all, as read by Nussbaum, Henry James's novels project an *ideal*. Booth would argue that it is in this "pretense to ideals that we cannot possibly live up to in the rest of life, that our most exhilarating personal prospects lie" (*The Company We Keep* 257); Leo Bersani would counter this by suggesting that, in "ask[ing] us to consider art as a correction of life," this neo-Aristotelian approach constitutes a "*misreading of art as philosophy*" (*The Culture of Redemption* 2).

Works of art surely cannot be justifiably displaced from life itself. Art's matter is, after all, built out of the matter of life, and more than just nominally, and to declare this is not to revert to a nineteenth-century reduction of art to the unmediated mimetic representation of life (which the humanists have been accused of doing—see Eaglestone, "One and the Same" 602). As Felski puts it, the "singularity" and "sociability" of works of art are "interconnected, not opposed" (*The Limits of Critique* 11). "[W]orks of art cannot help being social, sociable, connected, worldly, immanent," she writes, ". . . by default, [they] are linked to other texts, objects, people, and institutions in relations of dependency, involvement, and interaction" (11). And yet, she adds, "they can also be felt, without contradiction, to be incandescent, extraordinary, sublime, utterly special" (11). Attridge goes a step further in positing that the singularity of literature "does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter [it]" (*The Singularity of Literature* 64), and that it can be experienced "only as a process of adjustment in norms and habits whereby it is recognized, affirmed, and, at least partially and temporarily, accommodated" (63). To be clear, this does not mean

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[28] We might think here of the satirist "whose laughter is negative [and who] places himself above the object of his mockery, [and] is opposed to it" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 12). In the same way, morally didactic novels or morally didactic readings of novels occupy a negative space in relation to life.

that literature ought to be read as instrumental; rather, Attridge argues, literature is always already implicated in social discourse.

This thesis is, among other things, a meditation on the difficulties of engaging in the kind of literary-ethical inquiry in relation to literary fiction and as articulated by contemporary critics such as Serpell and Felski. It is also a consideration of the difficulties involved in engaging with the meanings and potential readerly concretisations of literary texts that seem inevitably to slip through our definitive grasp even as they are presented as a part of our lived experience. It is also, more ambitiously, an attempt to imagine a way out of these quandaries of ethical criticism from within, where humanist and poststructuralist ethics might commingle in the "huge hall of reflection full of light and space and fresh air, in which ideas and institutions can be unsystematically nurtured," to borrow a quote from Murdoch (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* 422). Accordingly, I employ terms associated with humanist critics such as *fidelity* while 'un-defining' them so they are freed up for new relations, and Brook's 'great and wondering O' of deep resonance without comprehension can likewise be opened up. I set out to oppose the potentially alienating and deadening effects of poststructuralist theory with a blind faith that literature-as-ethics might ultimately work towards positive values since, as the fall of the beautiful soul has taught us, what is without place in the world of material realities is without locatable value. As such, I speak of *otherness* and *mystery* interchangeably. Serpell prefers 'uncertainty' in part for its neutrality as she means to disabuse us of the illusion that "the conceptual word 'ethics' always signif[ies] the beatific" (20); though I use this word also, my inclination is for 'mystery' as the neutrality of 'uncertainty' leaves any argument built on it open to the same risk of succumbing to the paralysis that Serpell identifies of the New Ethicists. In addition, as Ali Smith writes in *How to be both*, "in mystery there is always hope" (227). I also speak of *love* and *beauty*, both of which point to a notion of value that cannot be reduced to what is recognised as conventional 'moral goodness'; and these terms too, I "demystify, destabilize, denaturalize" and

"recontextualize, reconfigure, [and] recharge perception [of]," to borrow Felski's words (*The Limits of Critique* 17).[29]

Moving thus within the field of New Ethics, I argue that the ethical potential of literature lies in its ability to open us up to the profundity of experience by impressing upon us the myriad possibilities that exist as *our* possibilities, no matter how distant. There is no literary world that has been conceived that does not have in it a kernel of the reality we know and are familiar with. And yet, in the various ways that it estranges us from this reality, literature allows us to 'know' our world by another face: to see things with greater clarity and to attend to particularities previously neglected, to come to know things we did not before, and also, importantly, to recognise that the complexity of experience is such that it exceeds all our systems of knowledge. Or to 'un-know' our reality, as Georges Bataille puts it, and hence to acknowledge that experience must always remain in part opaque and that it is in this necessary mystery that we might locate the origins of some of our most vital concepts—love, for instance. Literature's ethical value lies in expanding our consciousness, our capacities, and our possibilities thus, achieving this as much through the mechanics of difference/distance as through those of similarity/empathy.[30] And so we can keep company with the despicable Humbert Humbert, the traitorous Macbeth, the manipulative Becky Sharp, the perverse Judge Holden, the vengeful Amy Dunne, the talented Mr. Ripley, the violent Alex DeLarge, even Satan himself in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, without adopting a moral position vis-à-vis them or any other kind of 'reasonable' relation to them. It is our ethical responsibility to acknowledge these things of darkness ours without necessarily identifying with them or understanding them.

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[29] I am not, as will become apparent, advocating for what Eve Sedgwick refers to as 'reparative reading' in *Novel Gazing*, which Felski describes as "a stance that looks to a work of art for solace and replenishment rather than viewing it as something to be interrogated and indicted" (*The Limits of Critique* 151).

[30] To be clear, 'empathy,' as I have used it here, covers a wide range of definitions and strategies. Some accounts—Booth's, for instance, and Alan Palmer's *Fictional Minds*—presume cognitive deliberation leading to character identification, role-taking or "*thinking the thoughts of another*" (Booth, *The Company We Keep* 139), and/or a projective fusion of imaginations. Keen, on the other hand, defines the term as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect," which she, in turn, distinguishes from "the more complex, differentiated feeling for another as *sympathy*" (4). Empathy has also been discussed in relation to, and occasionally conflated with, "fellow feeling, pity, compassion, and benevolence" (Keen 41); it has been variously defined to include motor mimicry, induction, emotional contagion.

This recognition has important implications for the way we go about making meaning in life. The two axes of New Ethics as described above, though often positioned as opposing schools of thought, are bound by a common commitment to what Hale refers to as "the self-consciously unverifiable status of the alterity that the ethical subject seeks to produce" ("Fiction as Restriction" 190); tellingly, she describes this unverifiability as a consensus, that which "retains the post-structuralist's skepticism about knowledge as a tool of hegemony while bestowing upon epistemological uncertainty a positive ethical content" (190). The encounter between reader and text, self and other is a "leap in the dark," as Hillis Miller describes it (qtd in Hale, "Fiction as Restriction" 195). Serpell suggests that New Ethicists correlate this unverifiability and literary uncertainty, and hence, share a common belief in "literary uncertainty as an index of ethical value" (15). Here, literary uncertainty refers to the mobility of thought that literature encourages, and that other disciplines, not least of all philosophy, can benefit from. Serpell argues that for many of these theorists, literary uncertainty is "*the* remedy for the doldrums of ethical philosophy's plodding language and method" (299). Literature is all possibility, all possibilities and all 'impossibilities.' O brave new world, indeed.

That literature places us at a threshold is a particularly relevant and valuable characteristic in present times, where the state of our social, cultural, political, and environmental landscape is such that we find ourselves more evidently living through limit experiences, unable to "infer the direction of the world," as Patricia Waugh puts it ("The Novel as Therapy" 52). The juggernaut that is technology continues on its path of exponential growth, largely unfettered, challenging and changing our very sense of what it means to be human. The political status quo is endangered by sustained attacks on long-cherished political ideologies and unstable, radical political regimes. Meanwhile, we are edging closer and closer to a climate tipping point. In 2019, the Doomsday Clock has us at two minutes to midnight. (That said, even in more stable and consistent times, love and death are always at hand to bring us to the brink of existence.) Culturally, we too are in a period of transition, in the aftermath of postmodernism and the 'theory era'—a period characterised by new relationships between art, criticism, politics, the environment, and ethics. Alongside New Ethics, critics have identified various 'turns' in contemporary critical thought,

such as a therapeutic turn and a narrative turn (Waugh, "The Novel as Therapy"), a political turn (Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*), and the 'return of the real' (Foster, *The Return of the Real*). In the process, cornerstones of society— our notions of virtue, community, love, and truth, among others—are being overturned.

In *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Peter Boxall argues that what we are facing is a "crisis in representation," which reveals to us "an extraordinary failure of the paradigms with which we have articulated cultural life, and the emergence, as a result of a new kind of inarticulacy, a strange sense of disconnection" (17). The thesis that follows takes place on the border-line of thought. It is an attempt at a critical practice that is positioned on the edge of things, confronting this crisis in representation; and that is grounded in the belief not just in the value of confronting limit experiences, but also the necessity and urgency of doing so in these times when we are less likely than ever to predict the future and its forms. To this end, I have chosen to focus on the novel form, which, as conceived by Bakhtin, is a revolutionary form that is in constant dialogue with its historical context (as I will discuss in the next section).

It is also hence that I have avoided a historicist orientation. Historicist approaches have been criticized for their tendency to organise human experience into fixed categories that exist in hierarchical relationships to one another, and for a lack of self-conscious reflection on the limits of their own discourse. The historicist methodology has also been accused of, at its weakest, reducing literary works to effects of their particular time and space.[31] These potential shortcomings have the disadvantage of disabling the question of ethics. In any case, ethics is understood and approached here in terms that are philosophical and ultimately transhistorical: it is, as Levinas proposes, a first principle, beyond any specific cultural system of knowledge. In parts of the thesis where history

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[31] See *The Limits of Literary Historicism*, in which Allen Dunn and Thomas F. Haddox delineate the limitations of the historicist discourse; the collection of essays serves to reopen the space for dialogue concerning the historicist methodology and its theoretical foundations, with contributors offering alternative models of and to historicism. See also *On Literary Worlds*, in which Eric Hayot similarly challenges the historicist frame and argues for the necessity of approaching literature from beyond these confines: his argument addresses the frame as a Eurocentric construction that excludes the non-West in the writing of history.

emerges with force, it does so with an eye to disabusing us of the idea that history, the study of contextualised experience, can be confined within frameworks, or, indeed, organised into categories like 'periods' or 'genres.' My interest in history here extends only insofar to the way it breaks its own horizon and, to quote Ali Smith, "opens to renewal everything which appears complete or perfected" (*Artful* 128); the way it demonstrates that the "*eruption*" can prove "the superior figure of knowledge" (Debray qtd in Hayot 16). Historical circumstances of post-war Europe in Chapter 2, for instance, serve as the backdrop that enables Hannah Arendt's attack on habitual thought; while the brief tracing of the development of the history of the epistolary form in Chapter 3 lays the groundwork for a discussion of the way Aidan Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry* bursts the seams of its chosen genre.

Which is also to assert that my priority in this project is an ethical engagement with the novels, the particularity of which functions as the eruption within history; it is within this context that the tension between the close reading of the novels and the broad historical reach of the thesis is situated. This is a work of aesthetics. By it, I mean to contribute to a growing chorus of intellectual thought that seeks to reclaim space for the aesthetic through testifying to the continued, if not increased, relevance of the novel to the intellectual landscape in its present particular unknowable form—a relationship whose complexities transcend the concerns of the average historicist. And by contributing, I mean also to expand on its capacities by proposing an alternative defence of art, on grounds other than the high aestheticist idea of art for art's sake—which critics today, practising in the post-critical tradition, often fall back on in their desire to move beyond the legacy of theory. Challenging the reductive and diagnostic tendencies of theory-driven readings, Felski, Rorty, Eve Sedgwick, and their cohort frequently resort to arguments based on abstract notions of goodness, beauty, and truth, which harken back to nineteenth-century aestheticism and its cherished ideal of art's autonomy. Placing art in dialogue with ethics, and arguing for art to be understood as an experience of loving attention to the other, I construct my defence against these pieties. Art is not merely for art's sake, but is in life, and for life's (and love's) sake.

What is required now are, to quote Nick Cave, "acts of devotion" that are "an investment in the unknowable" ("The Red Hand Files"), which are finally an

investment in life. Cave speaks of prayer and meditation. Directing and focusing our attention on limit experiences, acquainting us with their conditions, and enabling us to get used to the discomfort that accompanies such experiences, the act of reading too constitutes just such an act of devotion, of investment; as does writing, and my writing of this thesis. In Waugh's words: "Novels allow us to order our minds more completely by taking us closer to the edge of disorder" ("The Novel as Therapy" 37); it is hence that she suggests that novels can enable us to "meet the demands of [a] new risk society" whose effect is more often uncertainty than knowledge (43-44). If we can no longer be praying types in these secular modern times, perhaps we could be reading and writing types, and being so, find our way to negotiating a world that increasingly and consistently eludes our grasp, to "achiev[ing] some glimpse into the naked, unthought futurity that our blurred and darkening present contains within it" (Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* 18). Literature is entirely at home in the realm of the unknown and the unknowable; through it, we can learn to similarly make a home in the face of uncertainty and risk.

The Texts: Murdoch, Quin, Higgins, Hollinghurst, and Smith

The most readily accessible entry point to the complex conversation between philosophy and aesthetics is arguably narrative prose; as such, I have—like Serpell, Nussbaum, Booth, Attridge, Hillis Miller, Adam Zachary Newton before me—chosen to focus on the novel in my study. The novel is always already, quite evidently and necessarily, in the thick of life. Bakhtin declares it the most human of all genres as it is the embodiment of the dialogic principle that governs existence. In the novel, dialogism manifests in the quality of *novelness*, which is, in turn, what allows the form to participate in a specifically human (i.e., developing, living) time and experience. Novelness refers, in one aspect, to literature that is always testing itself against established conventions, including its own, and making itself anew. "What is more conventionally thought of as the novel is simply the most complex and distilled expression of this impulse," writes Holquist ("Introduction" to *The Dialogic Imagination* xxxi). Compared to other genres which we know "in their completed aspect, that is, as more or less pre-existing forms into which one may then pour artistic experience," the

"primordial process" of the novel's formation as a genre was laid bare to Bakhtin in his time (*The Dialogic Imagination* 3). Writing in 1941, Bakhtin notes that the novel is "the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted," its "generic skeleton . . . is still far from having hardened, and we cannot forsee all its plastic possibilities" (3). The only genre born into a "new world still in the making," Bakhtin proposes that the novel "reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding" (7).

The novel however was not just temporarily 'novel' or new. Bakhtin argues that from its inception, the novel was structured in "the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality" (39), and has at its core "an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness" that translates into "a living contact with the unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)" (7). The novel's 'modernity,' or novelness, is "indestructible" because its essential characteristic is "an eternal re-thinking and re-evaluating" (31), a constant reaction and response to its context in the historical time of its production and consumption. Simultaneously retrospectively shaped and therefore teleological, and yet governed by its own constantly developing and therefore permanently contemporaneous and spontaneous time, the novel serves as a model for the way in which we process experience: in terms of fate and destiny, through memory; as well as in terms of day-to-day life, from moment to unpredictable moment.[32]

Moreover, the dialogicality of the novel is also the site where existence is conceived of as the relationship not simply between the self and time, but also between the self and human others. In "Discourse in the Novel" (collected in *The Dialogic Imagination*), Bakhtin suggests that the basic distinguishing stylistic feature of the novel is a diversity of languages (speech by the author, speech of the narrators, speech of the characters, intertextual quotations, etc.), all of which,

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[32] A link can be drawn here to Agamben's notion of 'contemporariness,' which he articulates as "*that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*" (41). Put another way, the contemporary is "something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it" (47). Bakhtin's 'novelness' functions along similar lines of proximity and distance, and the Bakhtinian novel can be argued to be a paradigm of Agamben's 'contemporary.' Additionally, Agamben's use of the metaphors of light and darkness to parse his argument, and his insistence that distance/darkness is not privative (44), anticipates the discussion in Chapter 2 on the way 'vision' depends on both light and darkness, clarity and obscurity, sight and blindness.

as Holquist points out, are "constant reminders of otherness" (*Dialogism* 76), and all of which the novel draws together and unifies without erasing their differences or subjecting one to another. 'Heteroglossia' is the term Bakhtin employs for this: "*another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way"; a type of "*double-voiced discourse*" in which both voices are "dialogically interrelated," as if "hold[ing] a conversation with each other," but are also at the same time highly particular (*The Dialogic Imagination* 324). The novel thus plays out the drama of co-existence. In "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," Murdoch too declares that "imaginative prose literature . . . is *par excellence* the form of art most concerned with the existence of other persons" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 278).

These qualities of the novel perhaps account for the reason that this genre has, above all other literary forms, most often been implicated in moral teaching as formalised in the *Bildungsroman* but evident not least in the role the novel has played more generally in propagating and crystalizing the idea of moral beauty. It follows that the novel is the genre most attuned to the interrogation of the structures that produce such thinking. Bakhtin's writings on the novel and novelness can be said to speak to and even answer the problem of philosophy's failure in articulating an ethics because of its universalizing tendencies and its neglect of particularity, which he identifies in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act.* Murdoch similarly suggests, "We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with," so that prose fiction is seen to enable us to "re-discover a sense of the density of our lives" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 294). According to the dictates of Bakhtinian thinking, novels represent the specificity of reality as open-ended and as encompassing, among other things, the unaccountable particularity of the other that yet demands to be addressed—without their resistance to closure precluding meaning.

To circumvent the trap of conceptual exhaustion that Serpell describes, I have selected novels with ethical import but that have not previously been considered in ethical criticism: Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Ann Quin's *Three* (1966), Aidan Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry* (1983), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), and Ali Smith's *How to be both* (2014). Far from being chosen on a whim or in unthinking defiance of tradition, each of these texts has been selected for its ability to offer a different approach to

the present inquiry into the intersection of ethics and aesthetics: the novels examined span a variety of sub-genres from (apparent) bourgeois realism to the epistolary—genres they both work within and against. The idea here is, as Serpell writes, that in considering many different structures, we might "[work] against the tendency to keep [literary uncertainty] unlocatable and unverifiable" (19).

In selecting less well-known writers and works, one aim of the thesis is to make them more fully available for their contemporary audiences. Quin's *Three* and Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, in particular, are oft-neglected texts, undervalued or overlooked as a result of their perceived obscurity and their resistance to being assimilated into more familiar or current critical discourses. Smith's *How to be both* has been the object of great critical acclaim but less so of detailed critical analysis and her *oeuvre* is generally under-explored. This is to a lesser extent the case for Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty,* but even here detailed critical discussion has been limited. In this respect, Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* might seem to be an outlier with both author and novel having been the object of more extensive critical interpretation. But Murdoch herself was both novelist and philosopher, and this novel, in particular, consolidates her abiding concerns with relations between aesthetics and ethics with specific reference to the responsibilities of the novelist and in the context of the continental philosophy that Murdoch herself was immersed in—unusually for a British philosopher of her time, the trend being analytical philosophy. Putting Murdoch into dialogue with the likes of Barthes, Levinas, Bakhtin, and Simone Weil, I hope to offer a fresh take on *The Sea, The Sea*.

These novels have also been chosen for their self-conscious description and affordance of an ethically-tinged aesthetic experience by way of the particularities of their form. They can be considered 'experimental' (a quality often conflated with the aforementioned perceived obscurity), to varying degrees—with Hollinghurst's being the most conventional[33]—and their deliberate play with conventions and limits foregrounds the erosion of any stable premise, making them suitable candidates for this particular study with its

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[33] Hollinghurst's formal experimentation in *The Line of Beauty* is limited to his depiction of the flow of time but, as I will propose in the concluding chapter, he challenges the limits of the forms we have for meaning, specifically the notion of beauty.

poststructuralist-influenced methodology. Although this was not a factor taken into consideration when selecting the novels, Murdoch's, Quin's, and Higgins's novels were notably published during the period when modernism was still the dominant aesthetic ideology. Relevant here is Martin Jay's argument that the poststructuralists, in particular, embraced the modernist work of art, i.e., the work "in crisis," which is "more open to intrusions from without than utterly self-sufficient, more a complicated mixture of representation and presence than either purely one or the other" ("The Morals of Genealogy" 45); this is opposed to the perception of the work of art as "an organic, beautiful whole, an autotelic structure providing a sensuous manifestation of an idea, a boundaried object following its own immanent laws" (45). As Attridge puts it,

> there is . . . a sense in which the formally innovative work, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the most sharply challenging . . . ethical demand. Formal innovation . . . is a testing of the operations of meaning, and is therefore a kind of ethical experimentation. (*The Singularity of Literature* 130-31)

In encountering an experimental work, we cannot help but register its resistance to and challenge of categorical and habitual thinking; these 'defences' overthrown, we are left vulnerable but also placed in a position to respond responsibly. Murdoch's, Quin's, Higgins's, Hollinghurst's, and Smith's novels each interrogate and dismantle fixed structures of understanding, not in the spirit of disenchantment, but of recovery. There is life and healing at work here, and herein lies their ethical potential, the ultimate triumphant expression of which I suggest is love. All the novels I discuss are love stories, some more readily apparent as such than others, and all engage with the problem of the recovery of meaning.

Moreover, the reading of texts that markedly inhabit or mediate positions of marginality also allows me to interrogate the conventions of literary form, and therefore to formulate a thesis built around the very specificities of literary form, such that one could not say, as Charles Altieri does about Nussbaum's thought, that "literature can be replaced by any other means of training discernment and eliciting thoughtful pity" ("Lyrical Ethics" 44). The arguments proffered in the following pages can be extended (though not *applied* indiscriminately) to other

works that relate questions of the relation of the aesthetic to the ethical through the examination of love, such as John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*, which has much in common with *The Sea, The Sea*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. These have already, however, received substantial critical attention and I have preferred to work with relatively neglected texts that also foreground the relation between love and aesthetics. The study of modern queer fictions of love would have taken this project in another direction but deserves more space than can be presently afforded in order to do it justice (I mention it only in brief in the conclusion, by way of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*). Hollinghurst's and Smith's *oeuvres* offer rich possibilities for exploration in this area, as does Sebastian Barry's *Days Without End.* In addition, the present conversation can also be extended to other genres of literature such as poetry, a gesture thus far only made by a few critics,[34] as well as the visual arts, particularly in portraiture: Ludmilla Jordanova's discussion of portraits depicting pain and suffering in "Portraiture, Beauty, Pain," for instance, highlights the possibilities of a study on the ethics of painting along the lines pursued in this thesis.

The Chapters

I begin my study by delving deeper into the idea that the problem of ethics (and therefore, of love) is a problem of aesthetic form; and that insofar as this is the case, it has to do with the liberation and recovery of meaning. Enlisting to my cause Murdoch's novel focused on a narcissistic lover, *The Sea, The Sea*, I initially ground my discussion in its treatment of the matter of *fidelity*, a term that pertains both to affairs of the heart and to aesthetics: an image always intercedes between the self and the other, the lover and the beloved, and it is the 'accuracy' of this image to which I refer when I speak of fidelity. Fidelity as a standard of love, I suggest, is misunderstood in terms of constancy and consistency, when it ought to be defined as resilience: a commitment renewed time and time again, in the face of the unknown. For Murdoch, this resilience is made manifest in the

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[34] Forays have been made by Altieri ("Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience"), Eskin (*Ethics and Dialogue*), Phelan ("Rhetorical Literary Ethics and Lyric Narrative: Robert Frost's 'Home Burial'"), and William Waters ("Rilke's Imperatives").

attention we pay to the particularities of the other, an idea she draws from the French philosopher, Simone Weil. In this chapter, I also draw on Murdoch's philosophical writings on art to look at how the novel's affinity with interruption and incompleteness paradoxically makes it an ideal form for the representation and cultivation of a loving attention that might lead one to goodness.

In Chapter 2, I argue that an ethical, loving attention such as that which interests Murdoch exceeds the ocular tradition that has dominated Western philosophy because it posits or involves attention that necessarily encompasses the idea of blindness. Here, I take a marked bend towards the philosophical by first looking at the work of several thinkers who were part of a tradition that flagged up the privileging of the seeing and knowing eye—Georges Bataille, Levinas, Derrida, and Maurice Blanchot—in order to lay the foundation for what I refer to as *an ethics of blindness*. I also discuss the resonances between this ethics and literary form, and propose a category of literature that we might call *blind literature*, which engages with the particularities of human experience that cannot be seen or known. I then go on to consider Quin's enigmatic novel, *Three*, which takes the novel's affinity with interruption and incompleteness to its extreme, as an example of such literature. Making bedfellows of obscurity and clarity, Quin's novel exploits the experimental possibilities of the novel genre to explore the radical mystery of the other through the story of a mysterious stranger, S, and the bourgeois couple into whose marriage she intrudes. I argue that the novel calls for a breaking of the fixed systems of thought with which we seek to contain and expel the mystery of the other; here, I read the novel alongside Hannah Arendt's philosophical thought.

Three also gestures towards the difficulty of forging an ethical relation to the other in light of his or her mystery, a problem that I take up in Chapter 3 with a reading of Higgins's epistolary novel, *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, which features two lovers separated by a gulf of difference. In Higgins's novel, the epistle takes on the role that Quin's mysterious S performs, giving form to the otherness that necessarily intrudes between lover and beloved; I further develop the discussion in the previous chapter on 'breaking form' in the direction of poetic language. The notion of otherness as a space that communicates meaning, which is explored in Chapter 2 through parataxis, is here reiterated in the idea of private untranslatable languages and their potential to embody personal meaning. The

relationship between Arendt's 'thinking' and 'knowing' that is explored in the previous chapter on Quin, which is in turn a variation of the relationship between Levinas's Said and Saying (discussed in Chapter 1), is also explored in this chapter through the oblique way of metaphor. The metaphor, I propose, effects a suspension of thought as called for by Levinas, Arendt, and Weil, inscribing a blind spot in which meaning can emerge. *Bornholm Night-Ferry* poses and attempts to answer the question, *how do we love in the dark?* In doing so, it establishes itself as an exercise in being responsive in and to necessary blindness.

It seems to me appropriate to end this study on love's artful vision and art's loving vision with a discussion on beauty. In the concluding section, which looks to the immediate present, I look at Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and argue for the need for a redefinition of beauty to 'keep up with the times,' so to speak, as the sociohistorical and cultural changes since the nineteenth-century render classical ideals of beauty no longer tenable. I propose instead a conception of beauty as the ordinary sacrament of meaning, the readily apparent even if indefinable 'evidence' of a relationship forged (in the process of being forged) with the mysterious other, to whom we are always blind. Beauty, being of a sensual nature, reminds us that our gaze should always be directed at eye-level; and it provides the foothold we need as protection against getting lost or becoming disempowered in an ethical-aesthetic conversation that takes place in large part in the dark. I close with a reading of Smith's *How to be both*, which consolidates the various threads of the present discussion, and which goes one step further in positing and exploring the transformative potential of a relationship of meaning forged with the other. A different way of seeing, as this relationship provokes, is after all a different way of being in the world.

Chapter 1: Still, Life—The Matter of Fidelity in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*

>Let me not to the marriage of true minds
>Admit impediments. Love is not love
>Which alters when it alteration finds,
>Or bends with the remover to remove.
>O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
>That looks on tempests and is never shaken . . .

—Shakespeare, Sonnet 116

Sonnet 116 by Shakespeare has become something of a monument to truth in the modern consciousness, a testament to what love is or should aspire to be. The poem consolidates the varied notions of love as it has been represented throughout literary history and boils them down to one imperative: fidelity. Faithfulness appears as the key criterion by which we assess the quality of love. Love is Desdemona, declaring her innocence on her deathbed; Noah, building the ark despite the taunts; Samwise Gamgee, the stout-hearted, trudging alongside Frodo and helping him complete his quest. Love is an ever-fixed mark.

But a reading of Sonnet 116 as an ode to this particular conception of fidelity belongs to the uninitiated. It is difficult to imagine that a writer with as keen an insight as Shakespeare when it comes to human nature would have made such nonchalant assumptions about something so complex; he *had* to see that there is no fixed point when it comes to love. From its first lines, the sonnet gives us intimations to this effect. It notably begins with an entreaty ("Let me") and not a statement, which is in turn followed by the qualification that the union has to be "a marriage of true minds." For a poem often cited as an affirmation, Sonnet 116 also significantly "proceeds by means of negation," as Linda Gregerson and Helen Vendler point out: 'Let me not,' 'Love is not,' 'O no,' etc. These negatives, they suggest, give the sonnet all the marks of a rebuttal and temper its laudatory tone (Gregerson 170; Vendler 39); Vendler goes as far as to argue that Shakespeare intended "anger and scorn" in the poem (39). Additionally, because negation functions as a linguistic step backwards, it has the effect of making the space of the poem a shifting ground. By the time the sonnet draws to a close in the seemingly definitive couplet, "what [it] has gained in forcefulness, it has lost in assurance": "[The ending of

the poem] is sheer bravado and of course it fails," writes Gregerson (170). The assumptions commonly made concerning Sonnet 116 are further challenged when the poem is read alongside the other sonnets, such as those in the Fair Youth sequence: in Sonnet 92, the persona struggles with the idea that the beloved "mayst be false, and yet I know it not" (Line 14); in Sonnet 93, he resigns himself to living, "supposing thou art true,/ Like a deceivèd husband" (Lines 1-2). In the context of these, it is highly unlikely that Shakespeare would have intended Sonnet 116 to be taken as the uncomplicated statement of love that it is now commonly assumed to be.

Throughout his *oeuvre*, Shakespeare reveals a preoccupation with the contingent, unpredictable nature of love. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, love's fickleness is embodied by the mischievous spirit, Puck, who is capable of inducing love by means of a potion; lovers fall in and out of love literally at (Puck's) whim. The most damning line in the play arguably belongs to Lysander. A victim of Puck's machinations, he renounces his love for Hermia, to whom his heart is initially "knit/ So that but one heart we can make of it," and declares, "Not Hermia but Helena I love:/ Who will not change a raven for a dove?" (II.2.47-48; II.2.113-14). By the end of the play, Lysander is back in love with Hermia while Demetrius discovers that "by some power it is—my love to Hermia,/ Melted as the snow" and he is now in love with Helena (IV.1.162-63). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy that ends, as the form dictates, in reconciliation but, as in many of Shakespeare's other comedies, there is an underlying current of disturbance and unease that threatens the happy ending. The complication lies in the way that love is largely treated as a frivolous game with few serious consequences. Theseus alludes to this in the very last act where he suggests that lovers are like mad men in that they "have such seething brains,/ Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend/ More than cool reason ever comprehends" so that they will see what they want to see (V.1.4ff), which is to say that love could very well be a trick of the imagination.

The one instance in which love comes close to bearing its own cross is in the play that the actors stage in Act V, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, which is a tragedy much like *Romeo and Juliet*. The play-within-a-play however is conveyed through a similar playful tone as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—the actors turn it into a farce (complete with a talking wall) while the audience mocks it unceasingly—and hence, it is robbed of all its gravity.

Elsewhere, inconstant love also features in *Twelfth Night*, in which the twins Viola and Sebastian are interchangeable with their lovers, Orsino and Olivia, who happily accept one for the other that they might each "have share in this most happy wrack" (V.1.261). In *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, declarations of love in the first act are swiftly rescinded by the second; "Even as one heat another heat expels,/ Or as one nail by strength drives out another,/ So the remembrance of my former love/ Is by a newer object quite forgotten," says Proteus (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* II.4.190-93).

Time and time again, Shakespeare disabuses us of the illusions we have concerning love, especially the quality of steadfastness. There are very few instances in his work in which love does not alter. Even when it comes close to the ideal form that Sonnet 116 projects, Shakespeare makes it quite clear that such love has no place in our world. Love which is capable of bearing it out even to the edge of doom *will* bear it out to the edge of doom, and over. *Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.* "But that very phrase could serve as an indictment of love, a suggestion that it is dogmatic, unbending, and terribly wilful," argues Judith Butler ("Response" 238). Many of the Bard's great love stories are also tragedies that end in the death of the lovers. Certainly, the most famous and revered: Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Othello and Desdemona; they all loved "too well" (*Othello* V.2.344), and as a result their stories are all stories of woe. (This risk that unwavering love carries is not limited to romantic affairs; one thinks also of Cordelia and her devotion to her father in *King Lear*.) Infidelity and extreme fidelity lead to the same end after all.

Love of the highest standard might not be Time's fool, but we as mortal beings surely are. In contrast to the tragedies, the love affairs in Shakespeare's comedies are often troubled by some complication because they are very much situated in the world we inhabit. Even the affairs that take place in a world of spirits and faerie folk follow the same logic, which dictates that people very rarely love unwaveringly to the point of death. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare explicitly addresses the tension between real love and "true love" through Miranda and Ferdinand's relationship (IV.2.84). This relationship follows the familiar procedures of 'true love' but, cultivated as it is on a fantastical island by means of magic and sanctified by divinities, their love lies literally "[b]eyond all limit of what else i' th' world" (III.1.72). Shakespeare plants the seeds of

doubt in the audience as to whether their love can survive in the real world of Milan—or the real world of the audience, even—with all its contingencies; Prospero himself declares that what his magic conjures are "insubstantial pageant[s]" made of "baseless fabric," which "[melt] into air, into thin air" and "[l]eave not a rack behind" (IV.1.146ff). It is not too presumptuous to suggest that Shakespeare must have had his suspicions about common notions of love and fidelity. The persona of Sonnet 116 was, after all, a man in love and, as Touchstone cautions in *As You Like It*, "[T]he truest poetry is the most feigning, and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry, it may be said, as lovers, they do feign" (III.3.17-20).

Whatever our limitations as fallible human beings, fidelity is commonly upheld as a *moral* ideal of love. In literature, the violation that is deviation from this standard is often expressed accordingly in terms of catastrophic consequences. Consider, for instance, the tragedy of *Othello*; or the death toll in Seneca's *Medea*, where Jason's breaking of "pledges bound by straitest oath" (137) results in the murder of Creusa, Creon, and Jason and Medea's sons. In these narratives, fidelity is an absolute moral criterion: one is either faithful, and, therefore, good and rewarded for it; or unfaithful and, therefore, deserving of punishment. The stakes of a love governed by fidelity are high and devastating and therefore, necessarily complicated. Both *Othello* and *Medea* evoke a deep sense of unease, an ambivalence, about the extremes that love can be pushed to when it is bound by such fixed and unforgiving standards. We hesitate to agree with the Moor that his crime was that he loved too well, or see Medea's actions as entirely, straightforwardly 'justified'; Medea herself notably also questions the justification of what she plans to do with her sons. The complexity of Seneca's play of infidelity revenged is such that we are struck dumb by the devastation as Jason is, who proclaims only that where Medea is, "there are no gods" (1026). As Joel B. Altman argues, "a Senecan drama, while deeply concerned with the moral life, is not, strictly speaking, a didactic work" (231). There is no "consistent argument," no moral to receive since Medea is herself in possession of a "wavering moral status" (240); and Seneca's play is all the more richer in its depiction of life for that.

The Corral of Meaning

> We were trapped in the corral of morality. Murdoch led us not only to the broad fields of ethics but also beyond that again to the almost untracked forests of the unconditional.
>
> — Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy"

Othello and *Medea* are not simply plays about love and fidelity; neither is strictly a romance narrative. Instead, fidelity presents itself as a nexus for a range of issues spanning the aesthetic, the political, and the ethical. Whatever lens it is refracted through, the matter of fidelity boils down, as I will argue, to our formal relationship to the world through which we derive meaning. Our (mis)understanding of fidelity as a virtue in terms of that which does not alter is reflective of a 'corralling of meaning' at work in philosophy, particularly Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy. This problem has been variously identified to different degrees by critics such as Charles Taylor (from whom the phrase 'corralling of meaning' has been borrowed), Emmanuel Levinas, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, Derek Attridge, and Wayne C. Booth.[1]

In "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," Taylor makes a distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics': while ethics refers to the wide domain of all issues pertaining to 'the good,' the former is a narrower domain within the latter, confined to a specific concern (that of what is right *to do*), and committed to systematic procedures and fixed goals (i.e., criteria by which goodness can be assessed) in the name of clarity. "[O]ur sense of what is right starts off fuzzy and powerful, with strong but unclear intuitions; it stands in need of clarification," notes Taylor (4), and the force of moral reasoning lies in the way it can reduce these "fuzzy intuitions" to precise prescriptions (7), which are all the more convincing for being able to stand up to the "self-monitoring" (6) of such reason and to smooth out any incommensurabilities (7).

Morality is a domain in which we are not comfortable admitting that we are ultimately in the dark; indeed, we often do our best to convince ourselves otherwise, that we are capable of expelling the dark. As Taylor argues, the moral system is founded on

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[1] See Harpham's *Getting it Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics*, Attridge's "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," and Booth's *The Company We Keep*.

an arrogance about epistemology that ignores the fact that it is situated "in the context of a grasp of the good which is largely unarticulated" because of our epistemic limitations and of our reluctance to engage with that which is messy and elusive (17). Morality, he suggests, "consists largely of background understanding" (17); "Or else, it is presented to us in paradigm persons or actions or in internalized habitus" (17), in which case it necessitates the neglect of specificity, of issues outside its specific realm of obligatory action, as well as of all incommensurabilities within the said realm in order that it might posit "a procedure of operation" (7). Insofar as it is less foundationally secure and edifying than it claims to be, and as it proceeds only by foreshortening the wider domain of ethics, morality as "the whole, or the one ultimately serious domain" (4) can be and often is detrimental to our understanding of experience.

Taylor defines ethics in comparison to morality as that which "involves more than what we are obligated to do. It also involves what it is good to be" (10); he goes on to discuss the things it is good to be—which he speaks of in terms of 'life goods' and 'constitutive goods'—a subject he expounds on also in *Sources of the Self.* But in articulating the virtues, in referring to them as 'moral sources,' Taylor himself also curtails the potential of seeing ethics as 'a wider domain.' His description of ethics is less compelling than his broader suggestion that the shift from morality to ethics be understood as a "liberation" ("Iris Murdoch" 5) of thought and experience. For Taylor, ethics remains a region of epistemological inquiry but for Levinas, it is the liberation itself that constitutes ethics. The difference between ethics and morality as he sees it is, put simply, the difference between a process and its product, or the Saying and the Said. Without yet bringing to bear the full import of these terms, it is enough for now to parse this difference as such: the Saying is that which is unstable because it is ever questioning, hesitating, and revising; and the Said is that which is intelligible and fixed.

Based on the fact that it reduces, determines, and claims an authority over that which it ultimately cannot possess, morality-as-Said sets itself against the thrust of ethics-as-Saying, which is directed towards generosity, space, uncertainty, and potential. Ethics-as-Saying is beyond all that is readily assimilated and accessible, beyond the moral situation, beyond ontology itself (and therefore, certainly beyond the 'life goods' or 'constitutive goods' that make up Taylor's 'what it is good to be'). "[The Saying] does

not allow itself to be walled up in the conditions of its enunciation," writes Levinas, but "benefits from an ambiguity or an enigma, which is not the effect of an inattention, a relaxation of thought" (*Otherwise Than Being* 156). And if morality-as-Said is the site on which the self's encounter with the other is clarified, codified, and regulated (as in the Ten Commandments), then ethics-as-Saying is that which exists prior to this site: it is the space where the other is not reduced as such by me. The other remains absolutely other, and hence, unknowable, unfixable and unmasterable.

In Levinasian thought, ethics is a perpetual extension of generosity that affords lived experience a profundity by acknowledging that there are aspects of it that remain a mystery. Morality, as Levinas sees it, clarifies the mystery but "at the price of a betrayal [of ethics]" (6). This is not to say that Levinas suggests we dispose of morality as an area of concern. Morality performs a regulative function in society, which Levinas is not so foolish as to ignore: even as he argues for the freedom of Saying, he concedes that the Said is "ancillary and thus indispensible" (6). The issue at hand here, for Taylor as much as for Levinas, is to work at circumventing the potential tyranny of moral frameworks (or, indeed, any epistemological frameworks) that traditional philosophy is subjected to, and at refining our sensibilities toward a more truthful even if less defined meaning of the Good—a project for which Levinas's conception of ethics offers greater scope. Andrew Gibson summarises the matter in such terms in *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*: "We are moral as we are political because we are historical beings, and no movement 'beyond morality' is properly conceivable . . .. Ethics nonetheless operates a kind of play within morality, holds it open, hopes to restrain it from violence or the will to domination" (15).

The ethical sensibility of Iris Murdoch, the subject of Taylor's essay, is more akin to Levinas's. Murdoch's idea of morality[2] is not "a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises" but extends to cover "the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 380). In her view, moral values are necessarily so complex and various as to be beyond the reach of any system: she maintains that the concept of goodness "resists collapse into the selfish empirical

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[2] Murdoch's notion of 'morality' is more properly understood as 'ethics,' in the Levinasian sense, as opposed to conventional morality. Murdoch's use of 'morality' however has been retained to minimise disruption to her writing.

consciousness" (376) and that a "genuine mysteriousness" (381) attends to it, a mysteriousness that is its very essence. Like Levinas, she holds that the valuing of closure in the name of clarity when it comes to speaking about experience amounts to a betraying reduction, and instead, strains towards the overcoming of totality in our relations to one another through the assertion of the particular. Notably, Murdoch subverts expectations in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* by making Julius King, an oft-remarked "man of principle" (34) with "a passion for cleanliness and order" (426), the villain; and the unkempt Tallis Browne, who lives in disarray and cannot finish writing his lecture, the unlikely 'moral hero.'

Accordingly, Murdoch proffers, in her philosophical writings as much as in her novels, the possibility of a moral philosophy that conceives of moral concepts as "deep moral configurations of the world, rather than as lines drawn around separable factual areas" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 95). These are configurations that we more often than not fail to perceive in their entirety, with this very failure providing the grounds for truth. She writes,

> The insistence that morality is essentially rules may be seen as an attempt to secure us against the ambiguity of the world. Rules may be ambiguous in that we have to decide how to apply them, but at least in attempting an ever more detailed specification one is moving in the direction of complete clarity. If I am right, however, this cannot be properly taken as the only structural model of morality. There are times when it is proper to stress, not the comprehensibility of the world, but its incomprehensibility . . .. (90)

Moral experience, as Murdoch sees it, falls within this latter category, and the task of moral philosophy is to "[take] the moral forms of life as given," in all their diversity and complexity, and "not try to *get behind them* to a single form" (97); not only are our efforts to 'achieve' a moral value doomed to be imperfect, our moral concepts themselves are ever-changing and "infinitely to be learned" (323). "Great philosophers," Murdoch reminds us, "coin new moral concepts and communicate new moral visions and modes of understanding," rather than work within the limits of what has come before them (83).

For Murdoch, what is at stake in moral philosophy is the liberation of morality from an attitude that claims to reach for truth but settles for whatever it can grasp, which

is often inexact and trivial. In "The Idea of Perfection," collected in *Existentialists and Mystics*, she speaks of this attitude in terms of a scientific attitude, or at least a corrupted version of one, and notes that moral philosophy ought not to be practiced according to its dictates because it is evidently *not* a science. Broadly speaking, Murdoch, as Taylor intuits, desires to release meaning from its shackles. This, she suggests, is achieved by energizing our meaning-making processes and our forms of experience with "poetic freedom" (*From a Tiny Corner* 103), where 'freedom' refers not to anarchic liberation or relativisation but to "the experience of accurate vision" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 354) and 'energise' is taken to mean not only and not necessarily to reinforce but also to question, contradict, and hence, set in motion. To put it another way, what Murdoch is speaking of here is a kind of freedom that is "a renewed ability to perceive and express truth" (256), and this freedom she refers to as *imagination*, the domain most obviously of the artist.

That great philosophers have much in common with great artists is an unsurprising conclusion arrived at in Murdoch's work, considering that she sees goodness and beauty as being "largely part of the same structure," or "two aspects of a single struggle" (332) to see and to give form to the world as it really is. The idea of virtue, she argues, "is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to [the world]" (332). In "The Sublime and the Good," she goes as far as declaring, "Art and morals are, with certain provisos . . . one" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 215). Murdoch herself is a philosopher/novelist, rather than a philosopher *and* a novelist. Although she declares that she "certainly [does not] want to mix philosophy and fiction—they're totally different disciplines, different methods of thought, different ways of writing, different aims" (36), the mind does not settle easily into either category when it comes to her work.[3] Murdoch's statement seems to be made more in the interest of pre-empting any philosophical reading of her novels that alienates their fictionality, than of pursuing a strict divide between philosophy and art. This goes some way in explaining her refusal to 'classify' her novels as 'philosophical novels,' a genre that is often read more as

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[3] For instance, Broackes's *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, a book on Murdoch's philosophical thought, contains essays by Martha Nussbaum and Peter Conradi that read Murdoch's philosophy in light of her novels. Similarly, other studies of Murdoch's intellectual output such as Rowe's *Iris Murdoch and Morality* tend to consider her philosophical work alongside her fiction.

philosophy than literature (225). Should one be seeking words to describe them, one might be better off referring to Murdoch's comment that what she has given us is "a huge hall of reflection full of light and space and fresh air, in which ideas and intuitions can be unsystematically nurtured" (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* 422).

If the same cannot be said of Murdoch's philosophical treatises, it is due to the specific demands of the philosophical discipline itself, although one might also argue that in the treatises, there is something of the ethos of the novel as well. Murdoch's critical work is symptomatic of what Bakhtin identifies as 'novelised' writing in *The Dialogic Imagination*. For instance, her writing is arguably "more free and flexible" compared to her contemporaries, and is infused with that rejuvenating energy that comes with "incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language" (6-7). Murdoch as philosopher/novelist was always in active, creative dialogue with the dominant intellectual ideas of her time: Nancy E. Snow points out that Murdoch was "a philosophical maverick, forcefully challenging the received philosophical wisdom of her day in trenchant critiques . . . and bringing an array of often novel influences . . . to bear on the development of her philosophical perspectives" (137).

It follows then that in Murdoch's view, art is instrumental to the development of moral thought. When she argues that aesthetic situations are "not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 332)[4] and that "the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue" (371), Murdoch does not mean that art is, or ought to be, didactic. Aware that art is as vulnerable to ideological prescription as any other discipline is, she is careful to differentiate between 'bad art' and 'good art': the former, which Murdoch terms 'fantasy,' deals in consolatory illusions of order and control, while good art, she emphasises, is "pointless" and that it is this pointless-ness that amounts to its value (371).[5] In presenting us with "a truthful image of the human condition" (371), in

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[4] Murdoch's statement directly addresses, and opposes, Kant's views of art being related to morality only by analogy. For Kant, morality is tied intimately to reason while art has nothing to do with it. For Murdoch's engagement with Kant, see especially her essays, "The Sublime and the Good" and "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," collected in *Existentialists and Mystics*.
[5] In the introduction to *The Value of the Novel*, Peter Boxall discusses how the intellectual developments of the last century have resulted in, among other things, a "culture of accountability" and a "culture of the rationalized university" that "forces literature into a utilitarianism which means that it can no longer help one to think, can only imprison one more narrowly in the way things are" (10). Similarly, in *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski's objection is "to the relentless grip, in recent years, of what we could call an antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma" (9). In reaching beyond the meaning of critique as

all its contingencies and complexities, "in a form which can be steadily contemplated," it may be that it "transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality" and "enlarges the sensibility of its consumer" (371); but if it does "[improve] us morally" (and Murdoch believes it does), it does so 'accidentally' because it works on a deeper level than moral thought (218). It is hence that art can also be destructive of moral reasoning; but that is part of its operation of prompting us to reach beyond totalizing frameworks imposed by the self and society by revealing the particularities of human experience that exceed these frameworks (371).

It is through the compulsion and direction of our attention that art can play a role in helping the individual learn moral concepts: in an interview with Michael O' Bellamy, Murdoch declares, "Morality [in art] has to do with not imposing form, except appropriately and cautiously and carefully and with attention to appropriate detail" (*From a Tiny Corner* 50). Murdoch's comment acknowledges that art remains a matter of the artist's control and is, in a way, a system in its own right, creating a paradox when juxtaposed with the kind of morality she espouses. In "When She Was Good," Martha Nussbaum suggests that "[by] their very coming-into-being [the novels] would appear, by the lights of Murdoch's morality, to be an immoral act, an act of manipulation and excessive control"; "Indeed, her novels draw attention more than most to the presence of centralized control, as the characters execute a complicated erotic dance whose choreographer is always just offstage," Nussbaum adds (33). While that may be true, Murdoch's meticulous orchestrations also include ceding control of the narrative and getting out of its way, so to speak—a willingness to stop seeing, or at least, a willingness to stop directing the reader's sight.

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skepticism (as per Paul Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion') towards what she terms 'postcriticism,' Felski's aim is to "de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions . . . thereby freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument" (3). That said, these arguments, notably, are directed to critical engagement with art and not art per se; implicit in Boxall and Felski's work, indeed in the present thesis, is a sense that art—good art, in any case—resists such exclusively diagnostic treatment and demands instead a more dialogic approach.

The Matter of Fidelity in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*

'Picturing the human' (the title of Maria Antonaccio's study) is an apt phrase to describe Murdoch's own creative endeavours, not just in the sense of representing the particularities of the inexhaustible human experience (which cannot escape being bound up within a moral dimension), but also in the sense of investigating the possibility of viewing morality as an aesthetic matter. Moral *reasoning*, Murdoch argues, does not tie us to the human world (*Existentialists and Mystics* 327); the question then remains, what *form* does our moral relationship to the human world take? In the drawing together of art that focuses on the human particular and philosophy that deals in abstractions and universals, we can locate an attempt at a resolution to the tension between Murdoch's "vision of particulars" and her Platonic sense of the Good as a "unitary abstraction of some kind" (Nussbaum, "When She Was Good" 32); in her novel, Murdoch is constantly trying to translate philosophy in terms of art. In *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Murdoch engages with the moral and aesthetic task of picturing the human. In the novel, a narcissistic playwright and director, Charles Arrowby, allows his self-importance to corrupt his love for his childhood sweetheart, Hartley—a love that is inseparable from his image of her in his memory. Murdoch's moral and aesthetic concerns meet in the subject of Charles's perverse fidelity as she tests the hypothesis that she set out in "The Idea of Perfection": "the central concept of morality is 'the individual' thought of as knowable by love, thought of in the light of the command, 'Be ye therefore perfect'" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 323).

Self-Love as Love's Antithesis

> This explains 'l'amour fou.' Love cannot be reduced to any law. There is no law of love.
> — Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*

In *The Sea, The Sea*, Charles Arrowby's unrelenting fidelity towards Hartley figures as a destructive obsession: an obsession that is by another name, simple, uncomplicated, ignoble, narcissistic self-love, which is no love at all. Charles's love for Hartley is

absolute as he never fails to remind us and that it is such takes on more significance for him than the actual 'object' of his absolute love: he repeatedly makes reference to "someone I had loved and lost" (33) and points out that he "never (except for once when I was young) seriously considered marriage" (39). "I loved once (the same once) absolutely," Charles declares as a matter of pride (38). By his absolute love, Charles means a love that is pure and eternal, a virtuous ideal; but love as a "supreme value, a standard by which all other loves have failed" (334) is not generous, is not for-giving. The absolute, figured in the word *too*, returns us to ourselves as extremes are wont to do: you are too good, too silly, too clever, too old *for me*; or, more explicitly, in the sense of the word meaning 'likewise,' where *too* invokes *two* but simultaneously conflates it to *one*: "We loved each other," Charles writes of Hartley, "we lived in each other, through each other, by each other. We were each other" (78). Absolute love turns in on itself and becomes its own anti-thesis: self-love.[6]

When Charles unabashedly aligns himself with "hedonists" and declares himself an "intelligent self-lover" (8), he means to imply a degree of sophistication and worldliness, even spiritual superiority and transcendence, as suggested by his noting, a paragraph later, that he shares an inclination for "simple joys" and a dislike of waste with Saint Augustine (8). In a similarly aggrandizing manner, Charles figures himself an introspective Romantic: standing upon a bridge near his house and "watch[ing] the violent forces which the churning waves, advancing or retreating, generate within the confined space of the rocky hole" with "curious pleasure" (5), he rehearses the pose of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). But, as with Saint Augustine, any resemblance between Charles and Friedrich's wanderer is only passing. The painting is ostensibly a representation of man's dominion over nature, but this is complicated by the treacherously craggy mountains and the sea of fog, which suggest a less than straightforward relationship of power; these connotations are inscribed in the violent waters that Charles looks upon and, notably, the pool is where he later almost drowns. This conflict of emotions gives rise to what Kant refers to as the quality of the

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[6] This is not to say that self-love is necessarily to be condemned. In "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism," Heinz Kohut argues against the negative valence tied to narcissism in Freud's work and suggests that it is the origin of positive personal qualities such as self-esteem and creativity. It is however not within the scope of this chapter to dwell too deeply on the intricacies of self-love as a condition rendered through a psychoanalytic framework.

sublime, which Murdoch discusses in "The Sublime and the Good." There, she describes the sublime as inspiring a "mixed experience" of "distress at [the] failure of [our] imagination to compass what is before us," and "exhilaration" at the 'negative exhibition' of our cognitive faculties, to which the sublime object attests (*Existentialists and Mystics* 208). Although the sublime affirms the supremacy of the rational individual, it is nevertheless founded on the acknowledgement of an incapacity, the "realization of a vast and varied reality outside ourselves," as Murdoch puts it (282). There is nothing of this acknowledgment in Charles, however, who is the uncomplicated, unambivalent image of self-satisfaction. In him, the qualities of contemplativeness and inwardness often associated with Friedrich's wanderer, and with the Romantics, are perverted into narcissism. Charles is a self-lover in the meanest sense, a "tyrant," "tartar," or "power-crazed monster" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 3); like Narcissus, all of his love is directed inwards.

His brand of love having more to do with the self than the other, love exists in a necessary relationship with possession for Charles. He speaks, for instance, of the "feelings of ownership" he has for Lizzie (48), and experiences "that old familiar possessive feeling, the desire to grab and hold" her when it seems she might be slipping out of his grasp (94). Charles does not ever call himself a god (though he is happy to recall others doing so) but imagines himself one: he puts his name on everything—it is "my sea-facing window" and "my yellow rocks" (2), "my sportive sea" and "my 'cliff'" (6)—and on everyone, from Hartley to Rosina to Lizzie, and even Gilbert and Titus. "To name the world is to try and compel it," states Peter Conradi (237). By insisting that 'Hartley' is Mary's "real" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 129) name and by calling Peregrine 'Perry' despite the latter's wishes (71), Charles attempts to subjugate them to his will. To the tyrant and the narcissist, people are "chattels" (334) whose *raison d'être* is to increase the self's field of meaning: "How could I not have been [faithful to Hartley], if she had lived with me, sewed for me, cooked for me," declares Charles (84). As Lizzie puts it, "you're like a very good dancer, you make other people dance but it's got to be *with you*" (71). Interested only in extending its own reach, love that seeks to possess is love that seeks to shut in and shut out.

The self-lover's monstrosity is that he unabashedly consumes even as he resists being consumed himself (the Pac-Man syndrome, if you will). Charles's "possessive

hunger" (Conradi 234) for food, women, and art is the novel's structuring principle—the reader is led on a gastronomic adventure—but Charles is, at the same time, "afraid of being 'swallowed'" himself (Murdoch, *The Sea* 53). Charles, the self-lover, fears the open mouth that belongs to the other as a "portent" of failing to conquer and of being conquered himself (60). He imagines he sees a sea monster, its mouth "opening to show teeth and a pink interior" (19); he finds "something strange and awful about the distorted open mouths of singers, especially women, the wet white teeth, the moist red interior" (60) and perceives singing as "a form of aggression," in which "[t]he wet open mouths and glistening teeth of the singers are ardent to devour the victim-hearer" (312); and later, when Rosina, with her "black will" (107) and her determination to destroy him, confronts him in Shruff End, he sees a vision: "it was as if her face vanished, became a *hole*, and through the hole I saw the snake-like head and teeth and pink opening mouth of my sea monster" (105). When Hartley attempts to escape from Charles's grasp, he significantly "[catches] a glimpse of her open mouth and of her glistening frothy teeth" (232), and her screams during the period of her incarceration at Shruff End serves as a vocalisation of this failure:

> Her voice, raucous, piercing, shrieked out, like a terrified angry person shirking an obscenity, a frenzied panic noise, a prolonged '*aaah*', which turned into a sobbing wail of quick 'oh-oh-oh', with a long descending 'ooooh' sound ending almost softly, and then the scream again: the continuing mechanically, automatically, on and on as if the human creature were possessed by an alien demonic machine. (305)

Her scream is "a terrible sound, a sound which in fact [Charles] has been dreading ever since [he] embarked upon [his] perilous adventure" (336). Unsurprisingly, in both instances where Hartley screams, Charles shouts at her to shut up: "I felt I wanted to silence her even if it meant killing her" (306).

The gesture that comes to mind at this point is the embrace. Roland Barthes writes in *A Lover's Discourse*: "The gesture of the amorous embrace seems to fulfill, for a time, the subject's dream of total union with the loved being" (104). The beloved is circumscribed within the lover, is encircled against the rest of the world, protected even, that is, until the embrace is not released. The embrace is a "moment of affirmation" but

only a moment, "for a certain time, though a finite one, . . . [an] interval" (105); the embrace that refuses to let go turns into a noose, a chokehold. Barthes cites Aristophanes's theory of the Hermaphrodites in which man's 'original body' is cut in two and the two halves yearned to be re-joined, a romantic notion perhaps if not for the fact that "When [the halves] met they threw their arms around one another and embraced, in their longing to grow together again, and they perished of hunger and general neglect of their concerns, because they would not do anything apart" (Plato, *The Symposium* 61). In attempting to reconstitute man's 'original body,' to give form to this eternal embrace, Barthes concludes that "[the] figure of that 'ancient unity of which the desire and the pursuit constitute what we call love,' is beyond my figuration; or at least all I could achieve is a monstrous, grotesque, improbable body. Out of dreams emerges a farce figure" (*A Lover's Discourse* 227).

The lover's embrace is a consuming and silencing gesture. In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre figures love as "conflict" (477), a constant struggle for unity against the risk of destroying the other's freedom; it is a matter of the self choosing freely to have his or her possibilities delimited by the other, and of the self requiring the same of the other (474ff). Sartre's account of love is grounded in attitudes of assimilation and appropriation—he refers to Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic in his study although he points out that it does not offer a perfect analogy for love (482)—and is, perhaps unsurprisingly, developed from the narcissistic premise that love is ultimately "a project of [the self]" geared towards self-knowledge, which only the other can offer (484). Love, he argues, is really "the demand to be loved" (488). (Noting the obvious connotations of such a model of love, Sartre also cautions against indifference.) Sartre ultimately concludes that love is likely to be a disappointment since it works against fundamental human impulses to seek self-knowledge and therefore to merge with the other.

We might argue here that it is only a narcissistic love that would pursue the assimilative and appropriative tendencies of love to its limits, and that would not constantly seek to overcome them. "The lover's discourse stifles the other, who finds no place for his own language beneath this massive utterance [of *I love you*]," Barthes writes (*A Lover's Discourse* 165), where, especially in the case of the self-lover as Charles

demonstrates, the emphasis always falls on *I*. When Hartley comes to Charles at Shruff End for the first time, he renders her inarticulate with his embrace:

> She made a gesture as if she were about to speak, but by then I had grabbed her, clumsily again but effectively enough, in my arms and gathered her into that bear hug that I had for so long been dreaming of. I lifted her off her feet and heard her gasp as almost the whole length of her body was crushed against me. (Murdoch, *The Sea* 211)

When she tries to tell him her history, he insists on first kissing her on the lips—"Then everything will be well. The kiss of peace" (218)—and then repeatedly interrupts her with his own narrative in which they "talk about the old days . . . [and] establish [themselves] together as one being, one being that ought never to have been divided" (215). A self-lover admits only a soliloquy. Narcissism, Louise Glück writes, "means to suggest transfixed infatuation, that overwhelmed awe that admits *no secondary response*" (5, own emphasis). *and I, the one who speaks . . . am disfigured: soliloquy makes me into a monster: one huge tongue.*[7]

Accordingly, *The Sea, The Sea* is an echo chamber. Its claustrophobic atmosphere might be explained and excused by its nature as a memoir if not for the fact that it only begins as one and very quickly becomes, by Charles's admission, a novel (153). The self discovers the other in the novel, Holquist suggests (*Dialogism* 84); in this aspect, the novel finds sympathetic resonance in Badiou's definition of love as "an existential project" that calls for one to "construct a world from a decentered point of view other than that of my mere impulse to survive or to re-affirm my own identity" (*In Praise of Love* 25). Charles's myopic vision when it comes to love is reflected in the way his "novelistic memoir" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 239) holds the other (Hartley, Hartley's son, Titus, Lizzie, the reader) hostage in a "cage of needs" (442). "Why could they not talk?" wonders Charles at the awkwardness of the interaction between Hartley and Titus during the time of the former's imprisonment: "Later I saw that of course it was the whole situation which made them speechless; and it was I who created and who maintained that situation" (296). Before, theatre was his "particular way of shouting back at the world" (33): it vindicated his dictatorial inclinations, nurtured his obsessional tendencies, and

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[7] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*. 166.

sanctioned "the assault, the noise, the characteristic impatience" (34) of the narcissist's communication; his 'hostages,' actors and audience alike, were willing. Theatre, as Charles puts it, "was part of my revenge" (34). But theatre also made these impulses somewhat productive because it moves finally beyond the narcissist behind it— somewhat, because as it turns out Charles "failed as an actor," "ceased as a playwright" (37), and might not have been a very good director either. This is purely by virtue of art's own transformative and communicative quality. Outside the field of art, in life, these impulses remain mired in the self.

Narcissistic self-love is corrupt, is no love at all, because it is that which does not move and hence, that can never really be moved. It is rooted in *disdain*, Glück suggests: "Narcissus's plight arises from his disdain for others, for those whose love he neither returned nor honoured" (5):

> Both boys and girls looked to him
> To make love, and yet that slender figure
> Of proud Narcissus had little feeling
> For either boys or girls . . ..
> Now swift, now shy, so he had played with all . . ..
> Until one boy, love-sick
> And left behind, raised prayers to highest heaven:
> "O may he love himself alone," he cried,
> "And yet fail in that great love." The curse was heard . . ..
> (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book III, 75-77)

As it is with Narcissus, the base note of Charles's character is disdain. "You die at heart from a withdrawal of love," writes Charles (Murdoch, *The Sea* 84). Contempt is what is left behind when love retreats. Charles's belief in the absolute and perfect nature of his and Hartley's childish love allows him to elevate them above their counterparts: "Ours was a solemn holy happiness, and we shunned the coarser talk of our schoolfellows," he writes (79-80). When Hartley leaves him and he withdraws his love, this 'heroic' elitism is gradually perverted into blanket contempt for ordinary living, for social life, for everyone who is not the beloved. It is contempt that drives Charles to retire to the sea and shun all company except for that of Lizzie, for whom he makes an exception because he selfishly imagines that she might serve as a "sort of retired part-time 'senior wife' figure,

like an ageing ex-concubine in a harem who has become a friend: a companion who is taken for granted, to whom one is close, but not committed except by bonds of friendship" (48).

As Charles puts it himself, "really I have no friends" (40), although the truth of this statement does not quite catch until the end of the novel when one of his 'friends,' Peregrine, attempts to kill him for his wilful destruction of Peregrine and Rosina's marriage:

> You deliberately smashed my marriage, you took away my wife whom I adored, you did it carefully, cold-bloodedly, you *worked* at it. Then when you had got her away from me you dropped her. You didn't even want her for yourself, you just wanted to steal her from me to satisfy the beastly impulses of your possessiveness and your jealousy! Then when you were satisfied, when my marriage was broken forever, you went jaunting off somewhere else. And what is more you expected me to tolerate this and to go on liking you! . . . what bugged me was that you wrecked my life and my happiness and you just didn't seem to care at all, you were so bloody perky. (397)

Peregrine's outburst stands in stark contrast with Charles's callous and dismissive treatment of the matter in his own writing, in which he admits that he "was never 'in love' with Rosina" but "simply wanted her, and the satisfaction of this want involved detaching her permanently from her husband" (72). The latter statement could just as well apply in Hartley's case. *The Sea, The Sea* is a catalogue of Charles's mistreatment of the people around him who, mostly (quite inexplicably) love him. Accompanying, and therefore throwing into doubt, his repeated declarations of his absolute love for Hartley are accusations that he despises women (95, 334), which his behaviour toward Lizzie, Rosina, and Hartley certainly supports. And of course, Charles despises men too: his relationships with them are mediated through jealousy of their relationships, their possessions, their success, their happiness.

Under Charles's selfish and disdainful gaze, love is made profane: Lizzie succumbs to her love for him and declares herself his "page" (141), for instance, and Gilbert offers himself up as a "sort of possession, just a chattel, not anything troublesome, not with *rights*" and a "house-serf" (241). More explicitly, Charles's monstrosity is reflected in Rosina, who haunts him like a ghost at the beginning of the

novel, and who, in her first confrontation with him at Shruff End, looks "handsomely grotesque" with a face made up like an Indian mask (104) and glittering hands like "clawed paws" (109). Furthermore, by making his pure and chaste love with Hartley (imagined or otherwise) the reason and excuse for his behaviour, Charles defiles that as well. Because he believes he loved absolutely once, he absolves himself of any further responsibility to love another. Because he loved absolutely once and was spurned, he henceforth reserves all of his love for himself. Because he loved absolutely once, everything he does or does not do in the name of this love is absolutely justified. Hartley, unlike Charles, is able to see the situation clearly: "It's resentment really [that Charles feels towards her], otherwise you wouldn't be so unkind . . .. Or it's curiosity, like a tourist, you're visiting me, visiting my life and feeling superior" (300). There was never a question of Charles's attempt to rekindle their relationship being anything other than a tragic farce.

Self-love has to do with the static and hence, with the eternal, and "nothing human is eternal," says Charles's cousin, James Arrowby (353). Charles imagines his relationship with Hartley as being characterised by two "fixed and certain mark[s]" (81): a moment when they were about twelve and "the emotions began . . . [that] puzzled us, amazed us. They shook us as terriers shake rats" (78), and the projected event of their marriage. Even after Hartley's unexpected departure and the intervention of more than forty years, his faith in these fixed points is unshaken. This 'model' of love's timeline (indeed, the entire affair) is borrowed from the Greek romances where, as Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the "result of the whole lengthy (story) is—that the hero marries his sweetheart" (107). Bakhtin details a schema for the Greek romance, to which Charles and Hartley's relationship bears much resemblance:

> There is a boy and a girl of *marriageable* age. . . . They are also exceptionally *chaste*. They meet each other *unexpectedly* . . . A *sudden* and *instantaneous* passion flares up between them that is as irresistible as fate, like an incurable disease. However, the marriage cannot take place straightaway. They are confronted with obstacles that *retard* and delay their union. The lovers are *parted*, they seek one another, find one another; again they lose each other, again they find each other. There are the usual obstacles and adventures of lovers: . . . the *absence of parental consent* . . . The novel ends happily with the lovers united in marriage. (87-88)

Of course, in Charles and Hartley's case, it is Hartley's decision to leave Charles that retards the plot, and there's the rub.

In a Greek romance, all that intervenes between the two fixed points is "a sharp hiatus that leaves no *trace* in the life of the heroes," which Bakhtin names 'adventure-time' (89). Adventure-time is "extratemporal" (90) rather than biographical because everything that happens during this duration has no consequence: the love between the hero and the heroine remains "*absolutely unchanged*"; it is "as if absolutely nothing had happened between [the moment they fall in love and the moment when they are joined in marriage]" (89). This is the narrative structure that Charles seeks, built on "the absolute nature of the bond between myself and Hartley, and the certainty which, in spite of Hartley's behaviour, we both had about the continuity of that bond" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 185), but it is hardly this that Murdoch gives us. Within this realm of adventure-time, "an individual can be nothing other than completely *passive*, completely *unchanging*" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 105). Charles assumes this is the case with himself and hence imposes this standard on Hartley as well: "yes, it is the same person," he says, "and I can *see* it as the same person, after all" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 114). Although this passivity can be read as an absolute fidelity to the self (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 106), it is a fidelity that exists only as fiction. Murdoch's novels are, if nothing else, about the mutability of the self. Charles appears to be protected from biographical time and the "mysterious awful changes" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 92) that it inflicts on the individual and that is manifested in one's appearance: Lizzie has "allowed herself to become untidy and out of condition" (42), Gilbert "aged a lot" and is "all wrinkled and humorous and dry" (92), even Hartley's face is "haggard and curiously soft and dry" with "magisterial horizontal lines upon the forehead" (114), but Charles "look[s] marvellous, so brown, so young" (92). His youthful appearance, juxtaposed against his ageing company, figures as an unnatural stoppage of time and Conradi reads it as an indication of Charles's being in a state of arrested development, a Peter Pan figure (Conradi 234), who, unable to mature emotionally, remains mired in his self-love.[8]

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[8] In "On Narcissism," Sigmund Freud posits that narcissism is a component of an individual's personal development that one eventually grows out of.

Like Miss Havisham's veil (another character to whom Conradi likens Charles), Charles's seemingly eternal youth is a pretence, "a natural endowment, a gift of nature" but a superficial one like "[his] figure and [his] girlish complexion" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 166). When confronted with real youth in the form of Titus, who is "in the full yet indeterminate efflorescence of earliest manhood" (247), it falls away: Titus has "the effortless crawl which [Charles] had never mastered" and experiences "no difficulty climbing up the little steep cliff," while Charles has "a slight difficulty [himself] and a bad moment" (257). Charles makes of Titus a symbol of youth and innocence and extols him into "the offspring of [his and Hartley's] old love" (227). In doing so, he indirectly condemns Titus to his eventual death. As Peregrine puts it, "In [Charles's] case, [youth] is nothing to do with goodness" (166); it is, on the contrary, a transgression. Charles himself later admits that Titus's drowning is the culmination of his own youthful pretensions: "I ought to have warned him, I ought never to have dived in with him on that first day; I had destroyed him because I so rejoiced in his youth and because I had to pretend to be young too" (459).

In a characteristically Murdochian intertextual gesture earlier in the novel, Charles sees Rembrandt's portrait of his son, Titus, in the Wallace Collection. The painting is itself notably engaged in a dialogue with time: Titus was the only one of Rembrandt's four children from his first marriage to survive into adulthood, and a year after Titus's birth, his mother Saskia van Uylenburgh died from an illness, aged 29; Titus himself died young at 27 and was survived by his father. In the image of Titus van Rijn's is therefore inscribed the death of his three older siblings, the death of his mother, and retrospectively, his own death. Titus Fitch is similarly an indication of time passing, of the finality of Hartley's departure, which is why Charles finds that he "could not help . . . feeling rather pleased that Titus was adopted" (130), which offers some respite of the fact. Yet, in keeping with his narcissistic personality, Charles rushes to appropriate Titus's youth for himself, into his own narrative of fixed time, imagining that Titus is the key to the resurrection of his and Hartley's past love affair. Like that of King Midas, Charles's touch fixes and petrifies.

The Unethical Image

> What wounds me are the *forms* of the relation, its images; or rather, what others call *form* I experience as force. The image—as the example for the obsessive—is *the thing itself.* The lover is thus an artist; and his world is in fact a world reversed, since in it each image is its own end (nothing beyond the image).

> — Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

That which is static proves a lie, a violation of life's rhythms. Fidelity as consistency, as involving a static relationship, is a misunderstanding of the word as *The Sea, The Sea* suggests. To begin to conceive of fidelity ethically, it must first be acknowledged that fidelity is always directed to an image; insofar as fidelity is crucial to love, the question of love then has always been a question of art. We can only be faithful to what we know and hence, we are faithful not to the beloved but to *our* understanding of the beloved, which is made incarnate in an *image*.[9] In James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus declares: "The first phase of apprehension is a bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended. An esthetic image is presented to us either in space or in time" (212). In attempting to process and understand our experience, we are always already engaged in a process of aestheticizing. This 'formulation' concerning fidelity, love, and the image carries several implications; but the image is our starting point and it has two characteristics especially relevant to the present discussion: it is a mediating object and it is meaning fixed in form.

To say that the image is a mediating object is to acknowledge that the image always stands *in between*: in between presence and absence, the individual and reality, the lover and the beloved (especially the lover and the beloved). "[N]o one *falls* in love with a physical appearance (with a 'type'); you fall in love with an image in a setting," points out Barthes (*Preparation of a Novel* 325). Any relationship between a 'you' and an 'I' constitutes the basis for ethics and carries the potential for love; where 'you' and 'I'

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[9] Here, it is evident that the seeds of narcissism are already planted. In *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer posits that "human love is a function of narcissism" (140) and quotes Carl Rogers in part (145). Rogers's quote in its entirety, found in Bernard Nisenholz's *Sigmund Says: And Other Psychotherapists' Quotes*, reads: "We can love a person only to the extent that we are not threatened by him; we can love only if his reactions to us, or to those things which affect us, are understandable to us" (83).

are concerned, the issue of fidelity and therefore, the image is always at stake. There will always be the image that stands in between but it is only when the image becomes *opaque*, thereby effectively obscuring 'you' from 'I,' that an injustice has taken place. It is an impoverished imagination such as Charles's that turns the mediating image opaque, either by turning it into a reflection or by overlaying it with an existing and hence already completed image. Plato's allegory of the cave addresses this capacity of the image to stand in place of the real and, hence, to obscure one from the truth. Since art is "a somewhat dark affair in comparison to the true one" (*The Republic* Book X 597a, *CW* 1201), it follows then that art is "likely to distort the thought of anyone who [encounters] it" and hence should be "altogether excluded" (595b, *CW* 1199-1200).

In "Reality and its Shadow," Levinas echoes Plato's sentiments when he declares, "The most elementary procedure of art consists in substituting for the object its image" (*The Levinas Reader* 132). He argues that not only does the material of art (words, musical notes, colour, etc.) insist on the absence of the real object by its very presence, "as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnate in its own reflection" (136), art also has the insidious tendency to neutralise our ability to "maintain a living relationship with a real object [by grasping and hence, conceiving it]" (132). Art "contrasts with knowledge," writes Levinas, "It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow" (132). Comparing an aesthetic image to a symbol, a sign, and a word, Levinas argues that because an aesthetic image has a certain opacity (which is to say, that there is no going beyond the sensible character of an image), "thought stops on the image itself" (135). The image thus "marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity" (132) such that to be captivated by art is to be in "a waking dream," "a mode of being where nothing is unconscious, but where consciousness, paralysed in its freedom, plays, totally absorbed in this playing" (133). Levinas writes,

> To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace—such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. (141)

Art interests us to the point of bedazzlement, of immobility, and yet, it is that which is incomprehensible; what is referred to as the "disinterestedness of artistic vision" (132), Levinas argues, is really a means of invoking and sanctioning ignorance.

That is not to say that Levinas suggests that art is meaningless, only that it does not make accessibility to its meaning a priority and as such, does not offer a useful application. In fact, the aesthetic image, in his view, can be said to be absolutely meaningful, in the sense that it is a closed and completed object that allows no dispute: it amounts to a Said, to recall Levinas's terminology. An image has to have "a formal structure of completion," he writes, a point at which its creator "stops because the work refuses to accept anything more, appears saturated" (131).[10] Art belongs neither to the order of revelation nor to that of creation (132); the image "does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue" (131) but rather as an end, a conclusion already reached. This is what enables art to pretend to a position "*above* reality" (131): art achieves completion where life cannot. This is also, according to Levinas, art's crime, that it freezes time indefinitely. Plato is wary of art's ability to supersede reality by serving as a poor substitute; Levinas argues that art carries the risk of violating the principle of reality. According to him, art fixes existence in "the paradox of an instant that endures without a future" (138) and hence, "every artwork is a statue—a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself" (137):

> Within the life, or rather the death, of a statue, an instant endures infinitely: eternally Laocoön will be caught up in the grip of serpents; the Mona Lisa will smile eternally. Eternally the future announced in the strained muscles of Laocoön will be unable to become present. Eternally the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden. An eternally suspended future floats around the congealed position of a statue like a future forever to come. (138)

The artist has given life to his work but it is a permanently aspirational life, "a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life" (138).[11] The same

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[10] The Cross, with Christ crucified on it, stands at the heart of the Christian myth; it is the incarnation of Christ's last words, "It is finished," which refer to God's plan for him.

[11] This fixity he differentiates from that of concepts, "which initiates life, offers reality to our powers, to truth, opens a dialectic" (139); it is the latter, in the form of criticism, that Levinas believes can "[integrate] the inhuman work of the artist into the human world" (142). "The immobile statue must be put in movement and made to speak," he declares (142). In Levinas's view, art's death sentence needs to be

lifelessness is embodied in the novel, he argues, which is governed by the idea of fate and where life is "described between two well-determined moments, in the space of a time existence had traversed as through a tunnel"; "[t]he characters of a novel are beings that are shut up, prisoners," he declares (139). (This recalls Bakhtin's adventure-time, which is, of course, the kind of time that Charles inhabits in his narcissistic narrative.) Put together, Levinas warns that the fascinating quality of art and its essential non-reality conspire to draw our attention away from truth.

If the lover loves not the beloved but his image of the beloved, it follows then that the self-lover loves his own image in a quite literal way. Charles's life, even before he reunites with Hartley, has been built around a single idea: that he "loved once . . . absolutely" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 38). With this refrain, he constructs a life in which relationships mediate *his* memory of Hartley, which "bod[ies] her forth" (86), after the fashion of the "shaping fantasies" of Shakespeare's madman/artist/lover (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.i.1834ff), as a "physical scheme" that he then imposes on the people around him (Murdoch, *The Sea* 86). As a result, Charles's company comprises of "shadow forms" (86) of his memory of Hartley: Lizzie's "gentle pleading diffidence" (42) and Gilbert's obedience recall Hartley's youth and pliable innocence, Rosina's "black will" (107) is an intensification of Hartley's secret passion, Clement's consistency makes up for Hartley's lack thereof, and so on and so forth.

Sam Jordison points out that "none of the characters other than Charles have any convincing inner life" and that "[t]o an extent, this can be attributed to Charles' own egotism and failure to conceive of a world outside his own head" ("Booker club"); the 'thinness' of the supporting cast is the result of Charles's refusal to let them (Hartley included) be themselves and his reduction of them to particular aspects. This is, in a way, a perversion of the model of love that Socrates sets out in *Phaedrus*:

> Everyone chooses his love after his own fashion from among those who are beautiful . . .. Those who followed Zeus, for example, choose someone to love who is a Zeus himself in the nobility of his soul. So they make sure he has a talent for philosophy and the guidance of others, and once they have found him and are in love with him they do everything to develop that talent. (252e, CW 530)

commuted by critique; as noted in the introduction, Bakhtin would argue that the critical mode is always already in play in the novel.

Even Hartley is replaced by the same "Hartley-mask," which might as well be a death mask, "that so many women had worn for [Charles] through the years" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 145): "between me and [the living Hartley] there hovered . . . the vision of a slim long-legged girl with gleaming thighs" (113). Charles believes that his first vision of her—that "'old woman' image"—is the illusion, "before I knew who she was" (132), and he prides himself on being able to "read her young look into her old look" (134). Even when he accepts "how very much [he] had *made* that image" of Hartley that has superseded her reality as a living person, he "[can] not feel that it was anything like a fiction" but it was rather "more like a special sort of truth, almost a touchstone" (428). *His* image of her, he feels, has more reality for him than her actual living self.

A narcissist such as Charles looks at the world and sees only his reflection. Because of the way he perceives them, Lizzie, Gilbert, Rosina, Peregrine, Titus, and Hartley are all really images of Charles. "[S]elf is such a dazzling object," Murdoch writes in "The Idea of Perfection," "that if one looks *there* one may see nothing else" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 324). Here, Murdoch's use of 'dazzling' recalls Levinas's charge that the aesthetic image fascinates to the point of 'stopping thought,' to the point of nullifying a living relationship with reality; the self's image of his or her self is exemplary of Levinas's unethical art. Murdoch's naming of the house to which Charles retires to reflect upon himself, 'Shruff End', or 'black end,' is suggestive of a dead end, and within this cul-de-sac, Charles, as much as his company, is held a "captive spectator" (146) to his own image and his drama. The house is also notably in Narrowdean or Nerodene, a name that also significantly evokes notions of limits and entrapment.

Shruff End and Narrowdean are connected to Clement, Charles's long-time companion with whom he shares a relationship that he later recognises as one of real, ethical love. He hopes that he might recuperate his spiritual life there (4) and become "pure in heart" (122) but ends up co-opting the house into his imagined destiny with Hartley, as if finding her there was a reward for his faithfulness, and (further) corrupting his spiritual life. As an ironic symbol of fidelity, Shruff End repeats the oppressive structure of the corral of morality, where what might have been good is subverted. In an oft-quoted passage, Henry James describes what he calls a 'house of fiction,' a

monolithic structure filled with a million windows "of dissimilar shape and size," from behind which just as many individuals—artists—look out upon "the human scene," deriving their own distinct impression ("Preface" to *The Portrait of a Young Lady* 46). This multiplicity of perspectives is the structuring principle of the house of fiction, and also its triumph, James suggests, for it speaks to the particularities of the human experience. Charles's Shruff End is literally and figuratively, in more ways than one, a dilapidated house of fiction, James's house viewed darkly. It figures as a version of a classic Gothic haunted house, perched precariously "upon a small promontory . . . upon the very rocks themselves" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 10), is "mysteriously damp and the situation is exposed and isolated" (10), and promises to be "cold and stormy in winter time" (11); it is also a House of Usher, permeated with a sense of dread and claustrophobia, with the ghost of a woman incarcerated (literally at one point) at its heart. Shruff End is, more importantly, the sum of Charles's delusions about others and about himself made manifest: it is entirely insulated from reality, and for all its literal windows, allows only a single point-of-view. As his narcissism appropriates and perverts everything that crosses the borders of the house, Shruff End shrinks down accordingly to its inner rooms until we are listening to Hartley's terrifying screams emitting from behind its locked door.

The narcissist's imagination is always impoverished, and it is an impoverished imagination that succumbs to the easy consolations of form. The invention of form is necessary because it is the means by which we understand experience and by which we create our personal truths, and yet, form is always, at least in part, self-gratifying. Murdoch writes: "Any story which we tell ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem chancy and incomplete" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 371). As such, she warns, "there can be a tendency too readily to pull a form or a structure out of something one's thinking about and to rest upon that" (*From a Tiny Corner* 10). Like Plato, she points out that the danger in being satisfied by form is "that it can stop one from going more deeply into the contradictions or paradoxes or more painful aspects of the subject matter" (10).

Charles's tendency to impose his fixed ideas on experience means that the mediating image between him and reality is often opaque such that he continually fails to

see things as they are. His folly is most evident in the case of Peregrine, who turns out to be a little more dangerous than the ineffectual "Irish drunk" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 37) and blundering "noisy bear" (71) that Charles thinks he is. Meanwhile, he sees himself and Hartley as "a dulled yet glowing painting of Adam and Eve upon an old fresco, two innocent beings bathed in a clear light" (84-85), and hence imagines that everything he does in the name of his love for Hartley is ultimately justified, even if it includes keeping her against her will. Notably, many of the narratives and types that he imposes on reality and the people around him are borrowed from elsewhere. Charles is then, in a sense, a plagiarist and a thief, quite literally in the incident where he reveals that he stole a photograph of his Uncle Abel and Aunt Estelle, whom he regards as "glamorous almost godlike beings in comparison with whom my own parents seemed insignificant and dull . . . failures" (59), dancing together. Here, Charles attempts to substitute an actual image for reality. Furthermore, despite the fact that they are "holding each other rather far apart" (which could mean everything or nothing), he composes for them a narrative of happiness, of "mutual dependence," and of an "absolutely satisfactory relationship" that will see them "closely embraced" in the next moment (156-57). It is evidently out of envy that he steals the photograph; this photograph and the narrative he comes up for it implicitly become a template for his understanding of love.

Charles's tendency to borrow (or steal) images is also figuratively gestured to by the abundance of intertextual references in the novel. A characteristic of most if not all of Murdoch's novels, these references are filtered through Charles's particular narcissistic personality in *The Sea, The Sea*, the effect of which is to suggest that his imaginative vocabulary comprises of 'readymade' forms which he indiscriminately appropriates. As Anne Rowe observes in *The Visual Arts and the Novels of Iris Murdoch*, Charles is an aesthete who misuses the "authority of art . . . to distance reality and legitimate personal fantasy" (184). When Charles looks at the paintings in the Wallace Collection and feels as if

> so many of my women were there . . . Lizzie by Terborch, Jeanne by Nicolaes Maes, Rita by Domenichino, Rosina by Rubens, a perfectly delightful study by Greuze of Clement as she was when I first met her . . . There was even a picture of my mother by Reynolds, a bit flattering but a likeness (Murdoch, *The Sea* 170)

he is not only turning the artworks into reflective surfaces as the proprietary diction and tone suggest, but he is also overlaying his image (and hence, understanding) of the people around him with an existing, external image. The opacity of the mediating image increases: reality is further obscured from view and the artworks lie as if a shroud over the women. Unsurprisingly, Charles sees the patient, obliging, and amenable Lizzie in Terboch's depiction of delicate young women. Just as naturally, he sees Rosina as one of Rubens's sensual, desirable, tempting women. And just as he fails to comprehend the impact his affair with Rosina had on Peregrine, he also fails to understand the depths of Rosina's suffering, his only takeaway from their relationship being that "[a] furious mutual desire for possession dominated the whole affair while it lasted" (72). The women all but dissolve under the aesthetic lens through which Charles perceives them. Rosina's face, for instance, is depicted as "heavily made up, patterned with pinks and reds and blues and even greens, looking in the subdued localised light like an Indian mask" (103-04), a description Rowe identifies as an allusion to Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (*Visual Arts* 50). These gestures, she suggests, work towards illustrating "the deluded perception of the solipsistic, the self-obsessed . . ." (50).

The Fault in the Imagination

> . . . I was vain of his
> faithfulness, as if it was
> a compliment, rather than a state
> of partial sleep.

— Sharon Olds, "Stag's Leap"

Charles's reflection and the frames through which he perceives reality are examples of images that have already been completed and whose presence insists on the absence of an underlying living reality. This is the potential of aesthetic images to fix, obscure, and disengage us from reality that both Plato and Levinas are wary of. On this point, Murdoch is in agreement, stating, "Our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation, can be a danger to our sense of reality as a rich receding background"

(*Existentialists and Mystics* 294). What Murdoch does contest is their blanket rejection of art. Our critical attention, she suggests, should be directed not to the image but to the imagination that creates the image: "It is what lies behind and in between [the images] and prompts them that is important, and it is this area which should be purified" (354).[12] In both her philosophical writings and her novels, Murdoch makes a distinction between a poor and a good imagination that problematises a general censure of art, which can ultimately only be justified by an impoverished imagination such as the one Charles has (that the particular can rescue the general is a favourite refrain of Murdoch's). Referring to them respectively as "egoistic *fantasy*" and "liberated truth-seeking creative *imagination*" (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* 321), she argues that the distinction here is "between the expression of immediate selfish feelings and the elimination of yourself in a work of art" (*From a Tiny Corner* 226). Put more forcefully, "Fantasy is the strong cunning enemy of the discerning intelligent more truly inventive power of the imagination, and in condemning art for being 'fantastic' one is condemning it for being untrue" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 11).

The issue of fantasy, and of the need to take up arms against it, is a recurring theme across Murdoch's essays on philosophy and literature. In "Against Dryness," she accuses the modern writer of indulging in consolatory fantasy, which "operates either with shapeless day-dreams . . . or with small myths, toys, crystals"—that is to say, with the lack of form or with insignificant form—and does not "[grapple] with reality" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 292). In "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," she aligns fantasy with untruthfulness, suggesting that the words associated with it are 'sentimental,' 'pretentious,' 'self-indulgent,' 'trivial,' which all "impute some kind of falsehood, some failure of justice, some distortion or inadequacy of understanding or expression" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 11). Murdoch emphasises the moral dimension of fighting against "obsessive" and "self-enclosing" fantasy in the practice of any art in "Art is the Imitation of Nature" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 255); and in "On 'God' and 'Good'," she names fantasy as "the proliferation of blinding self-

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[12] In their original context, Murdoch employs these words in a discussion on freedom and moral actions, in which she suggests that "Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 354). Insofar as action is figured here as the outward translation of freedom, and freedom a synonym of imagination, the sentiment behind this sentence holds for the argument at hand.

centred aims and images" that prevents the liberation of the soul and hinders the individual's capacity to love, and to see reality (*Existentialists and Mystics* 354): it is the "tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one" (348).

Charles is readily apparent as a perpetuator of fantasy in *The Sea, The Sea.* The result of Charles's fantasy, his lack of interest in anything which he does not direct or which does not reflect him in some way, is that he does not see reality for what it is, or people for what they are, in all of their complexity. As Lizzie says of him, "You don't respect people as people, you don't *see* them, . . . you're a sort of rapacious magician" (45); Rosina similarly declares, "You're a cold child . . . you are never *interested* in the people you want, so you learn nothing" (108). Here, it is not so much a confusion of life and art that Murdoch mistrusts, as Angela Hague suggests (126), but rather a corrupted way of imagining and perceiving the world, a passivity and a laziness, *a state of partial sleep* (to borrow Olds's words) that results in wilful ignorance. The "moral error" lies not in "endeavouring to mold reality into artistic form" (126) but in endeavouring to make reality in one's image.

Evidence of an impoverished, fantastical imagination can be found in the "mediocre art" it produces, "where perhaps it is more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the diminishing of any reflection of the real world" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 348).[13] It follows then that Charles is an inferior artist, as his friends point out: "You never had any imagination, no wonder you couldn't write plays," says Rosina (Murdoch, *The Sea* 108) while Peregrine declares that Charles's plays "were nothing, nothing, froth" (165). Charles himself admits that his career "contains many failures, many dead ends" and "[a]ll [his] plays flopped on Broadway" (36). The images created by way of fantasy are precisely that which, as Plato and Levinas fear, "constitute[s] a barrier to our seeing 'what is really there'" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 199), and which proliferate in Charles's narrative and in his

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[13] This might go some way in explaining why so many of Murdoch's protagonists, who are more often than not self-deluded individuals like Charles are also artists, and poor artists at that. For instance, Bradley Pearson from *The Black Prince* is a writer who "published very little" (12) and who spends the duration of the story having writer's block, while Montague Small from *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* is a successful writer of detective fiction, which he considers "pseudo-art" and "vile self-indulgence" (30).

artistic oeuvre; such images cannot help but "ask to be used badly and cannot be understood any other way," Murdoch notes (14).

It is perhaps in opposition to the kind of imagination that Charles possesses that Murdoch is "reluctant to encourage speculation on the significance of paintings in her writing," as Rowe points out (*Visual Arts* 3). The reason for this, Rowe suggests, "lies partly in Murdoch's dislike for, and deflection of, critics who look for too many 'significances' in her work, and partly in the fact that the relationship between image and text rarely rests at a simple *ekphrastic* connection" (4). Conradi notes that iconoclasm is one of Murdoch's enduring themes: "the destruction of images, pictures and states of mind" (32). In *The Sea, The Sea*, this theme emerges most strongly through the echoes of *The Tempest.* Charles fancies himself a Prospero figure, but as before, any resemblance is passing; rather, it comes across as an affectation developed after having played the role once on stage. What makes Shakespeare's Prospero *Prospero* is not the power he wields while on the island and during the course of the play, but the power he surrenders and the humanity he admits at the end: the darkness in him, the faintness of his human strength, his frailty as a man. These gestures, these concessions to reality, are what release Prospero from the island and from Shakespeare's fiction; they are also the reason that Shakespeare's art is not egoistical fantasy. Charles himself notes, "[Shakespeare is] the place where magic does not shrink reality and turn it into tiny things to be the toys of fairies" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 482).

At the beginning of the novel, Charles imagines that, like Prospero at the end of *The Tempest*, he has "abjure[d] magic" and retired (2), but he has no real desire to escape any grand fantastical narratives, as evidenced by how he quickly turns his retirement into a romance narrative; nor does he have any real intuition of his limitations when it comes to shaping and controlling life. Whether Charles himself ever undergoes a similar sea change, Murdoch leaves it up to the reader to decide. While the postscript suggests Charles's reluctance to give up his narrative altogether, it also contains intimations of some measure of understanding, such as his admission that "I was the dreamer, I the magician. How much, I see as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality" (499), and his belated attempts to see Hartley and James for who they really were. That said, Murdoch also leaves us reasons to remain sceptical:

Charles continues to insist on the worthiness of grand narratives of love, merely transforms Hartley from the beloved to the pitied, and himself confesses that he doubts that one can change oneself, "[o]r if there is any change it must be measured as the millionth part of a millimeter," which he seems to dismiss altogether (501). In *The Sea, The Sea*, it is finally Ben, Hartley's husband, and not Charles, who has the "prosperous air" (421), having escaped the latter's fantasy with his wife; a while later, Charles notes again the former's "curiously prosperous" look (430), which he, in true Charles's fashion, immediately buries in "unsavoury thoughts" (431).

Experience exceeds the self and the self's attempt to impose a form on it; and yet, at the same time, experience demands to be given form for form is what gives life's messiness and ephemerality weight and carry. Such is art's responsibility: to nurture a relationship of genuine interest in what is other than ourselves. In an oft-quoted passage in "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," Murdoch relates an incident in which

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. (*Existentialists and Mystics* 369)

Murdoch's argument is that art—good art—is capable of having the same effect on the individual as nature has on her in this moment. Prospero, to be sure, stresses the illusionary nature of his art but in asking to be "relieved by prayer/ . . . As you from crimes would pardon'd be" (*The Tempest* Epilogue 16-19) he assumes a relationship with his audience, a responsibility that Charles, who is concerned only with "victimiz[ing] an audience overnight . . . mak[ing] them laugh and cry and suffer and miss their train," with treating them as "enemies, to be deceived, drugged, incarcerated, stupefied" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 33), renounces.

Conradi observes that "there is a series of Murdoch characters who disappear from the narrative . . . without ever having been properly apprehended" and that "their demise or disappearance is a direct result, we are made to feel, of the failure of the other

characters to imagine their needs or see them as other than 'subsidiary characters'" (31). Conradi raises the example of Peter O'Finney (or Finn), who takes on the role of Sancho Panza to Jake Donoghue's Don Quixote in *Under the Net*. To Jake, Finn has "very little inner life" and is merely "an inhabitant of [Jake's] universe, and [Jake] cannot conceive that he has one containing me" (*Under the Net* 9). When Finn leaves for Ireland without a word and despite Jake's refusal to believe he will do so, Jake confesses that he feels "ashamed, ashamed of being parted from Finn, of having known so little about Finn, of having conceived things as I pleased and not as they were" (279). Another example that Conradi mentions in brief is Luca from *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, the reclusive love-child of Blaise and Emily, who never becomes more than a pawn in the adults' machinations and who is finally sent away to an institute for mentally disturbed children. The "removal of Luca from the scene" (305) brings his parents relief, and when Emily burns his toy elephant, "because the sight of it suggested the reality of Luca so dreadfully" (309), he is erased from the narrative.

In *The Sea, The Sea*, aside from Titus, Peregrine—whom Charles grossly misjudges—is another victim of Charles's failings. In the postscript, Charles receives the news of Peregrine being "murdered by terrorists in Londonderry" as a shock and he realises that, hitherto, he had "regarded [Peregrine's] activities as purely comic" (487). It is as Conradi suggests: we feel a certain sense of causality, as if it were Charles's lack of interest in Peregrine that results in him being written off the narrative. And of course, there are the women in Charles's life, whose erasure Charles effects throughout the novel by holding them up to the unrealistic standards set by his dream image of Hartley, as well as Shakespeare's heroines. Even Hartley is near-erased by Charles's fantasy of her: when she leaves Shruff End at the end of her imprisonment, she "was wearing the scarf over her head, as [Charles] had intended her to, and her face was shadowed," and Charles notes that he "would have liked her to wear a veil" (344). To borrow James's words, "it is we who turn them into ghosts or demons" when we fail in our responsibility to acknowledge the particular otherness and reality of the people around us (352). James, of course, is the exception, the 'special case,' that slips away from Charles's grasp; unlike the other characters, his existence appears to be independent of Charles from the outset.

As undesirable as fantasy is, Murdoch acknowledges that because "[e]ach of us lives and chooses within a partly private, partly fabricated world," it would be "false to suggest that we could, even in principle, 'purge' the world we confront of these personal elements. Nor is there any reason why we should" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 199). As Conradi observes, "damage is done to the integrity of her work when critics treat her division between 'fantasy' and 'imagination' as if it could be absolute," as this suggests a degree of naivety, of the same self-delusion that Murdoch has her characters try and work their way out of (314). Our fantasy is "a mental charade" that "has its own necessity" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 353): "human beings cannot bear much reality," writes Murdoch, and the effort required to face reality is tremendous so as to make the task unattractive (*Existentialists and Mystics* 352). Good art, she argues, is that which recognises this and "presents the most comprehensible examples of the human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy and also of the effort to resist this and the vision of reality which comes with success" (352). Hence, despite her sometimes positioning them as enemies, "[w]hat Murdoch asserts is not the discontinuity, but the continuity between the two" (Conradi 247). Our task then—as humans, as artists, as humans who are always already artists at work—is to continually attempt to refine our fantastical impulses into the art of imagination.

For Your Attention

An imagination invested in responsibility, an interested imagination, is the ability to "see the other thing, what one might call . . . nature, reality, the world" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 255) and to "take pleasure" in it (14). This amounts to what Murdoch calls "unpossessive contemplation" (370), which is the opposite of the passive absorption or fascination that Levinas is critical of. This is a concept that Murdoch borrows in part from the philosopher Simone Weil, who refers to it as *attention*. Weil states that attention consists of "suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object" (*Waiting for God* 111). While this may sound suspiciously close to Levinas's warning against the unethical cessation of thought, it is important to note that Weil uses the term 'suspending' rather than 'stopping.' The suspension of thought

consists of "holding in our minds . . . but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of" (111) because, Weil argues, errors in thought are "due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily, and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth" (112).[14]

Far from being passive, attention is an *activity* that Weil discusses in the context of school exercises, thereby importing significant related notions of training and discipline: attention begins with "a tracing down of our faults" (112) with a mind to correction and constitutes an active waiting upon truth that requires effort, "the greatest of all efforts perhaps," because "[s]omething in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue" (111). A devout Christian, Weil's idea of truth is firmly situated in relation to the existence of a Christian God. Murdoch, on the other hand, identifies as being religious without subscribing to any one specific faith (*From a Tiny Corner* 62) and her reading of Weil is accordingly tempered: she conceives of contemplation as being "analogous to prayer" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 356) insofar as prayer is a "spiritual exercise" in which one is engaged in "the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real" (352). What Murdoch takes away from Weil's concept of attention is primarily its liberation and stimulation of our thinking; or, to return to Levinas's terms, the process of bringing the Said back into the Saying.

L'attention est la forme la plus rare et la plus pure de la générosité, writes Weil in a letter to the poet, Joë Bousquet (*Correspondance* 18). Attention, or contemplation, is the rarest and purest form of generosity because "The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth" (*Waiting for God* 115). As Murdoch notes, attention is always directed outwards, away from the centre of the self (*From a Tiny Corner* 7). The self shrinks from sight and is replaced by a waiting upon, an attending, a regard of the other *as other*, as that for who we have no name; we "[give] our attention to what does not exist" (*Waiting for God* 149), where the 'existence' of something or someone is 'determined' by our ability to conceive of it. Here, we have Levinas's ideal ethical situation, the face-to-face encounter with the

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[14] This kind of attention is referred to as 'apophatic' in the mystical tradition from which Weil draws, and is seen as a kind of mixture of the disciplined will and disciplined passivity or suspension of the will.

other, which in 'breaking with the world common to us,' is a moment of violence. In *The Sea, The Sea*, Charles describes the moment he sees Hartley in Narrowdean for the first time as an "awful moment of recognition" that is just as much a moment of non-recognition:

> Awful, not because she had so almost completely changed, but because I knew that everything was in ruins about me, every old assumption was gone, every terrible possibility was open. . . . It was not envisaging pain that made me feel so shattered, it was just experience of the change itself. I felt a present anguish such as an insect must feel when it emerges from a chrysalis, or the crushed foetus as it batters its way into the world. It was not, either, a removal to the past. Memory seemed now almost irrelevant. It was a new condition of being. (112)

Charles, of course, does not live up to the ethical potential of the moment. He catches sight of her, subjects her to his motives, and moulds her to his image: "I can make sense of it, yes, it is the same person, and I can *see* it as the same person, after all" (114).

Attention involves a measure of ecstasy, the stepping outside of oneself. By paying attention to the other, I renounce myself in order that the other might exist as he or she is before me: "In denying oneself, one becomes capable . . . of establishing someone else by a creative affirmation," writes Weil (*Waiting for God* 147-48). Like Diotima in *The Symposium* (87), Weil does not mean to insinuate a connection with artistic creation here. In fact, she dismisses art as "second-class work" for always being "an extension of the self" (*Waiting for God* 148). This is a view that Murdoch is quite evidently against. Great art, to Murdoch, is necessarily a thing "totally opposed to selfish obsession" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 370); *The Sea, The Sea* is a poetic 'treatise' against narcissism, as the preceding discussion has demonstrated. "The great artist," notes Murdoch, "sees the vast interesting collection of what is other than himself and does not picture the world in his own image" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 30). Imbued with a "calm merciful vision" (29) that sees the world in all its difference, art "teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self" (353), which is also to say that not only is art an appropriate object on which to fix our gaze, it is also a conducive environment to train our attention.

Attention, as Weil herself suggests, needs to be *directed*: it is therefore a matter of aesthetic form. Levinas laments that "[i]n imagination our gaze then always goes outward, but imagination modifies or neutralizes this gaze: the real world appears in it as it were between parentheses or quote marks" (*The Levinas Reader* 134). For Levinas, this is part of what amounts to an unethical detachment from reality but Murdoch argues, "it is when form is used to isolate, to explore, to display something which is true," that is, when form is used to put *certain* things in parentheses, "that we are most highly moved and enlightened" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 353). Weil's attention is directed towards God; Murdoch, for whom God does not exist, directs her attention "towards the great surprising variety of the world" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 354) instead. Where Weil's attentive individual aspires to be a saint, Murdoch's aspires to be an artist:

> [Nicodemus] compares the apartness of the artist with that of the saint. But the artist is not 'apart' in this sense. He sees the earth freshly and strangely; but he is inside the things he sees and speaks of, as well as outside them. He is of their substance, he suffers with them. Of saints I know nothing. (Murdoch qtd Conradi 173)

Contemplation reveals, and what the contemplation of art reveals is "what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize," that is, "the minute and absolutely random detail of the world" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 371).

This attention to the particularity of the world is what makes art a "special discerning exercise of intelligence in relation to the real" (454). All modes of cognition (art, philosophy, science) begin with the interested imagination—it is the urge to know what we do not already know, what is other than us, that provides the impetus—but art is a exceptional mode that does not demystify to the point of simplification or congeal into a set of 'rules.' As Nussbaum points out in *The Fragility of Goodness*, novels prioritise the particular situation over generalizations, unlike philosophy, which tends not to "focus intently on the stories of concrete characters" and pursues instead "systematic considerations or . . . [a] greater purity" (13). Similarly, Richard Rorty notes that "novels are usually about people—things which are, unlike general ideas and final vocabularies, quite evidently time-bound, embedded in a web of contingencies"; the obvious finitude of the novel (and therefore of the characters and their situations) is also such that we are

highly unlikely to make extrapolations beyond its particular situation (*Contingency* 107). "By contrast," Rorty writes, "books which are about ideas [i.e., philosophical treatises] . . . look like descriptions of eternal relations between eternal objects" (107-08).

Art's resistance to demystification is partly because it is not in art's nature to do so but also because it remembers something that the others have forgotten or deliberately set aside: that reality is incomplete. Art is the only exercise of intelligence that is not "too much afraid of incompleteness" (Conradi 295) and remains untouched by the modern bias towards the knowable, that Denis Donoghue speaks of (*The Arts without Mystery* 21). Its trickery and magic work towards showing us the cracks in between, in between our understanding of life and hence, in between the forms of experience we have constructed. Whereas the philosopher feels anguish when faced with the unknowable and the impossible (Murdoch, *From a Tiny Corner* 128), the artist discovers delight. *Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in*.[15]

Of Trickery and Magic

Or in Charles's case, that is how the demons get in. *The Sea, The Sea* is, among other things, a novel about the supernatural where the supernatural is shorthand for radical and absolute difference *experienced as a part of reality*. Introducing supernatural elements into what is essentially a 'serious' tale about the ethical imagination and its application in reality feels counterintuitive unless we accept Conradi's thesis that one of Murdoch's projects is iconoclasm with an end in revelation. Incidents occur in Charles's narrative that are not fully explained and assimilated into the 'natural' course of events, such as the ghostly face that Charles sees "looking at me through the glass of the inner room" from an unusual height (68). (The apparition is later somewhat explained as a foreshadowing of Charles's mistreatment of Hartley, somewhat because we do not necessarily consider premonitions as part of the 'natural' course. When time is understood as progressing linearly, premonitions suggest a wrinkle in time.)

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[15] Leonard Cohen, "Anthem."

The sea serpent that Charles spots early in the novel presents yet another example of the aberrant. It takes up significant real estate in his mind from its first sighting and is cited throughout the narrative: as a sea-worm, in Charles's vision of Rosina, in Titian's *Perseus and Andromeda* which Charles sees in the Wallace Collection, etc. Charles initially suspects it is the result of a bad LSD trip but eventually comes to recognise it as the "sea serpent of jealousy" (492), which is the reading that critics such as Hague have satisfied themselves with. Bran Nicol argues that the sea serpent has "the power to absorb" various interpretations—the alternative he offers to the one above is that the sea serpent might also be "a displaced expression of the fear of female sexuality" (139)—and still seem to represent something more" (138); but he ultimately concludes that the sea serpent is essentially "somehow about [Charles]" (138). The point about the sea serpent, however, is that it is *not* finally about Charles. The serpent is that which breaks the horizon before Charles, which disrupts his view, which interrupts his narrative when he first begins it. The detail that is most suggestive of the sea serpent's absolute otherness is the connection between the sea serpent and James, the one character who has always eluded Charles's grasp and that Murdoch draws in the closing pages of the novel without clarifying. Charles suddenly remembers that before he lost consciousness in the pool, he "had seen a strange small heard near to mine, terrible teeth, a black ached neck" and comes to the conclusion that "*The monstrous sea serpent had actually been in the cauldron with me*" (466); a short while later, he finds the note he had written himself on the night after the accident and it details James rescuing him as if by magic (468).

James has previously been associated with magic: his flat is a study in the occult (172), for instance, and he admits to knowing tricks such as "raising one's bodily warmth by mental concentration" (446); then there is the matter of Titus's feeling as if he had "met [James] before, and yet I know I haven't. Perhaps I saw him in a dream" (328). That James represents something other than what Charles himself represents (i.e., some sort of reality principle) is also gestured to in the latter's intuition as a child that he and James "could not both be real; one of us must inhabit the real world, the other one the world of shadows" (57). James's magic is not as easily explained away as the vision of the sea serpent: as Murdoch says, "Nobody understands James in the book, but he lives in a

demonic world, he is a demonic figure, and he has got the spirituality of somebody who can do good, but can also do harm" (*From a Tiny Corner* 100).

Murdoch believes that there are demonic forces that lie beyond our control. Here, 'demonic' can be taken in its common definition as 'evil,' such as in the case of jealousy (Murdoch says as much in her interviews); but in the above comment on James, Murdoch gestures towards the more general and ambivalent Platonic sense of the word, in which a *daimon* is something "half-way between mortal and immortal" (*The Symposium* 81), a "divine or spiritual sign" that "turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything" (*Apology* 31d, *CW* 29). In this latter sense, the demonic is simply that which is other than us and which yet has an undeniable presence in our world. In *The Sea, The Sea*, the supernatural is portrayed as being consistent with the fabric of reality although it presents itself as tears, gaps, and holes; that it presents itself as such is the very source of our fear. Charles's encounters with the supernatural then do not constitute an "imaginative withdrawal" from the real world as Hague suggests (123) but, rather, a step closer to the essential mystery of experience. To borrow Conradi's words, *The Sea, The Sea* "is not a likely tale, though it is a true one" (236).

In the novel, the supernatural is often accompanied by comedy. Indeed, as Hague notes, the supernatural is often its source (122). It is not after all fear that Murdoch wishes to incite but rather a deeply felt sense of life. The events[16] that take place in the course of *The Sea, The Sea*, the 'plot twists' as it were, from James's arrival at Shruff End to Titus's death and Hartley's departure to Australia, constitute the novelistic turn of Charles's memoir and work toward putting him back in touch with living time; and they do so by creating points of rupture in his imagined unified narrative that it cannot recover from. Elizabeth Dipple sees a contradiction in Murdoch's "commitment to reality and her practice of a firm defensible realism" and "her games, tricks and ironies," suggesting that the latter "indicate her reluctant acquiescence to the artifice and unreality of the form" (5). But what Dipple reads as reluctant acquiescence is in fact a fierce commitment to the moral demands of good art: clear realistic vision, combined with a compassion that recognises that our human experience is situated in a context of chance (Murdoch,

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[16] *Event*, that is, in the sense of "something that doesn't enter into the [perceived] immediate order of things" (Badiou, *In Praise of Love* 28).

Existentialists and Mystics 371). Compassion, that is to say, *to suffer with*—to suffer with our fellow man the contingency that is ordinary life. "[Life is] not tragic, it's not clear. It's not even knowable. It's sort of a mess," declares Murdoch (*From a Tiny Corner* 84). Accordingly, her novels, like those of Dostoevsky which she admires, are very much "festivals of contingency" (202). The pile-up of events in the novel is a deliberate invitation to incredulity—the subtitle to Jordison's review reads: "The book that finally won Iris Murdoch a Booker is at least as ludicrous as it is brilliant" ("Booker club"). It is by means of engaging with the "intolerably chancy and incomplete" (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* 371) aspects of ordinary life *to the point of absurdity* that Murdoch puts her novel in that "living contact" with the present that Bakhtin speaks of (*The Dialogic Imagination* 7).

There is humour in all of Murdoch's novels in the treatment of good and evil, a mode of the comic that traditional moral philosophy does not admit, as if morality is too serious a subject to be 'tainted' with humour. This has partly to do with philosophy's tendency towards finished thought, philosophy being one of the modes of cognition that is unsympathetic to incompleteness. Jacques Derrida describes the philosopher's project (rather too definitively perhaps) in *Points . . . : Interviews* as such:

> to render an account of all possible discourse and all possible arts. He wants to situate himself in a place where everything done and said can be thought theorised and finally mastered by him. It is the place of absolute mastery, the project of absolute knowledge. . . . Philosophical discourse, the mastery every other possible discourse, tends to gather itself up in the philosophical utterance, in something that, all at once, the philosopher's voice can say, bring together, utter. (140-41)

Laughter evoked by humour constitutes an interruption (in a sentence, a conversation, an action, a situation) that is inimical to this aspiration, to any such aspiration for mastery or a complete discourse. In this aspect, laughter operates in the Bakhtinian tradition of the carnivalesque, the protocols of which first developed in medieval Europe in opposition to "the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials" (*Rabelais and His World* 5). By way of a variety of manifestations, such as folk festivities and spectacles—often involving "giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals" (5)—as well as a literature of parody, the carnivalesque "celebrated temporary

liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" and "marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). Crucially, the carnival also initiated new forms of human relations, being premised on the awareness of the presence of that which is other: the human other, the carnival being a democratic mode; the other that is art by way of carnivalesque spectacle; another reality altogether, a "completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical" reality (6).

Laughter, as the basis of carnival, is imbued with the power both to liberate and to regenerate, and hence, can be a "corrective" to "narrow-minded seriousness," Bakhtin argues (22), such as in the case of Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*. It is no wonder then that in the 'history of laughter' that Bakhtin reads through the lens of the history of critical reception to Rabelais's work—which he identifies as "the summit" in the history of laughter (101)—laughter finds a formidable enemy in the Enlightenment movement. As a necessary consequence of its constant encountering of the other, carnivalesque laughter is characteristically ambivalent. "[T]his image of the contradictory, perpetually becoming and unfinished being could not be reduced to the dimensions of the Enlighteners' reason," writes Bakhtin (118). The resonance between Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter and Murdoch's intentions for moral philosophy is clear. Like supernatural elements in a realistic novel, laughter opens a hole in the net of meaning, such as when Charles asks James if there is a demon in the wooden casket and the latter "just laughed" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 172). It is this same casket, invested with the possibility of housing a demon by James's unanswering laugh, that falls over at the end of the novel and leaves the reader with an open ending: "My God, that bloody casket has fallen on the floor! . . . The lid has come off and whatever was inside it has certainly got out. Upon the demon-ridden pilgrimage of human life, what next I wonder?" (502). The open casket symbolises Charles's recognition of the "*reality* and consequentiality" (Conradi 250-51) of the present and the significance of contingency, and therefore his ability to extract himself from the myth of self-love. He finally acknowledges, "Time . . . unties all knots. Judgments on people are never final, they emerge from summings up which at once suggest the need of a reconsideration. Human arrangements are nothing but loose ends and hazy reckoning" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 477).

Kant argues that laughter is "an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing," in which 'nothing' is an absolute nothing, a void, and not "the positive opposite of an expected object—for that is always something" (*Critique of The Power of Judgment* 209-10). But if laughter initiates a silence, it is a telling silence, only what laughter says is not always understood for it says what it does without the mediating structure of language to which we are accustomed. Laughter does not transmute into nothing at all. What it speaks is ultimately vitality: it does not speak *about* vitality, nor does it gesture to vitality, but is vitality itself. This is what Murdoch implies when she declares the novel "a comic form" and when she says that "A novel which isn't at all comic is a great danger. It is very difficult to do this without losing something absolutely essential" (*From a Tiny Corner* 118).

The comic has a natural affiliation with life: as Susanne Langer notes in *Feeling and Form*, the source of the comic is the Comus, a "fertility rite" celebrating "a fertility god, a symbol of perpetual rebirth, eternal life" (331). This is what Kant intuits when he refers to laughter's "promotion of the business of life in the body, the affect which moves the viscera and the diaphragm, in a word the feeling of health" (*Critique of the Power of Judgment* 209). Because he places it in relation to the understanding, Kant argues that laughter as affect has no worth in itself, "for how can a disappointed expectation be gratifying?" (209). Langer, however, suggests that laughter's affect ought to be understood on its own terms, as "a culmination of feeling—the crest of a wave of felt vitality" (340), and this is significant because feeling is "the intaglio image of reality" (349), which is to say that feeling is the truest intimation of the depths of our experience that we can manage.

In contrast to the philosophical treatise, the novel is more hospitable to such incompleteness. As "a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 3), the novel is thought laid bare and in process, an inquiry without an end in sight. Even the didactic novels of the nineteenth century cannot be said to have a 'last word' in the same way as a philosophical treatise. Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, for instance, ends with David dying while seeing the image of his wife, Agnes, leading him on to an afterlife. In *The Sea, The Sea*, Charles includes a postscript, tellingly titled, "Life Goes On," to his

memoir, which "ought to end, with the seals and the stars, explanation, resignation, recitation, everything picked up into some radiant bland ambiguous higher significance, in calm of mind, all passions spent" (477). Only, as Charles goes on to say, "life . . . has an irritating way of bumping and limping on, undoing conversions, casting doubt on solutions, and generally illustrating the impossibility of living happily or virtuously ever after" (477).

Even when the postscript ends, it does not *strictly* end since the falling open of casket figures as a harbinger of more to come. Few of Murdoch's novels end with as decisive an ending as that in *The Red and the Green*; more characteristic is a conclusion that exceeds itself by looking to the open-ended future (not necessarily optimistically). In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, for instance, Tallis wonders how he can endure his father's death and how he can "live through the dying" (445); while *The Bell*, *The Nice and the Good*, and *A Severed Head* end with a journey being undertaken. As Deborah Johnson observes, the sense the reader gets in many of Murdoch's novels is of a 'left-overness' and of a deliberate foreshortening, which serves us a reminder of "how much human experience *doesn't* get into the novels" (110). The ending of a novel is always, to some extent, 'arbitrary' (Murdoch, *The Sea* 477); the point of the novel is to go on as far as it can, continually differing its 'last word' until it does not. This is the case even in narratives like that of the Greek romances, which take place between two fixed points: without the intervening events, there is no novel. The novel proceeds by way of interruption and deferral, and humour and non-realistic intrusions are but two of its mechanisms of disruption.

Johnson notes that Murdoch's non-conclusive endings often feature "[a] penultimate twist or turn of the plot where effects of probability or of *vraisemblance* are completely abandoned" (99). For instance, she proposes that the unlikely events of Honor Klein and Lisa's return in *A Severed Head* and *Bruno's Dream* respectively "have to do with structures of wish-fulfillment rather than the probabilities of realist fiction" (99). Murdoch, Johnson points out, is in the business of "destroy[ing] the novel as *eikon*," and emphasizing "its imperfection, that is, its incompleteness . . . " (100) over the more 'stable' and protected Jamesian house of fiction. As Johnson observes, several of Murdoch's 'non-conclusive endings' significantly involve a house fading or being

dismantled: *The Bell, The Time of the Angels*; and of course, *The Sea, The Sea*, in which it is the more overtly 'unrealistic' supernatural elements and the use of humour that enact a rupture in the text, calling into question the viability of the 'perfect' and hence, less than honest forms Charles constructs for his experience. What Murdoch demonstrates here is the capacity for the novel to be powerfully disruptive to our modes of thinking, "to break up the given, to admit and elaborate the possible," as Gibson puts it (16)—that is to say, the ethical potential of the novel.

Patricia Waugh notes in *Metafiction* that these self-reflexive gestures have often been dismissed along with the wider postmodernist project as self-indulgent and decadent, more indicative of the exhaustion and death of the novelistic genre than anything else. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, for instance, Christopher Lasch argues that self-conscious writing is reflective of the late twentieth century's excessive concern with the self (96): citing Morris Dickstein, he suggests that the writer's retreat into the self constitutes an "emotional withdrawal" (97), which alienates the writer from the external world and the "deeper subjectivity" that motivates his writing (97). Similarly, in "The Death and Rebirths of the Novel," Leslie A. Fiedler suggests that writers of metafiction— which he tellingly associates with "posthumous novels," "terminal fiction," and "the autodestruct novel"—are "apparently content to write [only] for each other" (144). John Gardner also greets self-conscious fiction with derision, speaking of it as "pretty paltry stuff intellectually" and "gim-crackery," and suggests that its popularity could be attributed to the way it "suits our for the most part childishly petulant contemporary mood—our self-congratulating self-doubt, our alienated, positivistic pessimism" (1). "When self-doubt, alienation and fashionable pessimism become a bore and, what's worse, a patent delusion, how does one get back to the big emotions, the large and fairly confident life affirmations . . . ?" he asks (1). Such criticism of metafiction was admittedly more pervasive at the end of the twentieth than it is now in the twenty-first century, where fictional self-consciousness fiction might be said to have become the norm. This is not to suggest that views such as Lasch's, Fiedler's, and Gardner's are out- dated. Should one desire to, one might still make the same arguments; it is only that it is no longer 'in fashion' to do so. Waugh's defence of metafiction against these critics is worth repeating here for what it contributes to the argument at hand: she argues that

critics like Lasch have failed to recognise that the literary experiments that have resulted from these gestures are those which have enabled the novel to "survive and adapt to social change for the last 300 years" (*Metafiction* 9). The 'uncertainty' expressed in and by metafiction is also a testament to the 'flexibility' and the 'openness' of the novel as a genre (9).

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault suggests that literature's increasing self-reflexivity from the Romantic period onwards is the result of a dialogic relation to its historical context, a response to being reduced to an object of knowledge by scientific thought. Seen in this way, self-reflexivity becomes a means of regaining autonomy:

> [Literature became] progressively more differentiated from the discourse of ideas, and encloses itself within a radical intransitivity; it [became] detached from all the values that were able to keep it in general circulation during the Classical age (taste, pleasure, naturalness, truth), and creates within its own space everything that will ensure a ludic denial of them (the scandalous, the ugly, the impossible); it [broke] with the whole definition of *genres* as forms adapted to an order of representations, and becomes merely a manifestation of a language which has no other law than that of affirming—in opposition to all other forms of discourse— its own precipitous existence . . .. (327)

As "a silent, cautious deposition of the word upon the whiteness of a piece of paper, where it can possess neither sound nor interlocutor, where it has nothing to say but itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its being" (327), metafiction's self-reflexivity is, contrary to Lasch's claim, nothing like Charles's narcissism: it stems not from self-obsession but from an assertion of its identity as difference in the name of a concerned engagement with the world at large, and its place within this world.

To paraphrase Murdoch, we read literature "not to escape the world but to join it" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 374). Murdoch is uninterested in distracting gimmicks and facile magic. The interruptive gestures in her novel are part of what Lorna Sage refers to as Murdoch's "aesthetic of imperfection," which "mocks the critical demand for totalities, and makes fiction seem a living process" (68). These same gestures force a space for incompleteness into the structure of the text that is more than just a void: it is our means of getting in touch with reality, in all its complexity, mystery, and spontaneity. The most honest forms of experience are those that accommodate this incompleteness,

those that flicker between what is known and what cannot be known, those imbued with the very rhythm of life itself. It appears that, contrary to Nussbaum's implication, the artist's vision *does* "have about it . . . aspects of vulnerability, silence, and grace" ("When She Was Good" 33).

Still, Life

> . . . the person one loves at first is not the person one loves at last, and that love is not an end by a process through which one person attempts to know another. . .

> — John Williams, *Stoner*

> If the one I love remains unchanged and unchanging, I shall cease to love her. It is only because she changes and startles me into change and defies my inertia, and is herself staggered in her inertia by my changing, that I can continue to love her. If she stayed put, I might as well love the pepper pot.

> — D. H. Lawrence, "Why the Novel Matters"

Our responsibility is finally, always directed towards life. Attention is 'creative' for Weil, as Sharon Cameron argues, insofar as it heralds a way of seeing that is "characteristically not deemed possible to do so": "To see outside a point of view is to inhabit a stance outside oneself and, notwithstanding the inhospitality of such a space, to reside there" (226). But the word 'creative' need not be enclosed in quotation marks: attention is quite literally creative and this is something that Murdoch sees that Weil will not. In giving something form, we select and isolate it as worthy to be paid attention to, and we establish a relationship of responsibility with it. Herein lies the creativity of attention. This is a notion to which Weil's theory of attention refuses consent. By suggesting that in paying attention to the other, "One gives oneself in ransom for the other" (Weil, *Waiting for God* 148), Weil defines a sacrificial ethics akin to that of Levinas's, wherein "oneself is provoked as irreplaceable, as devoted to the others, without being able to resign, and thus as incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give" (Levinas, *The Levinas Reader* 95). Levinas declares that this sacrificial attitude is that which is "proper to responsibility" (95); on the contrary, an ethics built on sacrifice removes the possibility of

responsibility since there can be no relationship *between* if I renounce myself, even in favour of the other.

That the self must be suppressed is something that Murdoch does not deny, but not to the point of annihilation, for the responsibility in question in her work is specifically that of a *shared* perception. Among the mysteries of the world, one that Murdoch values highly is that of other people, who "are, after all, the most interesting features of our world and in some way the most poignantly and mysteriously alien" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 257); "Real people," she argues, by their very nature, "are destructive of myth" (294). To achieve a shared vision in which each pays attention to the other in his or her difference is the aspiration that Murdoch articulates in her novels. In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum points out that art shows that "fine attention to another can make two separate people inhabit the same created world" (153); the converse also stands: because two individuals inhabit the same world, it is their individual obligation to pay attention to one another.

Characters such as Charles Arrowby, Bradley Pearson, and Jake Donoghue find themselves out of sync with the world because they are unable to extend their imaginations and hence, their perceptions, beyond themselves. Axel Nilsson and Simon Foster from *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, in contrast, achieve their 'happy ending' because they both partake in a shared vision of love, which is given form in the honest conversation they have with each other wherein Simon confesses Julius King's machinations. Julius fails to break them apart, not because as Rowe suggests, "Axel 'sees' his lover, Simon, too accurately" (183) since the former experiences deep doubts about Simon's fidelity and even prepares to throw him out, but because they are intimate and honest with each other in a way that Hilda and Rupert Foster are not, in a way that Charles and Hartley cannot be. Because of his selfish desires, Charles never has the same conversation with Hartley, despite her best efforts. A shared perception cannot come at the complete expense of one, and yet, something of the individual ego needs must cede (a process Murdoch refers to as 'unselfing'): in art as in life, our perception of the other must be cleared of the cataracts of self-interest in order that we might honestly see the other in his or her absolute particularity and difference. This is a compromise one reaches joyfully, we are given to believe, in Murdoch's view. The suffering that is the

cornerstone of Weil's philosophy (and Levinas's, albeit to a lesser degree) is juxtaposed with the pleasure that Murdoch associates with the discovery of the other, with the performing of our responsibility, with the creation of art: loving attention in nature as in art is always "immediately rewarded by the enjoyment of beauty," writes Murdoch (*Existentialists and Mystics* 354).

This is the context in which we must (re)conceive of fidelity: as a commitment to clear vision rather than constant vision, which is to say, a commitment to an interested imagination and to attention. In a world governed by contingency and mystery, in which the other always exceeds 'I,' where the only things we can count on are the flow of time and the rhythm of life, fidelity is a point of stillness, where stillness translates not to consistency but *resilience*:

> In our sense perceptions, if we are not sure of what we see we change our position while looking, and what is real becomes evident. In the inner life, time takes the place of space. With time we are altered, and, if as we change we keep our gaze directed towards the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible. (Weil, *Gravity and Grace* 120)[17]

To commit to attention is to commit to time, time with which we are altered, and to the present. The perceiver, Nussbaum argues, is always responsible to "the history of commitment" but also, and especially, to "the ongoing structures that go to constitute her context," such that "her commitments are forged freshly on each occasion, in an active and intelligent confrontation between her own history and the requirements of the occasion" (*Love's Knowledge* 94). Attention is not simply "a vision kindly adjusted," to use James's words (*The Ambassadors* 20), but a vision kindly and continually adjusting. It is a task that is never finished but that "fills the whole of one's life" (Murdoch, *From a Tiny Corner* 215).

Fidelity must hence be understood as "the agreement to commit oneself anew, time and again, precisely when circumstances change" (Butler, "Response" 238). It is expressed not as 'I chose you once and I love you still' but rather, as Butler suggests, "I

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[17] Weil's statement also harkens to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in which the transitions in and out of the cave involve a reorientation of the eyes (*The Republic VII* 518a, *CW* 1135). This reference to slips between ignorance and understanding, and blindness and sight, that constitute attention are further explored in the following chapters.

love you and I choose you again and again" (238); to choose once, to love one as before, is a betrayal, the very antithesis of fidelity. Fidelity is a relationship, a dialogue that is renewed time and time again in order that it might be true to ever-changing circumstances. It is a word whose "concrete meaning" changes continually (238), a Said repeatedly turned back into a Saying. Fidelity is, therefore, not a vow but a freedom, the freedom to choose; and it is a freedom that is always circumscribed within the 'boundaries'[18] of ethical responsibility since it "entail[s] an agreement to make oneself anew in light of the unexpected demands that challenge one's commitment" (238).

This commitment to time also entails an acknowledgement of the ultimate unknowability of existence. One always commits oneself in the face of unknowability: as Butler points out, to make a commitment is to stand for the future and the future is "precisely what cannot be fully known" (238). But one commits oneself unknowingly also because the other to whom the commitment is directed always ultimately exceeds us:

> I love you: I work at understanding you to the point of not understanding you, and there, standing in a wind, I don't understand you. Not understanding in a way of holding myself in front and of letting come. Transversal, transintellectual relationship, this loving the other in submission to the mystery. (It's accepting, not knowing, foretelling, feeling with the heart.) I'm speaking in favour of non-recognition. I'm speaking of closeness, without any familiarity. (Cixous, *Stigmata* 81)

This is what is meant when we understand fidelity as faith. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida argues that "faith, in the moment proper to it, is blind" (30), that is, it is always inscribed with unknowing: if one knows, one cannot be faithful since faith is replaced with knowledge. Earlier, I suggested that we can only be faithful to our understanding of the beloved; to be more precise, we can only be faithful to what we do not know of the beloved, and it is this commitment that love requires.

"One knows love somehow only when all one's ideas are destroyed, and this becoming unhinged from what one knows is the paradigmatic sign of love," writes Butler, "love shatters the idea of love" ("Doubting Love" 62). Murdoch expresses just this sentiment in a letter to her one-time lover, Brigid Brophy, in which she quotes an

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[18] The quotation marks enclosing 'boundaries' are important. They exist as boundaries insofar as something needs to be demarcated in order to be spoken of, and yet, they are not limits.

anonymous poem titled, "Love not me for comely grace": "How much I wish you would keep a true woman's eye and love me still and know not why" (*Living on Paper* 259).[19] In light of this, "[w]e have no other choice than to become shaken by doubt," Butler suggests, "and to persist with what we can know when we can know it" ("Doubting Love" 66). Or as Rupert Foster puts it early in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, before Julius besets him and his wife:

> . . . love tells in the end, Hilda. There are times when one's just got to go on loving somebody helplessly, with blank hope and blank faith. When love just *is* hope and faith in their most denuded form. Then love becomes almost impersonal and loses all its attractiveness and its ability to console. But it is just then that it may exert its greatest power. It is just then that it may really be able to redeem. Love has its own cunning beyond our conscious wiles. (26)

As it turns out, to be faithful in love, to be faithful to love, is a greater injunction than it appears to be.

And so, Luce Irigaray argues, instead of *I love you* which is always a simplification that "risks reducing the other to the object of my love" (*I Love to You* 138), we would be better off saying *I love to you*, where "[t]he "to" is the site of non-reduction of the person to the object," (110), that is, the site motivated by faith. "*I love to you* means . . . I do not subjugate you or consume you. I respect you (as irreducible)," she writes (109). Love boils down to a matter of fidelity, a matter of form: how we love has everything to do with how we perceive our love and how we fail to perceive our love.

Love's Attention

> Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realization of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity . . .
>
> —Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*

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[19] The editors of the collection of Murdoch's letters, Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, provide the context for the quotation: "Keep, therefore, a true woman's eye, / And love me still but know not why— / So hast thou the same reason still/ To doat upon me ever!"

Murdoch argues, "The enemies of art and of morals, that is the enemies of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 216). In *The Sea, The Sea*, her engagement with neurosis, which is the term she uses for narcissism, allows us to frame the matter of art, morals, and love as a matter of getting beyond the self. In Murdoch's view, our "tragic freedom" as moral beings lies in our "indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 216). This is the topic of investigation in Chapter 3, which looks at Aidan Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry*. Before getting there, we ought first to consider the qualifier that Murdoch uses with respect to this freedom: tragic. This freedom is tragic, she explains, because "there is no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves. Nor is there any social totality within which we can come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled" (216). Our current epistemologies would have us believe otherwise but in truth "we have only a segment of the circle" (216). Murdoch's use of 'tragic' suggests the conventional understanding of this blindness on our part being a flaw to be overcome, and this has particular resonance where the matter of love is concerned.

Love's vision is often seen as fallible and its knowledge deficient. In *The Therapy of Desire*, Nussbaum argues that love's hopelessly myopic sight necessarily excludes it from any ethical conversation. She notes that perception is always necessarily incomplete: the eye "misses what it does not make the object of attention; and what we single out for attention at any time depends on a great deal about us, especially what we wish to see" (165); this is especially so in the case of lovers who, when in love, see only each other. Consider Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, in which the lovers are so distinctly set apart from the background and from the ordinary, by their embrace of each other, by the halo of gold that encircles them, by their decadent robes that dissolve any sense of individual bodies, thereby marking them as one and as one apart. The meadows beneath them, equally vibrant, seem to float, and them along with it. What Klimt depicts here is love's vision, carving out a space of the ordinary and making it extraordinary; the lovers' world, the painting suggests, is a world unto itself. (This is exacerbated by the

arrangement of the painting in the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere on its own on a black wall, creating a kind of tunnel vision for the viewer.)

Love, Nussbaum suggests, cannot be considered "really deep if [the lovers] *can* carefully see around and about them," and therefore, its vision "exclude[s] general attention and care, at least at that moment" (*Love's Knowledge* 189). "There is reason to suppose that the exclusivity and intensity of personal love would impede the just and general responsiveness that these gentler feelings assist," she writes, "And if they impede that, they impede the perceiver's contribution to our moral project" (189). This, then, is the dilemma as she sees it:

> For so long as our eyes are open, we are wonderful and lovable and finely responsive; but when we immerse ourselves in the most powerful responses, entering silence, closing our eyes, are we then capable at all of asking questions about our friends, of thinking of the good of the community? And if we are not capable of this, are we worthy of the deepest feelings and commitments of others? (189)

Nussbaum's identification of love and ethics[20] as two "irreconcilable visions" (190) is unsettling, if only because it feels instinctively wrong to exclude love from ethics, and so confidently and absolutely; and after all, this thesis takes as one of its foundational assumptions the idea that love is the triumph of ethics. Even when Nussbaum proposes an ethical vision that is "an unsteady oscillation between blindness and openness, exclusivity and general concern, fine reading of life and the immersion of love" (190), she maintains her logic of diametric opposites: she ultimately reinforces the separateness of love and ethics (and their corresponding attributes) by framing the former as a challenge to the latter, as that which shows up the limitations of the latter.

For one thing, it is a poor love indeed if the lover cannot extend his loving vision beyond his beloved, whose image must also suffer from such selfishness, like Charles's of Hartley. This is the one 'fault' of Axel and Simon's relationship in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, and it is duly addressed in the last chapters of the novel: the couple's decision not to intervene in the matter of Rupert and Morgan's misunderstandings about

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[20] In "Perceptive Equilibrium," collected in *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum switches between the use of 'ethics' and 'morality' but what she means is what has been referred to as 'ethics' in this project.

each other results indirectly in the former's death. "We thought of ourselves," laments Simon, ". . . If only we'd thought a little more carefully about *them*" (432). "We have lived too much inside our love for each other," agrees Axel, and in his statement that "[they] should see more people and live more in the world," we see Murdoch's 'correction of course' (432).[21] It is hence that we say, love can make you a better person, and not just to the beloved.

In "Steerforth's Arm: Love and the Moral Point of View" (collected in *Love's Knowledge),* Nussbaum again makes a case for the separateness of love and ethics with an analysis of James Steerforth and David Copperfield's relationship in Dickens's *David Copperfield*, in which she argues that David's love for Steerforth renders him blind to the latter's moral failings.[22] By the end of the essay, however, Nussbaum concedes that love and ethics may not be as irreconcilable as she previously argued:

> For we feel that there is, somehow, morality *in* the willingness to enter into that world of love, loving Steerforth without judgment. . . . the book is not simply displaying to us a tension or even an oscillation between two viewpoints that it shows as irreconcilable—but . . . shows us, as a coherent movement of one and the same heart David's movement from the one to the other . . .. There is romance in his morality, morality in his romance. (*Love's Knowledge* 359-60)

Nussbaum's concession here is limited as she maintains that love and ethics are separate spheres but, in advocating loving without judgment, she implies that there is a way in which we can understand blindness as ethical, albeit indirectly, since love's averted gaze

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[21] Murdoch, of course, is characteristically honest about the difficulty of living in the larger world. Axel and Simon's story ends with the couple, after the brief digression into guilt over the role they play in Rupert's death, in the throes of happiness: "[Simon's] thoughts of Rupert now reach back further into the past, to good times which had their own untouchable reality. . . . It was impossible for him, as sat there in the green southern light and waited for Axel, not to feel in his veins the warm anticipation of a new happiness" (*A Fairly Honourable Defeat* 437).

[22] On this point, I am inclined to disagree with Nussbaum. David is guilty of overlooking Steerforth's character deficiencies but it is not for lack of noticing them. For instance, he does not fail to note Steerforth's mistreatment of Mr. Mell, which always "gave [him] pain" (*Love's Knowledge* 107), and although he "joined in . . . ardently" when the boys cheer for Steerforth, he points out that he "felt miserable" (114). That David "felt so much self-reproach and contrition for [his] part in [Mr. Mell's expulsion]" (114) puts him at least within the range of ethics even if he fails to act on his observations of injustice. And as for the reader, whom Nussbaum assumes falls under Steerforth's spell as well, we must surely take it to heart when Steerforth says to Mr. Mell, "You are always a beggar, you know; but when you [call me mean or base], you are an impudent beggar" (111). The sheer cruelty of that statement must break any illusions we might have had about Steerforth's character and it is a hard heart that does not feel for Steerforth's victims.

is that which mediates between love and ethics: Agnes cannot love as David does because, as an embodiment of wisdom, she sees 'too much,' while David's love, which averts its gaze at times from Steerforth's flaws as well as from those who are not Steerforth, "emerges as the love that is 'better and stronger than wisdom'" (363).

Nussbaum does not allow for a more profound relationship between love and ethics because she understands love's blindness primarily as a deficiency of sight. Such an understanding is the result of a longstanding ocular tradition in Western philosophy, which associates sight with knowledge and goodness. But as Murdoch points out,

> It is a deep paradox of moral philosophy that almost all philosophers have been led in one way or another to picture goodness as knowledge: and yet to show this in any sort of detail, to show 'reality' as 'one,' seems to involve an improper prejudging of some moral issue. (*Existentialists and Mystics* 330)

"[I]t is perfectly obvious that goodness *is* connected with knowledge," she continues, but this knowledge is not an "impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world" but rather "a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one . . ." (330). And what confronts us in the matter of love is the otherness of the beloved to which we are blind. Murdoch's suggestion that the tragedy of love's freedom be answered with 'respect' (216) gestures towards an *anti*-ocular tradition that emerged alongside the dominant ocularcentrism. This second tradition—the proponents of which include Weil, Levinas, and Georges Bataille—allows a case to be made for blindness to be conceived of as that which allows love's vision and ethical vision to coincide. That is, for blindness to be seen, not as love's fatal flaw, but its essence. Love is not just the perception of individuals but the perception of individuals in their particularity; that which is most particular to the individual is his or her difference from the self, and this difference is one that the self has no access to and that the self cannot assimilate if one is to be ethical. What love loves is this condition of otherness to which it is blind and it is when love recognises where it cannot see that it becomes love. "[L]ove: the non-violent apprehension of difference," as Murdoch puts it (218).

The recognition of radical otherness in the beloved exemplifies both the extent of our ethical potential, as well as that which opens us up to encounters with otherness in general. It is when we close our eyes and enter blindness that we are most attuned to and faithful to the beloved, that we are most capable 'of asking questions about our friends, of thinking of the good of the community,' when we are most likely to be 'wonderful and lovable and finely responsive.' To return to Murdoch's hypothesis that "the central concept of morality is 'the individual' thought of as knowable by love, thought of in the light of the command, 'Be ye therefore perfect'" (323): the qualifier that she includes—*by love*—is everything here, for it alters the connotations of morality, of perfection, and of knowability. Lorna Sage notes that although Murdoch makes the point that the other has a reality of his or her own, she does not "[explore] what it consists in": "the interest is still in what [the self] makes of the discovery of [the other's] otherness" (62). This might well apply to *The Sea, The Sea*, as well as to several of Murdoch's other novels.

What Murdoch neglects, Ann Quin makes her primary preoccupation in *Three*, a novel that is about the other's otherness, as much as it is about the self's *relation* to the other in his or her absolute otherness, which arguably might be the only capacity in which one can speak about something one has no grasp of. In the novel, Quin strives against social convention (that other enemy of art, morals, and love that Murdoch identifies[23]), and more generally, fixed systems of thought, in search for a means of relating to the other that respects the fact that we only ever grasp or experience a segment of the circle. Reading *Three*, one arrives at the conclusion that to know the other ethically, to know the other by love, is to know the other blindly.

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[23] Murdoch likes social convention for the "less deadly" enemy (*Existentialists and Mystics* 217) but Quin's novel suggests that it is in fact the more insidious, since neurosis, or narcissism, is more readily apparent and more readily apparent as an enemy. Convention, on the other hand, oftentimes offers itself as consolation or the very image of the good. It is hence that, as Murdoch points out, "all dictators, and would-be dictators, from Plato to Khrushchev have mistrusted art [for its tendencies to disrupt convention]" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 218).

Chapter 2: Darkness, Another Kind of Light[1]—Seeing Blind in Ann Quin's
Three

> Of all the faculties called the five senses, sight is without doubt the noblest.
>
> — Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of*
> *Common Sense*

> This is what the archetype of blindness indicates, the loss of consciousness,
> the descent into sleep, the sense of nothingness, of becoming nothing. To be
> seen is to exist.
>
> — John M. Hull, *Touching the Rock*

The eyes have held a privileged position in Western philosophy since the time of the
Ancient Greeks, due in no small part to their assumed relationship with knowledge.
Jacques Derrida declares in *Memoirs of the Blind*, "*Idein, eidos, idea*[2]: the whole
history, the whole semantics of the European *idea*, in its Greek genealogy, as we
know—as we see—related seeing to knowing" (12). Because the tendency is to view
knowledge as desirable—indeed, for Plato, it is the very epitome of the Good—the
eyes have accordingly always been esteemed. The Ancient Greeks placed a near-
absolute confidence in sight that was manifest in their art, where there was nothing
that could not be seen, nothing that would not eventually come out into the light: gods
appeared to man (in disguise at times but, crucially, in recognisable form, usually that
of man), revelations abound, and even the future might be perceived by way of Sibyls
and prophecies. In their science, mathematics, and especially their philosophy, a
similar partiality towards sight can be observed: Plato extolled sight as the "supreme
good" (*Timaeus* 47b, *CW* 1250) and, as Hannah Arendt points out, "The famous first
sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* . . . —'All men by nature desire to know'—
literally translated reads: 'All men desire to see and to have seen'" (*The Life of the*
Mind 58). The ocularcentrism evident in Hellenic culture continued well past its own
time, surviving the religious conflicts of the Middle Ages,[3] and persisting into the

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[1] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art & Lies*. 117.

[2] *Idein*: 'outward appearance' or 'form'; *eidos*: 'to see' or 'to grasp'

[3] Following on the heels of the classical period, the Middle Ages witnessed two opposing attitudes
toward sight embodied in part by the Christian tradition that perpetuated Hellenic impulses, and the
Judaic tradition that relegated sight to the back seat, behind hearing and touch. The "iconophobic"
Protestant Reformation brought about a change in tide but only briefly, as it "helped spawn the

Renaissance and the Enlightenment, during which significant advances into the field of optics (which then translated into innovations in other fields) consolidated the position of the eye at the top of the hierarchy of senses.

At the same time, there has always been a shadow haunting the visual landscape. This is Martin Jay's thesis in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, where he argues that ocularcentrism in Western philosophy has always been attended by an anti-ocular tradition that recognised and sought to mitigate the ills of what was perceived to be too limited and too totalizing a worldview.[4] In his study, Jay covers a range of philosophers regarded as having opposed the predominant ocular regime, many of whom (Diderot, Herder, Hamann, Bergson, etc.) sought to "dethron[e] sight from the summit of the sensual hierarchy" (100) in favour of another sense, usually hearing or touch, which they believed offered more accurate access to the world. Others like Sartre attacked the tyranny of the gaze, which he argued could not help reducing what was seen into an inferior object: one was always rendered a victim by the look of the other, "who took [one] by surprise, penetrated him, transformed him forever into an object" (*Saint Genet* 79).

Alongside such critiques, however, ran a markedly more radical set of discourses that challenged not only the privileged position of the eye but also the very status of knowledge, which is understood as inextricably tied to the ocular tradition because of the particular (even symbiotic) way that our attitudes toward vision have developed in relation to it. This opposing tradition has its seeds paradoxically in the extremely ocularcentric Platonism: Arendt argues that Plato's Socratic dialogues are "aporetic" ("Thinking and Moral Considerations" 428)—"The argument either leads nowhere or it goes around in circles"—and that what the method values is *perplexity*: any conclusions drawn from it are "at best incidental by-products" that ultimately reside beyond the immediate context of the dialogues (439). Socrates was ultimately a man who, Arendt declares, "did think without becoming a philosopher, a citizen among citizens, doing nothing, claiming nothing that, in his view, every citizen should do and had a right to claim" (427). Insofar as it displaces significance from the *status* of knowledge onto the process of obtaining knowledge, the Socratic method

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Counter-Reformation, which was closely tied to a deeply visual baroque culture" (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 43).

[4] An antivisual discourse was a pervasive phenomenon in Western culture in the twentieth century; Jay opts to focus on French culture, as he argues that there, the discourse was "most prevalent and multifarious" (*Downcast Eyes* 14).

constitutes first steps towards challenging the ocular tradition. More recently, philosophers such as Simone Weil, Georges Bataille, Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida, and Maurice Blanchot throw into jeopardy not only ocularcentrism's bias towards the eyes as the preferred means of perceiving the world, but also its unrelenting faith in the value of knowledge. Seeking to dislodge ocularcentrism's hold on Western philosophy entirely, they propose what can be described as an *ethics of blindness*, which gestures towards the possibility of locating *meaning* outside of knowledge. Building on this ethics, I posit a category of *blind literature*, within which I locate Ann Quin's *Three* (1966).

An Ethics of Blindness: Weil, Bataille, and Levinas

> We should calmly ask ourselves, however, if the world we have conceived in reason is itself a viable and complete world.

> — Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*

The ethics of blindness that Weil, Bataille, Levinas, and Derrida espouse is decidedly anti-Platonic insofar as it rejects any aspiration toward lucidity and clarity: what is unknown is encountered only as the unknown and therefore not subjugated therefore to any commonly held vocabulary. Recall that for Weil, attention begins with the suspension of thought, lest in our haste we fall into error; attention then has to do with not knowing and with not seeing, at least temporarily. Weil argues that there are parts of life that present themselves to us as a void or a mystery that "man is not permitted to know" since we would only know it in our "base fashion" (*Gravity and Grace* 23), or else we "find in their place counterfeits of which [we] will be unable to discern the falsity" (*Waiting for God* 112). If we wilfully choose to pursue these voids and mysteries, in an attempt to overcome our blindness, we wind up paradoxically blinding ourselves, and more seriously, for only then are we in error. The difference here is that between *estar a oscuras* and *estar en tinieblas*, between being in the dark, "deprived of the light of causes and effects" and being in the shadows, "blinded by attachment to things [such as knowledge] and the disorder which emanates from that condition," as Roland Barthes puts it, drawing from the mysticism of St. John of the Cross (*A Lover's Discourse* 171).

For Weil, who was also familiar with St. John of the Cross, blindness is a part

of attention as it affirms and opens us up to the real and absolute mysteries of existence, the most important of which is God, who is "hidden and formless in the universe" (*Gravity and Grace* 56). In paying attention to God, in seeking to love God, Weil insists that we must "not only [do so] in secret as far as men are concerned, but with the thought that God does not exist" (20).[5] Genuine love, for God and also for our neighbour, "which we know to be the same love" (*Waiting for God* 114), is hence borne out of an attention paid to that which we do not know, that which is absolutely other, that which we are blind to: "this is the Night of non-profit, of subtle, invisible expenditure . . . [where I sit] simply and calmly in the dark interior of love" (Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* 171). Despite her Platonic influences, Weil advances a radical discourse of blindness that is decidedly anti-ocularcentric.

Weil's anti-ocular discourse is situated within a religious context, just as Levinas's is,[6] but an ethics of blindness can engage with the idea of mystery without subscribing to the existence of a divine Truth. There is mystery enough in the world we inhabit. Bataille offers just such a version of this discourse by displacing the eye from its position at the top of the sensual hierarchy, through a strategy of excess, debasement, and unrestrained play[7]; and renouncing all related implications such as the notions of a divine Truth and spiritual elevation, as well as the will to knowledge. The tenets of ocularcentrism, he argues, demonstrate "the most derisive, the most inane contempt for vulgar human nature" (*Visions of Excess* 42); but it is precisely 'vulgar human nature' that "determines revolutionary mental forms, in opposition to bourgeois mental forms" (43). Bataille pursues the debasement of the eye in the belief

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[5] As Gustave Thibon notes in his introduction, "God [for Weil] does not in fact exist in the same way as created things which form the only object of our *natural* faculties. Therefore, contact with supernatural reality is at first felt as an experience of nothingness" ("Introduction" 20).

[6] It needs to be mentioned here that while Levinas's thought is clearly inflected by the Judeo-Christian tradition, his idea of religion does not conform to the usual definition of the word. In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes that by the term, he refers to "the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no community of concept or totality—a relation without relation" (80). While Levinas is concerned with the transcendental, it would be inaccurate to suggest that his philosophy subscribes to religion in the same way that Weil's does.

[7] For instance, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Bataille describes the eye as a "*Cannibal delicacy*" (17), amplifying extant anxiety into horror. This chapter is immediately followed by one entitled, "The Big Toe," that opens with the provocative declaration that the big toe, "doomed to corns, calluses, and bunions, . . . to the most nauseating filthiness" (21), is the most *human* part of the human body" (20). Bataille goes on to challenge the idea of the transcendent, noting "a bias in favor of that which elevates itself" and suggesting that "human life is erroneously seen as an elevation" (20). Elsewhere in the collection, he also conflates the sun and the anus into 'solar annulus' (9), similarly associates the pineal eye with the anus and its excretions (74), and identifies the "rotten sun" with "a mental ejaculation, foam on the lips, and an epileptic crisis" (57). Bataille's novella, *Story of the Eye*, is also an exemplary study in the denigration of the eye.

that we might then "see open up in the depths of the earth immense and even sinister caves where force and human liberty will establish themselves, sheltered from the call to order of a heaven that . . . demands the most imbecilic elevation of any man's spirit" (43). In the same vein, he also questions the morality of a will to knowledge. He argues that "we are enslaved by knowledge, that there is a servility fundamental to all knowledge" ("Un-Knowing and Rebellion" 86), and furthermore, not only is such knowledge tyrannical, it is also a fundamentally poor way of understanding experience ("Un-Knowing and Its Consequences" 83).

In response, Bataille develops the idea of 'un-knowing': "the indefinable, that which thought cannot conceive" ("Un-Knowing and Rebellion" 88), not because of a lack of ability or apparatus but because of the very nature of the thing itself. It is the effect of a limit experience, such as death, wherein we are confronted with what we cannot know or reconcile with ("Un-Knowing and Its Consequences" 81). In *Inner Experience*, Bataille associates un-knowing with the blind spot of the eye, which is literally that which makes vision possible and also impossible, as Benjamin Noys points out: "in the same way non-knowledge [or un-knowing] is the opening that makes knowledge possible but knowledge also finds itself 'completely absorbed in it'" (30-31). The blind spot, which is notably neither "a negative fault of vision or of philosophy which could potentially be corrected" (30), is symbolic of the "Ultimate possibility" that Bataille aspires to: that "non-knowledge still be knowledge" (*Inner Vision* 111). Bataille was not merely promoting anti-intellectualism but rather, urging us to "the extreme limit of knowledge" ("Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears" 102), hence his particular strategy of excess, debasement, and play.[8]

If we can face the despair that we must feel at such a confrontation of our limits[9] and "[continue] to exist in the world with the same hopes and the same instincts," then, Bataille posits, we come to the realization that "[our] possession of

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[8] Noys notes that Bataille's writing reflects this strategy, particularly of play:

> Bataille is constantly tripping us up, tripping up our desire to understand him, to make sense of him and to extract a theory from him. . . . In fact it is only in being tripped up by Bataille, falling down, collapsing like the factory chimney, that we could be reading him. Then the pain of the fall and the laughter of others at our tripping over the text stop our reading. When we fall we are liberated from theoretical constraints and the demands of seriousness, but only through the demand to trace the movement of that fall. (37)

[9] "I have tried my best to learn what can be known, and that which I have sought is inexpressibly deep within me. I am myself in a world which I recognize as deeply inaccessible to me, since in all the relations I have sought to establish with it, there remains something I cannot conquer, so that I remain in a kind of despair." ("Un-Knowing and Its Consequences" 81-82).

the world has greater depth than that of others" ("Un-knowing and its Consequences" 83). Each time that we allow ourselves to experience un-knowing as opposed to distancing ourselves from it, "we relinquish the will to knowledge" and in doing so, "we have the possibility of a far more intense contact with the world" (83). A far more intense contact with the world that is also an intense contact with the others with which we share the world: Noys argues that what ultimately drove Bataille in his staging of limit experiences and his practice of a philosophy of un-knowing through his subversive images was the resulting "affect leading to *communication*" (35). The disturbing, unsettling Bataillean images 'break with the world common to us,' to recall Levinas's words; unreadable and inexpressible, it is a "'lived experience' of an impossible communication" (Noys 35). "It was never a matter of personal contemplation but a sharing with others through the image, the image as the opening of the Other," writes Noys (35). Like Weil, Bataille sees the ethical value of blindness and a lack of knowledge in the way that they give us access to the profound depths of experience that resist being corralled within the ocular tradition.

For Levinas, the notion of an enabling, ethical blind spot is epitomised in the face of the other. In *Totality and Infinity*, he argues that vision, with the baggage that is its relationship and responsibility to knowledge, moves violently and inevitably into a 'grasp' as it seeks to comprehend (194). But the face of the other is that which resists our apprehension by sight: it is that which "is present in its refusal to be contained" and "cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed" through any attempt of mine (195). Insofar as one always experiences "a contact with a reality that does not fit into any a priori idea, which overflows all of them" ("Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" 59), insofar as the face does not "speak about someone, is not information about a coexistence, does not invoke an attitude in relation to knowledge" (qtd in Robbins 24), the encounter with the face of the other is necessarily an encounter beyond knowledge, a limit experience, a *blind encounter*.

The visual, to be clear, is not Levinas's priority; he sought in part to rearrange the sensual hierarchy by privileging the voice. Martin Jay and Susan A. Handelman play down the importance of the face as visage in Levinasian thought in favour of the Other's call (556; 209). However, we do encounter the face in its materiality throughout Levinas's work: in *Totality and Infinity*, he refers to the Other's face in relation to its own plastic image (192), and he describes the face as always being to some extent a visual phenomenon in "Ethics as First Philosophy" (*The Levinas*

Reader 82ff). Levinas is ultimately interested in what lies beyond the 'plastic image' of the face itself (i.e., the undeniable fact of otherness) but what lies beyond cannot be accessed in any way other than via the façade. It is only in "the sensible appearance of the face" (*Totality and Infinity* 198), "first produced in conformity with the way every signification is produced" ("The Trace of the Other" 351), where the other's epiphany, "break[ing] through the form that *nevertheless delimits it*" (*Totality and Infinity* 198, own emphasis), is produced.

Levinas's primary concern is with correcting what he sees as a misstep in philosophy, as well as an antithesis to his project of ethics: the misunderstanding of knowledge of being as objective knowledge. Seeking to "provide a positive description of this new orientation [towards being], of the search for a theory of more ultimate knowledge [beyond the present systems]" (*The Levinas Reader* 63), Levinas places himself in direct opposition to the extant knowledge project by advancing a discourse in relation with "what remains essentially transcendent" (*Totality and Infinity* 195). "The incomprehensible nature of the presence of the Other . . . is not to be described negatively," notes Levinas (195), and herein marks the essence of an ethics of blindness: a blind encounter produces an epiphany which is the fact of itself. One sees that one does not and cannot and will never be able to see. The face of the other, as Levinas has it, is not 'seen' but rather, un-seen—the acknowledged and accepted blind spot in our vision. This blindness it introduces into our vision, to be sure, disrupts our "tranquillity" but does not act violently in the sense of it seeking to possess; indeed, it "puts an end to violence" as its disturbs our peace only in order that we might rise to our ethical potential of responsibility (203). Like Bataille's subversive images, Levinas's 'face of the other' presents as an invitation to the self to regard him or her responsibly: to regard "in the sense of caring," which "meant keeping the eyes shut, thwarting the violent 'avidity of the gaze' in the service of generosity," writes Jay (*Downcast Eyes* 556).

An ethics of blindness does not discount knowledge and sight: it expresses the belief that vision in its totality, in the sense of a true and thorough understanding of the world, exceeds the capacities of sight. "Anything no one's consciousness is able to register is incomprehensible to all of us," writes Bryan Magee (*On Blindness* 17); and yet, "All there can possibly be is more of reality, and that is all" (169). As Levinas argues, any challenge of ocularcentrism is always already contained within the broader ocular discourse. "Already *of itself* ethics is an 'optics,'" writes Levinas

(*Totality and Infinity* 20). *The face breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it*: the tension between a discourse of blindness and a tradition of ocularcentrism is held within Levinas's statement. Similarly, Bataille's "wholesale repudiation of the homogenizing powers of rationality" (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 233) was more reactionary than anything: in arguing for the value of un-knowing, he was ultimately pushing for an expansion of our understanding of what 'knowledge' constitutes. In any case, a wholesale repudiation is self-defeating: as Jay notes, André Breton, among others, denounced Bataille for "produc[ing] a performative contradiction, insofar as [Bataille] had to engage in communicative rationality to express it" (233). That blindness in its complete unknowability can only be discussed in relation to sight, makes perfect sense because after all this is precisely where blindness is located: within the eye. Moreover, the value of the unknown lies in the *relationship* that we forge with it as knowing and desiring beings, tentative as that relationship inevitably is. As argued in the introduction, that which with we cannot form a relationship of meaning with cannot exist; one need only recall the fall of the beautiful soul.

Blind Literature

Levinas would expel art from ethics for reasons explored in the previous chapter; but insofar as it engages with the means and forms by which we understand experience, an ethics of blindness is already enmeshed in aesthetics. Bataille, for one, demonstrates the productive relationship that can subsist between both fields. His literary works are early examples of what I propose to call *blind literature*[10]: literature that challenges, even undermines, our various epistemologies; that figures as a limit experience in the way it opens itself up to the aspects of human experience that refuse to be domesticated by knowledge; and that grapples with the implications of such a confrontation; that seek new and more complete ways of seeing and representation—all with an eye to establishing a more thorough understanding of the world. Before delving into a study of Quin's *Three* as an example of blind literature, I would like to

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[10] I take my cue from Brian Bergen-Aurand who coins the term, *blind cinema*, for films that engage with Levinasian ethics in his thesis, *Seeing and the Seen: Post-Phenomenological Ethics and the Cinema.* He reimagines Saying and the Said as Seeing and the Seen, where Seeing is led into and absorbed by the Seen, which must then be unseen and returned to the Seeing in a deliberate gesture to be repeated infinitely. Moving from Seen to Seen through the interval of Seeing, one rests momentarily in the blind spots in between, and it is here where one has the opportunity regard the other, to care for the other in his or her complete alterity.

offer a sketch of those aspects of Derrida's and Blanchot's thought that pertain to the relationship between blindness and aesthetics. Between them, they provide the intellectual foundations on which I build this idea.

Derrida refutes the autonomy of any discourse, be it ethics or aesthetics, and argues that each is already inscribed in a greater logic, as a "a circle [of thought] in a circle of circles . . . link[ing] onto other circles," as he puts it in *The Truth in Painting* (26), where he responds explicitly to the demarcation of art from other fields of discourse by philosophers such as Kant and Levinas. There, he uses the relationship between the *ergon* (the work of art) and the *parergon* (its frame) to show that the framing of a discourse is always a framing *against* other discourses—which is to say that every discourse is always already implicated in a dialogic relationship with other discourses.[11] Accordingly, philosophical considerations are repeatedly brought to bear on conversations about aesthetics—especially when it comes to literature. "[L]iterature perhaps stands on the edge of everything," he writes in *Acts of Literature*: while "what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse [scientific, philosophical, conversational, etc.]," at the same time, "if it did not open onto all these discourses, . . . it would not be literature either" (47-48).

Literature does not escape Levinas's general censure of art, not least because he sees writing as inherently unethical. While he privileges language as one of only two "*non*totalizing modes of relating to the other" (Robbins 6), Levinas rejects the possibilities of written language; his ethical discourse is a "primordial language" without content, "prior to language conceived of as a system of signs" (Robbins 8). It is also an impossible language caught in a double-bind, only to be spoken "where community between the terms of the relationship is wanting" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 73); but, as Derrida points out, to receive the other's language, is already to "begin to understand and to recognise," and therefore to create a sense of community (qtd in Robbins 14). For Levinas, such language can only be spoken of as speech (hence, Saying and the Said): sound, he argues, is a "ringing, clanging scandal" that serves as a "break with the self-complete world of vision and art" (*The Levinas*

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[11] The *parergon* is "[n]either simply outside nor simply inside [the work of art]" (54), and is the supplement by which the autonomy of art is both assured and threatened. On one hand, it demarcates the work of art (as a frame of a painting literally does). On the other hand, its presence speaks to a lack within the *ergon* that is "constitutive of the very unity of the *ergon*" (59): without it, the *ergon* cannot exist and yet, the *parergon* is not intrinsically a part of the *ergon*.

Reader 147); in comparison, the written word, "[where] language is transformed into documents and vestiges," is always "disfigured or 'frozen'" (148).

Derrida recuperates literature for ethics by locating a dynamic blindness at the origin of the work.[12] The clearest description of this originary blindness occurs in *Memoirs of the Blind*, in which Derrida discusses it as the aspect that opens the artwork up to ethical possibilities. He begins by defining this blindness, in relation to the ocular tradition that equates sight with knowledge, as scepticism: "the suspension of the gaze, its 'epoch' (*epochē* means interruption, cessation, suspension, and sometimes the suspension of judgment, as in the *skepsis* that we spoke of…)" (117). Like the other philosophers of the blind, Derrida conceives of the interruption of thought as an ethical gesture because it is the moment when the totality of knowledge is disrupted by a moment of "total question" (*Writing and Difference* 96) and when one sees the revelation of the other's mystery. He goes on to make an argument for blindness to be seen as the constitutive lack in art, the "condition of its possibility" (*Memoirs* 122), by tracing the origin of drawing to a moment when sight withdraws (i.e., the story of Butades) and retracing that blindness in every act of drawing since. He shows thus the capacity, even inherent tendency, of art to suspend sight and disrupt totalities, and to hence allow for the ethical revelation that Levinas attributes to the literal face-to-face encounter. Derrida redefines Levinas's charge that art "contrasts with knowledge" and that "[i]t is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow" (*The Levinas Reader* 132).

Derrida writes of visual art specifically in *Memoirs of the Blind* but he has elsewhere written of literature as being similarly founded on a blind origin. He posits, through concepts such as *trace* and *différance*, that language is a function of absence, whereby meaning is never fully inscribed in the signifier but constantly differs and is deferred. Literature, being the linguistic product of the creative imagination, has the capacity to demonstrate this with a particular force: Derrida argues that literature does not possess a core 'essence' beyond its exemplary ability to be iterated in multiple new contexts (*Acts of Literature* 44). Moreover, since only "*pure absence . . .* can *inspire*" (*Writing and Difference* 8), since only the impossible can be truly invented

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[12] Derrida's views on ethics and writing are concretised into a challenge to Levinas's in "Violence and Metaphysics," where he proposes an 'inversion' of Levinas's stance; similarly, in "Plato's Pharmacy," he charges Levinas with phonocentrism. See "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, 79-53; and "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, 63-171.

(*Acts of Literature* 341), the literary text exists as an *ideal* 'object'—in the Husserlian sense of "the 'object' of an intentional act of consciousness" (Hillis Miller, "Derrida" 67). It is hence that Derrida establishes "emptiness as the situation of literature" (*Writing and Difference* 8), in which emptiness is understood in relation to excess, much like in Bataillean thought. Thus he argues that literature offers a place for the wholly other as "what is not inventable" and is therefore "the only invention in the world" (*Acts of Literature* 342). This writing that is "liable to the other," Derrida argues, "is writing working at not letting itself be enclosed or dominated by that economy of the same in its totality" (342-43). To put it another way, defining literariness as an experience ("an intentional relation to the text," 44) that allows for the possibility of the suspension of "referential naivety, of *thetic* referentiality" (47), Derrida figures literature as having the potential to function as an "intrusion of an effective simulacrum or of disorder" into referential discourses such as philosophical writing (39).

The ethical significance of literature's relationship to nothingness can be further elucidated by a foray into Blanchot's thought, himself to be counted among the philosophers of the blind. Blanchot similarly identifies and addresses in his work the problem of "free[ing] thought from the optical imperative that in the Western tradition, for thousands of years, has subjugated our approach to things, and induced us to think under the guaranty of light or under the threat of its absence" (*The Infinite Conversation* 27). In response, he proposes language as the solution, describing it as "sight freed from the limitations of sight . . . a transcendent way of seeing" (29). Like Derrida (who owes him an intellectual debt), Blanchot perceives negation as constituting the essence of language as a sign system, whose nature is to replace the things that it signifies and thus to distance us from them; and to replace them "not by filling itself with them but by abstaining from them" (*The Work of Fire* 75). Here, as before, the negation at the heart of language is not a violent, decisive destruction but "work and movement" (*The Infinite Conversation* 7), a lack that is also a "capacity" and "possibility" (75). Blanchot speaks of language as that which

> knows no precipitation, just as it does not know the refusal to go on, or oscillating doubt. It is most open in its obliqueness, through interruption always persisting, always calling upon detour, and thus holding us up as though in suspense between the visible and the invisible, or on the hither side of both. (31)

Although Blanchot refers to 'speech' in the context of this quote, it is written language that has his attention for its ability to convey a sense of "paradoxical quasi-ideal materiality" (Clark, *Derrida* 72), of being grounded in "a negativity that cannot be mastered, or reconverted to a positivity" (73). Blanchot suggests, moreover, that it is literary language that is the more capable of manifesting this impossible relation with nothingness.[13] If language 'holds us up as though in suspense between the visible and the invisible,' between the world we recognise and that which is other, between the self and other, its enclosure within the bounds of fiction only makes the essentiality of nothingness more explicit since literature's aspiration is always to make present that which is already absent (*The Work of Fire* 77). Blanchot argues that what literature creates is "always recessed in relation to what is" and this receding, despite literature's aspiration, has the effect of "render[ing] what is more slippery, less sure of being what it is" (*The Infinite Conversation* 403). Blanchot's discussion of the symbol in "The Language of Fiction" clarifies these statements: the literary symbol is made up of concrete everyday details (i.e., what is), the absence of which its own presence is conditioned by; at the same time, the symbol always exceeds— and in doing so, "discredits" and "reduces . . . to nothing"—these things it signifies (*The Work of Fiction* 80). The role of the symbol, Blanchot proposes, is "to send us endlessly back to the lack that is one of the ways by which it would like to make us experience lack in general, emptiness in its entirety" (80-81). This, as he sees it, is the paradoxical richness of the "extreme destitution" of language and of literature (76): "the absence literature produces" is paradoxically "a kind of overfullness with regard to the 'real'" (*The Infinite Conversation* 403).

What is at work in literature, Blanchot suggests, is "some *affirmation* irreducible to every unifying process"; the 'negation' in literature arises as a response to the way "it is always in terms of unity that thought . . . composes its positive

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[13] Whereas Derrida often refers to something other than what is commonly understood as 'literature' when he uses the term so as to complicate the discussion of his thought in the present context, Blanchot's definition is rather more straightforward. In his interview with Derek Attridge, "This Strange Institution Called Literature," Derrida speaks of 'literature' as an institution or a socio-political space, apart from 'belles-lettres' or 'poetry,' although he notes that they are "not entirely distinct" (*Acts of Literature* 40). The literary texts that he responds to—"mostly twentieth-century, and mostly modernist, or at least nontraditional," according to Attridge—straddle these boundaries, "all hav[ing] in common that they are inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature" (41). "I'm brought more easily toward texts which are very sensitive to this crisis of the literary institution," Derrida adds, " . . . to what is called 'the end of literature'" (42). Quin's *Three*, as the discussion that follows shows, is precisely such a text that is both literature in the Derridean sense and 'poetry.'

references" (405, own emphasis). For Blanchot, it is this irreducible affirmation by which literary language "[liberates] thought from being always only a thought in view of unity" that distinguishes it as an "entirely different speech" from other forms of language (405). Here, Blanchot anticipates Derrida's deconstructive practice and his redefinition of literature within this practice as a destabilizing mode that interrogates dialectical systems of understanding experience, such as philosophy. As Clark points out, in *Awaiting Oblivion* (and to a smaller degree in *The Infinite Conversation*), Blanchot revives the dialogue in a radically new form, as a "literary mode of language" that "[exposes] the limits of philosophical models of coherence" while offering an alternative mode of discourse (*Derrida* 18).[14] Rather than the usual form of dialogue that is "inherent with a kind of violence, at work in the constraints it imposes on the interlocutors as it forces them to speak and listen in turn" (89), Blanchotian dialogue looks to the aporetic Socratic dialogues and challenges the privileged position of unified, consolidated knowledge by displacing value onto the multiplicity and discontinuity of discourse itself. The literary mode therefore offers a way of thinking through experience that is perhaps "more thoughtful than the thinking that goes by the name of philosophy," to borrow Derrida's words (qtd in Clark, *Derrida* 19).

Blanchot describes the true vocation of the artist and the poet as such: "To call us obstinately back to error, to turn us toward that space where everything . . . returns to insignificance, and where what approaches is the nonserious and the nontrue, as if perhaps thence sprang the source of all authenticity" (*The Space of Literature* 247). Literature confronts, challenges, negates in the name of 'authenticity,' which remains (aptly) undefined in Blanchot's thought but, in being spoken of in relation to death (122), is firmly established as some 'thing' of the world—authenticity as a truth that relates to the profundity of lived experience, in other words. The "gaze of 'art,'" Blanchot suggests, is trained on the things of the world, which "offer themselves in the inexhaustible fecundity of their meaning which our vision ordinarily misses—our vision which is only capable of one point of view" (151). Art, then, is a correction of vision, or more accurately, a matter of expanding the human capacity for

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[14] Clark argues that the dialogue form offers an alternative model of discourse that "as a dramatic form, necessarily embodies an *event*, possessing thereby a certain ethical force"; that "has an inherent relation to . . . issues of intersubjective influence"; and that "engages with the possibility of *maieutics*; namely, the discipline of the exchange itself allows the midwifery of new, unanticipated ideas in the very course of dialogue itself" (*Derrida* 18-19).

understanding, of inviting and cultivating "concern for the reality of things in their unknown, free, and [silent] existence" (*The Work of Fire* 330). This is where ethics lie for Blanchot, in things and the world of things, on the level of lived experience. Accordingly, whereas Levinas 'formulates' his ethical relation with the self and the other as one of pure transcendence (i.e., the other as the Divine other), he relocates the relation to the human level by specifying "man as the absolutely other" (71), with whom he is concerned. In *Awaiting Oblivion* and *The Infinite Conversation*, the (literary) dialogues that move beyond thought notably take place between two human individuals. Blanchot does not so much depart from Levinasian thought here as extend its implications to aesthetics, and its possibilities in the direction of a "secular humanism grounded in a concrete emphasis on ethico-political responsibility" (Kuzma, "Maurice Blanchot").

Ann Smock points out that '*espace*' in *L'espace littéraire* (the untranslated title of *The Space of Literature*) "implies the withdrawal of what is ordinarily meant by 'place'" (*The Space of Literature* 10): "it suggests "the site of this withdrawal," she writes, "Literature's space is like the place where someone dies: a nowhere . . . which is here" (10). A nowhere that is here, an absence that is overfull, suspended between the visible and the invisible, an unceasing movement that is also an interruption: to encounter literary texts then is to negotiate it as the mediating space that we have come to identify with ethics, to place ourselves in a blind spot in order that we might encounter the unknown—all in the name of an undefined but sought after (if not cherished) 'authenticity,' an expression of the profundity of experience, which we might in the present context speak of as a fuller, deeper vision of lived experience. It is on these grounds that we venture to propose that every engagement with art is potentially a limit experience (a term Blanchot shares with Bataille) that promises a more intense contact with the world and the others who inhabit it along with us, and therefore potentially an ethical exercise; and that we might conceive of a category of literature that acts on this potential—that is to say, blind literature.

Seeing Blind in Ann Quin's *Three*

Literary texts toe the line between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, and occupy a liminal space sympathetic to alterity that blind literature self-consciously inhabits. It is in this category of blind literature that we can place Ann

Quin's *Three*, which tells the story of married couple, Leonard and Ruth, who are reckoning with the disappearance and suspected death of their enigmatic lodger, S. *Three* is part of an *oeuvre* preoccupied with negotiating obscurity and clarity in the representation of human experience. Quin's small but substantial body of work is entirely at home in a discourse of blindness: at the same time that her novels are searching for clarity by delving into the minutiae of human experience (particularly the precariousness of the relationship between the self and the other), they are also famously (notoriously) and meaningfully obscure in response to the inherent uncertainty and flux of lived experience. Quin's style and the form of her novels differ vastly from one novel to another but move in a general trajectory towards a sense of dissolution. *Berg* is Quin's first and most positively received as well as best known novel; it is also her most conventional, with its straightforward narrative and Greek mythic structure. From there on, she increasingly strips her work of the structures normally used to bolster and facilitate understanding, such as plot and grammatical conventions, as if these were consolations or crutches which she would do away with in order to arrive at a more authentic form for experience.

Critical response to Quin's play with narrative form[15] has been mostly polarised: she has been accused by critics of "willful obscurity" but also praised for "considerable depth and originality" (Mackrell 610). Jane Miller declares, "There is a good deal that is irritatingly opaque and elliptical in the book," in an otherwise favourable review of *Passages* (341), while an unnamed review of *Tripticks* announces that the effort of negotiating the "thickets of frustration that the method and layout interpose is too much, and draws fatal attention to the powerful humorlessness of the whole thing" ("Shattering" 526). *Three*, specifically, was noted in *The Times Literary Supplement* as having met with both "high praise" and "positive hostility" ("Advertisement" 577); while Daniel Stern of *The New York Times* refers to Quin's "almost arbitrary experimentalism" as proving "digressive and unfortunate," he also acknowledges moments of insight (BR28). Sylvia Bruce, on the other hand,

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[15] Quin's concern with the problem of finding a form for experience and her consequent literary experiments were entirely of her time. Jennifer Hodgson situates Quin's *oeuvre* firmly within the anxieties of the post-war period, which included, among other things, the collapse of intellectual ideals, threats to the individual consciousness, a radical transformation of the intellectual landscape, as well as a reassessment of the nature and role of fiction in society. In the 1973 edition of *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Victor Sage notably points out the then-recent "extension" (89) of the meaning of 'fiction' to "any 'mental structure' as opposed to the formless flux existing outside our minds, the Pure Contingency which we call nature" (88)—the view of reality as 'formless flux' being the result of the chaos of the time.

laments that most reviewers "seem to have considered that in their comment upon *Three* they must at all costs avoid indulgence: a major talent?—then let it be ritually slaughtered and buried before it attract[s] to itself too many of the rays of the sun" (qtd in Williams-Korteling 117). It is between these gestures of rejection and celebration, between obscurity and clarity, where we should read Quin; and where we can locate in her work a space for an articulation of an ethics of blindness.

S is the mystery at the heart of *Three*, the blind spot that is also the opening for ethics: she is the embodiment of the radical otherness that haunts every relation between two people and resists being assimilated into a falsely unified whole or a duality—an otherness that, in turn, speaks to the inherent unknowability of experience. In the aftermath of her disappearance, S is revealed as a destabilizing force that exposes the vulnerabilities of the bourgeois institution of Leonard and Ruth's marriage; and that undermines their unthinking ways of relating to each other and to the people around them, which are grounded in habit and convention.

Through her, Quin calls for a breaking of systems of thought that would fix experience in lazy unethical forms and expel its mystery in the name of clarity; as it is in Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*, the crime here that Leonard and Ruth must confront is the failure of imagination. In *Three*, Quin impresses upon her readers the high ethical stakes involved in such a failure by constructing her narrative against the backdrop of the Holocaust and by drawing on Arendt's philosophy. Rather than a thesis or a manifesto, Quin's novel is an exercise in searching for more authentic forms with which to represent experience: forms whose clarity does not preclude the inherent obscurity of lived experience, a *thinking* form that is faithful to the difficulties of an ethical relation with the world.

The Mystery of S: The Discordant Third

Rather than 'love stories,' Loraine Morely refers to Quin's novels about human relationships as 'love affairs,' a term especially appropriate for the way it foreshadows the otherness that pervades the relationships portrayed. As Barthes notes, 'love story' has a normalizing effect that assimilates the lover and the beloved into a known economy: "I'm convinced that the well-constructed love story, with a beginning, an end, and a crisis in the middle, is the way society hopes to persuade the lover to be reconciled with the language of the Other, by constructing his own

narrative, in which he plays a role" (*The Grain of the Voice* 286); in other words, "if you put the lover in a 'love story,' you thereby *reconcile* him with society" (302). It is this reconciliation that Quin resists, and her characters (and writing style) are accordingly 'promiscuous.' As Morely observes, Quin "no more concerns [herself] with consistency either of textual or sexual identity than with supporting a socio-cultural tradition of monogamy" (128).

Typical of Quin's novels, a 'love' triangle lies at the heart of *Three*. In his conversation with Quin, John Hall notes that she is "fascinated by triangularity in human affairs": "Her subsequent prose is a landscape strewn with three-cornered dances: the shape is the prime figure of Quin's geometry" (8). The prevalence of the number three in her oeuvre has similarly drawn the attention of Jennifer Hodgson, Francis Booth, and Giles Gordon. Drawing on Quin's interest in and familiarity with psychoanalysis, Francis Booth, for instance, suggests a connection with Jung and his "idea of the number four as the number of wholeness, and three as the number of incompleteness" (504).[16] On the matter of 'three,' Quin herself has this to say: "The relationships between three has [sic] always fascinated me, being I suppose partly because I have never known the family unit, and partly the influence of the Roman Catholic convent I spent my childhood in (the trinity etc.) . . ." (Jordan, "The Quin Thing"). Rather than being a step short of completeness then, as Booth suggests, for Quin, the number 'three' seems to point towards a state of unattainable completeness, wherein completeness is not necessarily bound to positive connotations. In Quin's novels, the consummatory third in her tripartite affairs notably tends to introduce an element of perversity that takes the characters beyond the pale: adultery, for instance, or incest, or deviant sexual practices.

The Quinian third is, as Hodgson puts it, the "discordant third": "the disruptive element" that threatens a system of thought, which resolves into strict binaries of self/other, him/her, seen/unseen, known/unknown, etc. (135-36)—even as it is inseparable from the system itself. In *S/Z*, Barthes opens the slash that neatly divides the two parts of a binary system up to ambivalence, (un)framing it as "the slash of censure, the surface of the mirror, the wall of hallucination, the verge of

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[16] In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung notes that "quaternity" was "worshipped as divinities by the Pythagoreans" (42) and that the number recurs in a range of myths and cultures. He refers to the number four as the number of 'totality' and employs it himself throughout his study (the four functions of consciousness, the four stages of the hero myth, the fourth stage of development of the *animus*, etc.); there is also, of course, the four Jungian archetypes.

antithesis, the abstraction of limit, the obliquity of the signifier, the index of the paradigm, hence, of meaning" (107). Quin's project of three engages with the possibilities of the Barthesian slash as the mediating space between supposed polarities, and allows her to give form to the complex problem of human connection. Her unreconciled love affairs and triangles allow something essential about the nature of relationships to emerge: that the relationship between the self and other is always already interrupted by the otherness of the latter that refuses to be domesticated. In a sense then, there are always three at play in any relationship. In *Three*, this otherness is externalised and embodied in S, the intruder into Leonard and Ruth's marriage who presents as a complete mystery. S is not so much 'introduced' as an external element into the seemingly stable equation of Leonard and Ruth's marriage, as she is revealed to be that which is always already mediating between two entities, the given within the relationship—and revealed as both a necessity for their contact with one another and a threat to their bond.

On one hand, S is what ties the increasingly estranged married couple together, even in—especially in— the aftermath of her disappearance: she intervenes in and dominates Leonard and Ruth's conversations, even intimate discussions about their sexual fantasies, and she is always on the tip of their tongues and at the back of their heads. To them, she is as a cigarette shared between two people, a symbol of the *promise* of contact in spite of an irrefutable distance (*Three* 110); of what, as Hodgson points out, Nathalie Sarraute (citing Katherine Mansfield) refers to as "the terrible desire to establish contact" (71), in the fullest sense of the phrase. The drama of *Three* is the enactment of this desire by Leonard and Ruth (on each other as much as on S) as they seek to resolve the mystery of the latter:

> this continual, almost maniacal need for contact, for an impossible, soothing
> embrace, that attracts all of these characters like dizziness and incites them on
> all occasions to try, by any means whatsoever, to clear a path to the 'other,' to
> penetrate him as deeply as possible and make him lose his disturbing,
> unbearable opaqueness. (Sarraute 72)

One might even say that, to borrow Sarraute's words, Leonard and Ruth are, after the fashion of Kafka's 'K.' in *The Castle*, "but . . . slender prop[s]," merely the "frail envelope[s]" in which is gathered this "passionate, anxious desire to establish contact" (77). Beyond this desire, they are largely anonymous characters who fail to

come fully into being, even outside the confines of S's diary within which a significant portion of the novel takes place, as we only ever get intimations of psychological depth; Ruth's doctor, who might have offered us such access (questionable as such access may be, considering the way psychoanalysis is portrayed), is notably unavailable (Quin, *Three* 130).

      S holds Leonard and Ruth together; at the same time, she is also the embodiment of the schism that threatens the "defiant, unapproachable, unity" that Ruth would have people believe she and her husband are (57), the slash between the 'left' and 'right' of Leonard and Ruth, as it were. Her closeness to them and theirs to her, and the closeness she creates between them, is implicated in a web of secrets and half-said things. Although never explicitly mentioned, it is suggested in the novel that S was Leonard's lover: Leonard hides a film reel of a naked girl at the beach from Ruth (90), presumably taken by him of S whom Ruth previously notes "[l]iked going in with nothing on (41). Ruth also gives voice to her suspicions in her own journal (124). Furthermore, in her diary entries, S does not make a distinction between the 'he' that is her lover, whom she never names, and the 'he' that is Leonard, leaving space for speculation that they are one and the same. That said, there are hints of a frisson of some kind between Ruth and S as well; Ruth is clearly attracted to S and in the event of her disappearance, masturbates while trying on S's clothes and jewelry. Additionally, S is also Ruth's accomplice in the secret of her plastic surgery, which the latter appears to have kept from Leonard as she promptly burns what is suggested to be photographic evidence after reading about them in S's diary (76). What S mediates between them is closeness that is also, simultaneously, "[a] conspiracy in a way, when each knows that only I can play at traitor if I choose" (135). "When did all that [her awe for Leonard, his respect for her] falter, what day, night did I feel this appalling separation, a certain loss of identity?" asks Ruth in her diary, before answering herself: "The days they [Leonard and S] went off together, and I was left alone in the house, facing those broken statues, perhaps then, yes" (124).

      S 'holds the space' of blindness in literature, and within this space, she holds Leonard and Ruth in relation to each other, and up for examination. The discordant Quinian third is that Barthesian slash come into being—that uniting/disruptive/mysterious slash—and in *Three*, it takes the name, S.

Bringing the Unknown into View: Faces known/unknown

S's presence (as absence) in Leonard and Ruth's lives is palpable. For Levinas, the encounter with otherness is always experienced as a traumatic violation of the self: "The one is exposed to the other as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter" (*Otherwise Than Being* 49); elsewhere, he uses the metaphor of breaking and entering ("Truth of Disclosure" 103). To be out of order is always to be violently out of order. The novel, as well as the couple's narrative, opens with the violent event of a man falling to his death; each also (separately) ends with similar events: with S's supposed suicide attempt and with the discovery of the body of a young woman who has been murdered respectively. In between, acts of violence and violation proliferate: Leonard and Ruth read each other's diaries,[17] with Ruth breaking one of Leonard's audiotapes in the process; Leonard watches what appears to be a pornographic film (Quin, *Three* 122) about which he later lies to Ruth; Leonard repeatedly propositions his unwilling wife and finally rapes her; and all the while, the violent banging of the doors reverberating through the narrative. (The intruders also seem to only have launched a direct assault on Leonard during S's stay, after several attacks on the estate.)

S's suicide, in particular, is an act of absolute and irrevocable violence that represents not just an aberration in Leonard and Ruth's orderly bourgeois world but also one that far exceeds the couple's ability to control, correct, and repress. Before it, violence exists only in the domesticated form of the "pistol lighter" (11), for instance, and the significantly empty swimming pool, through which the potential danger of the sea is neutered;[18] or is otherwise confined to the killing of crabs and snails. Just as Ruth attempts to cover up a blood clot on her lip with "powder, lipstick" (100), she initially attempts to rationalise S's suicide away as an "accident" (1); her suggestion that S's suicide note is "just a melodramatic touch" also reads as a flippant dismissal of S's agency and her will (1).[19] Notably, neither she nor Leonard refers directly to the suicide until the end of the novel.

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[17] Diary-keeping is a habit that Ruth appears only to have begun some time after S enters her life (S notes in an entry that Ruth does not keep a diary, 61), making this another instance in which S's influence is felt. The same might also be said of Leonard and his audio diary (52).

[18] S also notes a breakwater that demarcates the part of the coast that belongs to Leonard and Ruth, which "lies in wait more to devour the sea than be devoured" (54).

[19] Ruth's aversion to all that offends her bourgeois sensibility is also implied in the matter of S's abortion: "I know you don't agree with that sort of thing," says Leonard (78).

S is the trespasser who makes it into the house. She is determined to shatter, and she succeeds in creating the cracks that let the light in. In the aftermath of her death, Leonard and Ruth are forced to reconsider not just what they thought they knew of S, but also of each other. What remains when structures of understanding are dismantled, when the consolations of habitual thought are stripped away, is the inscrutable face of the other and its vulnerability to it, as well as the self's vulnerability to it. And the recognition of the face of the other as inscrutable is unsettling. In the beginning of the novel, Ruth is literally "startled from the newspaper by Leonard" (1): it is a disconcerting moment that is initially mitigated by "a sense of interaction about to begin" but Quin does not follow through with this as she allows the narrative to "sputter into a larger sense of place, but it is a place divided into bits, its parts not allowed to cohere efficiently into a whole": the wall, the arm-chair, the screen and sliding doors (Evenson xi). Throughout the novel, Leonard and Ruth are constantly played off against each other as Quin withholds any possibility of coherence and unity: each "[holds] a corner of the room" (*Three* 50), works at "little areas of chosen color . . . from bases they had secured" (56), as if they were at war. A similar effect is achieved grammatically by Quin's deployment of periods to definitively suggest a change of speakers or point-of-view: the periods break the text up (after the fashion of S and her diary entries) with Leonard and Ruth, as it were, "stand[ing] on either side of the [period]" (6).

Or else the couple is separated by the gulf between paragraphs as Quin switches from one character to another, sweeping from one place to another—from room to room, from house to park—as in a montage, emphasizing the distance that lies between them. As Hodgson points out, early on in the novel, an erotic scene involving Leonard and Ruth takes place across separate paragraphs, with each individual installed in different parts of the house (Quin, *Three* 159). Leonard's desire is displaced onto the statues that he "fondle[s]" and onto his orchids, which offer him an erotic experience:

> A bee orchid leaned over from the moistness around, touched his mouth. . . . [Leonard] parted leaves. Thrust through. . . . He murmured with pleasure, sometimes sighed. . . . His fingers trembled. His body sloped. Face flushed in the one stream of light. (11-12)

In a parallel paragraph, Ruth's desire is similarly displaced onto S's jewellery (and

later onto her cat):

> she pulled her breasts up by holding several necklaces above her neck. . . . she held [two beads from her broken necklace] against her nipples. Kneeling she looked down, swung herself from side to side. Her tongue slithered over lower lip, drew it in. She licked the beads, replaced them on the extended nipples, her head thrown back, knees parted pressed into the carpet, feet together. (12-13)

The erotic tension all but ceases as soon as Leonard and Ruth come together again in the same paragraph as the former re-enters the house and the couple revert to their banal conversations. Later when Leonard approaches her in bed and places his hand on "where the nightdress had crept above the triangle patch of dark hair," Ruth significantly rejects his advances (16).

The distance between Leonard and Ruth is, ironically, especially palpable when they occupy the same physical space: the claustrophobic space of their house (and of the swimming pool where they act out their plays) is such that their forced confrontations with each other emphasise their failure to *see* each other (a Chekhovian gesture). Here, they "move round each other" (5), as if they were strangers suspicious of each other rather than a married couple—S significantly uses this phrase to describe the couple's interactions with each other on two separate occasions in her diary (39, 80)—and slip into monologues during 'conversations.' When Leonard is reliving what are clearly emotionally-charged memories of the war and his incarceration, for instance, Ruth 'responds' by lamenting the "awful days" of the trips they took as newly-weds (7-8). Even their shared moment in the bath ends in a failed attempt at intimacy (43). The rest of the scene notably plays out in a surreal fashion in which the descriptions of the characters and their gestures are increasingly rendered alienating: the couple "gazed at the purple flesh protruding from the water" (44), as if it were a foreign object that neither recognised nor felt any connection to, after which, like marionettes, Ruth "pushed her face under the cold water, arms flung out" while Leonard's "head fell forward, mouth open" (45). When they do have sex, the scene is similarly devoid of all eroticism—"He twitched several times, then sank down. She lay motionless, tears ran into her mouth. Sorry Ruth I. . . . It's always the same Leon always—"—and ends in Leonard "at the end of the bed, limply, look[ing] on" as Ruth cleans herself (79).

Throughout the novel, Leonard and Ruth rarely see eye-to-eye, literally and

metaphorically. Often, they find it difficult even to face each other. When Ruth implies that Leonard neglected her in favour of S during their mime plays, they "looked at each other, quickly away, at their drinks" (6); while, elsewhere, in a "cramped coffee bar" outside of town, all three "sat on high stools, and avoided looking in the mirror" (69) after an argument between the couple. Ruth, in particular, seems particularly adverse to being seen by Leonard and is often swathed in darkness throughout the novel. For instance, when Leonard's searching torch finds her out and "[a] flash of light… for a moment fell full upon her face," she "drew back. . . . closed the window, pulled the curtains" (13). Later, she suggests that the "nasty couple" living nearby is always "spy[ing]" on her and her husband and so she draws the curtains against them (42); even the "triangle piece of light caught between the curtains at the top" disturbs her (43).

Moments when Leonard and Ruth do face each other are tainted with an unmistakable tension that has nothing to do with the erotic, as a pattern of intimacy perverted by hostility in Leonard and Ruth's relationship develops throughout the novel. In one of their mimes, Leonard and Ruth "[a]ttempt communication" (21) in vain: the former follows behind the unwilling latter, only to be "confronted by slits for eyes"; what follows is "Dismay. Desipient. Absorbed" (21). S also recalls in her diary a day in March when she sees Leonard and Ruth face each other on the beach: "R motionless, face tilted forward. L, his back to the sea, gestured," when "Suddenly R's hand came out. So quickly, even now I am unsure whether or not she hit him" (55). It could have been "an embrace perhaps," S cedes, and yet, even if it had been one, the moment is shot through with violence. "I think he caught her arm, made her face him again," continues S, and when she looked again, Leonard and Ruth have moved apart (55). This pattern culminates in Leonard's brutal rape of Ruth in the oppressive dark of their room, a scene that Quin depicts unflinchingly in a single unrelenting paragraph (127-28).

Leonard and Ruth's struggle to see eye-to-eye, to recognise each other, is not a result of the appearance and disappearance of S in their lives, but it is brought into view because of S. She provokes the realization between Leonard and Ruth that there are things about each other that the other failed to see, despite all the time they have spent together and all that they do know of each other, and that after all, they "do not comprehend in/each other" (101). Ruth summarises the meaning of S to her as such: "here was someone who shared something with him I failed to find" (124). As S puts

it in her diary, "Faces known/unknown" (91): faces known are revealed ultimately to be unknown. The gulf of difference that lies between Leonard and Ruth is only ever articulated as difference. *Three* is not a psychological novel in the way of, say, Dostoevsky's novels. The characters' physical gestures in the narrative, as well as Quin's stylistic gestures, are gestures towards conditions that suggest the depths of experience—the individual's need to establish contact, his or her inability to communicate, his or her utter loneliness. These gestures are not subjected to examination and analysis, to calculation and conclusion, because to delineate them, to attempt anything other than a recognition of them, would amount to a betrayal. "The novel is structured as a process of unveiling," writes Brian Evenson in his introduction to *Three* (ix). Trying to unravel the mystery of S's disappearance, Leonard and Ruth turn to the former's diary and tape recordings in the hope of locating some kind of motivation, but they repeatedly come up against a blank wall. What they *do* come away with is an increasing awareness of the distance that lies between them, the "hollowness of [their] relationship" (ix). "Under the veil, it seems, lies another veil," as Evenson puts it (x).

So quietly devastating is S's presence and absence in their lives that after, Leonard and Ruth are like "Worms cut in half" and "Interpreters in isolation" (Quin, *Three* 21), or like the "broken statuettes," which Ruth "held in cupped hands, and tried placing them together, but found they could not be joined for some were missing" (82). And so, throughout the novel, they are as mourners the morning after, moving slowly, almost automatically, as if through a haze. They wander around the house and their neighborhood restlessly and aimlessly; their actions are performed thoughtlessly; objects are picked up and replaced; the radio switched on and off. As Hannah Arendt points out, it happens that "[t]he only outward manifestation of the mind is absent-mindedness, an obvious disregard of the surrounding world, something entirely negative which in no way hints at what is actually happening within us" (*The Life of the Mind* 72). What is happening to the couple in this instance is S, her appearance and her disappearance, the surrounding mystery and the disruption she has caused by bringing certain truths to light. It is not simply the loss of S that they suffer (which they do to varying degrees), but also, and more profoundly, the loss of confidence in each other as known and knowable individuals.

Breaking Habit

> (Oh the longing at first, the impulse pulled back as from a shovelful of ashes.
> But it's as well to hum a tune as you brush your teeth, and knot your tie deftly
> to keep you safe from solitude and death.)

> —Jacques Réda, "Oraison du matin"

Human connection is always a *problem* for Quin, and the revelation of the third of otherness, as an intervening 'space,' forces a momentary suspension of thought, which in turn allows the possibility of authentic meaning to emerge. (We might recall here Derrida's *parergon*, a supplement to the *ergon* that also simultaneously threatens its unity; it is the *parergon* that opens the *ergon* up to more thoughtful ways of thinking.) As the self-declared antagonist in *Three*, S is the threat to Leonard and Ruth individually but also to them as a bourgeois married couple i.e., an established, monolithic unit of meaning. In *Mythologies*, Barthes identifies the "bourgeois norm" (8), or "the Established Order" (40), as the "essential enemy" (8), in words that recall the thought of philosophers of the blind: the bourgeois man is "a man unable to imagine the Other," he argues, "If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself" (152). In her diary, S reveals that she is "[p]ursued by the compulsion to jeopardise such a bourgeois stronghold" (Quin, *Three* 61) that Leonard and Ruth represent: the "[c]lock-magnetic" (20) life filled with "[d]ays of headaches, library, dinner and lunch engagements" (65) as recorded in Leonard's journal (over which S promptly spills coffee), and mundane preoccupations the likes of which S lists in her audio diary after the fashion of the latter's appropriately ledger-like entries (24-26). In her own words, S desires "[t]o see their cotton wool faces, zipper mouths expand, shrivel, contract. To throw their salt-cellar out of the window, drill through their soundproofed walls" (63).

  In this, S shares some affinity with the strangers who hover menacingly around the perimeter of Leonard and Ruth's home and their narrative, "the bloody trespassers" (5) whom Ruth believes would "quite happily see [them] dead" (9); who, on Midsummer's Eve, dress up as the Greek statues surrounding the pool in order to launch a surprise attack on Leonard (136-37). In her diary, S explicitly expresses a sympathy with what they do: she writes that during a prior attack wherein the strangers invaded the garden with torches and fireworks, "laughter bubbled up inside

me, especially when I noticed, in the flashes of lightning, L's face behind the summerhouse glass, and heard R's frightened cries" (136). The attack on Midsummer's Eve by the trespassers also notably interrupts the mime that Leonard, Ruth, and S are putting on, mirroring the way S seeks to break the patterns of the couple's "well-known game[s]" (71). Moreover, that the targets of the trespassers' attack are the classical Greek statues, the swimming pool that is the quintessential (Ballardian) symbol of "bourgeois malaise" (Hodgson 141), and Leonard's imported orchids also contribute in bringing the rioters' actions into uncomfortable proximity with S's confessed intentions against the couple's bourgeois lifestyle; she suggestively points out that as a result of their assault, "for the first time the gardens look alive" (Quin, *Three* 136). One final gesture to this kinship between the two parties is made near the close of the novel: in a diary entry, S writes of seeing some of the trespassers and them beckoning her over (139).

But whereas the strangers act from a place of contempt directed towards the privileges afforded Leonard and Ruth by their social class (or so the couple assumes), S's resistance towards the couple is directed towards their class only insofar as 'class' represents for her "that complex and determinate place we are given in the social body; . . . the name for everything which signifies that a certain history lives us, lends us our individuality," as T. J. Clark defines it (*Painting of Modern Life* 146).[20] What S is against is the idea of "[e]xistence bound by *habit*" (Quin, *Three* 21, own emphasis), as she determines Leonard and Ruth's to be; and as Leonard confirms when he describes himself as "Practical. Desiring to do what is expected. Accepted. Adjusted to the role. A member of society. Composed. Controlled" (120). Of a dinner party hosted by Leonard and Ruth, S observes, "Everyone immediately concerned with being, doing what is expected of them" (57), before recounting an entirely unexceptional night where "cues" are offered and taken up with "calculated eloquence," "repertoire[s]" performed, and Ruth "fussed as a child with new dolls,

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[20] Clark makes the above comment in relation to Manet's *Olympia*, which, he argues, was poorly received by its audience at its first public showing in 1865 because it offered up a proliferation of signs that "fail to obey the usual set of equations" (137) for a class and for a monolithic identity. In a footnote, Clark also cites Bataille's reading of *Olympia* as signifying the "effacement" of knowledge: "in her provoking exactitude, she is *nothing*; her nudity . . . is the silence which issues from her as from a drowned and empty ship: what she is, is the 'sacred horror' of her own presence—of a presence as simple as absence" (qtd in Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* 137-39). The resonances here with Quin's S are clear, and what Bataille adds in his study of the artist, *Manet*, from which Clark quotes, might well apply to S too: "Looking at *Olympia*, we feel very keenly that something has been suppressed; we feel a charm refined to its purest—a pure state of being, sovereignly, silently cut off from the old lies set up in the name of eloquence" (67).

making sure each of us sat in appropriate places" (57). Moreover, these habits are not their own but that which "they parcel up/ hand to each other" (102). Even S, who previously experienced "[t]he worst effort not to contradict their next movement" (21), falls into their habits "easily" and "[p]erversely" (56): "I wanted to get high, but not higher than anyone else" (57). It is convention, fixed systems of thought—of which the couple's middle-class lifestyle, less 'stronghold' than "mausoleum" (56), is a manifestation—that S rejects.

In *Proust*, Samuel Beckett[21]—who shares with Quin a distrust of habitual thought—memorably describes habit as "the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit" (8), a description memorable if only because it defies our expectations. Like S who writes that the "[n]arrow dimensions of [Leonard and Ruth's existence] catch me up into an appalling lethargy" (Quin, *Three* 72), Beckett argues that habit is "a minister of dullness" and "an agent of security" (*Proust* 10), and that in its "pernicious devotion" (9) to performing these roles, it "paralyses our attention, drugs those handmaidens of perception whose co-operation is not absolutely essential" such that we become "incapable of dealing with the mystery of a strange sky or a strange room, with any circumstance unforeseen in her curriculum" (9). Leonard similarly puts it thus: "the pattern [can be] set which [people] refuse to alter. Soon one believes that is oneself and the change settles into corners. Roused only in moments say by stimuli or objects. Smell. Sound. That remind" (Quin, *Three* 122). In his case, the paralysis of habitual thought is sought after, for his routines help him, in one instance, to forget the pain of being separated from the ideals he cherished as a youth: " . . . one goes on automatically complying being doing. For that is the easiest way. Besides one soon forgets. Habits take over, the pain becomes an object looked at from a distance," he observes in his audio diary (122). In another, the mime he plays out on his own (which is Beckettian in nature, especially when Leonard points out that hanging oneself can lead to an erection, a detail that is drawn from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) suggests that his and Ruth's predictable and safe bourgeois lifestyle protects him from the pain of loneliness: as the "only inhabitants left after an atomic war," who might as well be "prisoners all in one cell," Leonard 'hangs himself' when Ruth exits the scene (105).

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[21] Unsurprisingly, Quin was acquainted with Beckett's writing: "I would say if I have been influenced by anyone it would be a mixture of Sartre, Beckett and Ingmar Bergman" (Letter to Alan Burns, qtd in Williams-Korteling 64).

It is towards this end of 'breaking habit' that S intrudes upon Leonard and Ruth, and that Quin conducts her writing experiments, her breaking of form in *Three*. Like her contemporary, B. S. Johnson, she arguably saw "writing the experimental novel [as] an act of sabotage against a cultural and ideological elite" (Hassam 4). In her most experimental novel, *Tripticks*, Quin explicitly registers her rejection of habit and convention and hand-me-down systems of understanding: "I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems. A power I did not want to possess. The Inquisition" (192). By alluding to the atrocities committed at the hands of the Inquisition, Quin gestures towards the high ethical stakes involved in conforming without thought. A similar shadow looms in the background of *Three*, where S's 'quest' to 'break habit' is lent a moral urgency by the fleeting allusions to World War II—such as the references made to Leonard's youthful fanaticism and flirtation with political causes (120)—which was still very much a part of the novel's historical context. As Hodgson points out, the novel was "published only three years after Hannah Arendt's authoritative report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*" (142).[22] The newspaper snippet that S cites at length in her diary (Quin, *Three* 58-60), in particular, clearly evokes Eichmann's trial. In addition to the use of the historical terms, 'Special Treatment' and 'Return Undesirable,'[23] in the exchange, the accused shares similar characteristic traits with the Nazi. Like Eichmann, he is fiercely loyal to the regime he serves, as is evident in his unthinking repetition of stock phrases, also after the manner of Eichmann (59). Another minor but distinct gesture to Eichmann is the unmistakable tonal parallel with the Nazi's testimony, which was given in "the tone of someone who was sure of finding 'normal, human' sympathy for a hard-luck story," as Arendt describes it (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 50); by way of explanation for his participation, the accused in S's extract declares, "I was ill, wretchedly so at the time, I was helpless, if I'd reported it I would have written my own sentence," (Quin, *Three* 60). One would be forgiven for presuming that Quin lifted this exchange from the transcript of Eichmann's trial.

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[22] Otto Adolf Eichmann was a German Nazi who escaped to Argentina after the war; he was subsequently kidnapped by the Israeli government and brought to Israel to stand trial. It is this trial that Arendt writes her report on.

[23] There is a bit of dark humor in the connection one can draw between the black crosses put against the names of prisoners that are mentioned in the newspaper excerpt, which mean 'Return Undesirable' (Quin, *Three* 59), and the black marks that Leonard puts in his diary, which are implied to mark the days he masturbated (42, 45).

In her report, Arendt coined the term, the 'banality of evil.' She suggests that Eichmann's inclination towards clichés and stock phrases in his testimony—"Officialese . . . is my only language," he admits (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 48)—is indicative of an allegiance to habitual thought, which was what finally enabled him to perpetuate the atrocities of the Nazi regime:

> The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think* . . .. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presences of others, and hence against reality as such. (49)

The distancing, dulling, and paralyzing effects of habitual thought are to the extent that, Arendt argues, Eichmann "*never realized what he was doing*" (287); that, even though he knew for a fact that he was sending the Jews to their death, there was some sense in which one could argue Eichmann had not *known* what he was doing.[24] Here, Arendt addresses a question that played a crucial role in the final judgment in Eichmann's trial: the question of whether the accused had known what he was doing, and hence, could be convicted of intent to harm and kill. (This same question is notably also central to the interrogator's line of questioning in S's newspaper extract.) "It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period," Arendt declares; the "lesson one could learn in Jerusalem" is that such thoughtlessness and its consequent remoteness from reality can "wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps are inherent in man" (287-88).

Hence, the *banality* of evil, for the problem as Arendt sees it is a "lack of imagination" (287).[25] Arendt does not mean banality in the sense of the 'commonplace': she makes a distinction between the two terms in the postscript to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (in answer to furious accusations by readers of her report), as well as in a letter to Samuel Grafton, wherein she writes, "commonplace is what frequently, commonly happens, but something can be banal even if it is not common"

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[24] This manner of speech is replicated in *Tripticks,* where 'commercial-lese' renders the narrative unnatural, jarring, and often incoherent, to the extent of preventing any emotional engagement on the reader's part.

[25] This lack is also reflected in "the extreme reluctance of all concerned to break fresh ground and act without precedents" (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 262) during the trial, including the Jerusalem court, which "never rose to the challenge of the unprecedented, . . . Instead it buried the proceedings under a flood of precedents (263).

("Letter to Samuel Grafton" 6). As Arendt uses the word, banality is defined in contrast with Kant's 'radical evil' and "with the widely-held opinion that there is something demonic, grandiose in great evil" (6). In referring to the banality of evil, she means that "evil is not radical" and that "it has no depth, and that for this very reason it is so terribly difficult to think about it, since thinking, by definition, wants to reach the roots" (7). Whereas the commonplace is firmly *of* life, the characteristic trait of the banal is its defiance of word and thought, those hallmarks of life, through which it seeks to distance itself from lived experience. Just as Beckett argued against the deadening effects of habit—Eichmann's reference to (his) "blind obedience" as the "obedience of corpses" is highly suggestive (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 135)— Arendt points out that the banal has the "function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence" ("Thinking and Moral Considerations" 418).

Eichmann's thoughtlessness translates into a kind of blindness when it comes to understanding experience, that coincides paradoxically with being too committed to sight and to the conventions of knowledge (as they were manifested in laws, in Eichmann's case). *Estar en tinieblas*, to recall Barthes's term. Eichmann was not stupid, as Arendt repeatedly emphasises in her writing. Drawing from Kant, she distinguishes between the modes of knowing and thinking (the latter which she models after the aporetic Socratic dialogue), in a way that parallels Levinas's distinction between the Saying and the Said. Knowing has an end-product in the form of knowledge, which always manifests a presence in the sensible world, be it in the form of codes of conduct or scientific laws, or in the form of practical inventions (*The Life of the Mind* 53ff). Thinking, on the other hand, always deals with the intangible, with "objects that are absent, removed from direct sense perception" ("Thinking and Moral Considerations" 423); an object of thought is also always absent in the sense that thinking is a process in which there is no foreseeable and verifiable end. Arguing that knowing pursues knowledge while thinking searches for meaning, Arendt re-envisions Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's differentiation of knowledge or 'truths of fact,' from meaning, which he refers to as 'truths of reasoning' (*The Life of the Mind* 59). Knowledge is "irrefutable" and is that which "human beings are not free to reject" (59). Meaning, on the other hand, is figured in opposition to knowledge: it is possibility and freedom. "The consequence is that thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of

good and evil," Arendt argues, "in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals" (174-75).

Hence, it is the nature of thinking to always be an interruption of the ordinary course of events. Insofar as thinking is "every reflection that does not serve knowledge and is not guided by practical needs and aims," it is "*contrary to the human condition*," which deals primarily with and which prioritises the sensible and the readily apparent (*The Life of the Mind* 78). "It interrupts any doing, any ordinary activities, no matter what they happen to be," Arendt argues, "All thinking demands a *stop*-and-think" (78). Thinking is also an interruption working specifically in the manner in which we have hitherto understood it so to do: "like the veil of Penelope[,] it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before" ("Thinking and Moral Considerations" 425). Just as Saying interrupts the Said, thinking "*unfreeze*[s]" the "*frozen thought*" (431). Accordingly, we "cannot expect any moral propositions or commandments, no final code of conduct from the thinking activity" (425).

Arendt's concept of thinking, defined as it is in broad opposition to epistemology (its situation in the sensible world of appearance as well as its mechanisms and motivations), shares important resonances with the ethics of blindness. Significantly, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt figures thinking as an *a priori* condition and a means of getting to the depths of experience. "If thinking establishes its own conditions, blinding itself against the sensorily given by removing all that is close at hand," she argues, "it is in order to make room for the distant to become manifest" (84). Arendt's use of 'distant' here is instructive: she highlights a confusion between that which escapes our sight and that which is non-existent. We might also see a parallel with the image of the blind spot in Arendt's later statement that "distance is the most basic condition for the functioning of vision" (111). What Arendt's concept of thinking contributes to the discourse at hand is a demonstration of the very concrete impact that an ethics of blindness can have in our lives; it is not just a matter for the philosophers among us but for anyone who is concerned with the question of what it means for us to be, and to be fully, alive.

For Arendt, the distinction between knowing and thinking is a matter of ethical urgency because it has an effect on our faculty of judging, which, she argues, is a by-product of thinking. As she puts it, "The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly" ("Thinking and Moral Consideration" 446); judgment—that 'this is wrong,' that 'this

is beautiful,' etc.—is the realization of the ability to think. Given this, and the distinction between knowing and thinking, it follows that "we must be able to 'demand' [the] exercise [of judgment] in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be" (422). Such ethical implications are always simultaneously at the foreground and background of Quin's works: they never emerge fully as thematic content and yet are inscribed everywhere. (In *Berg*, there is the matter of patricide that never plays out while in *Passages*, a war forms the backdrop for the narrative action.) In *Three*, S is by no means a moral agent but she is an ethical agent as she provokes precisely the sort of vulnerability, the sort of 'helplessness' and 'absence of mind' (if only because the mind has long calcified into an organ of knowing) that Arendt argues is necessary to counter the ethical consequences of the habitual thought. It is within this context that the violence of S-as-other must be understood. Her violence is not in the same register as the 'meaningless' violence that the trespassers enact against the couple, and that the couple enacts against each other. As Levinas insists, the other disrupts our tranquility only to put an end to the violence we are always already perpetuating. Her violence is the violence of breaking lazy habitual thought, of breaking false consolatory form.

Breaking Form

To read the mystery of S (her death and her person) is the ethical exercise that Quin sets for us in *Three.* S is, by nature, an enigma, escaping Leonard and Ruth's grasp in death as in life, leaving behind only a series of undecipherable diary entries. She comes to the couple seemingly out of nowhere—she had previously worked for Leonard although the couple do not elaborate on this and Leonard's diary entries simply record that on March 26th, they had "S for supper" and that on March 31st, "S moved in" (2)—and departs just as mysteriously. It reads as a matter of course then that Leonard and Ruth's quest to unravel the mystery of S and her disappearance/apparent suicide by reading her diaries ends in disappointment: S's diaries are, after all, inextricable from her mystery, and the means by which the disruptiveness of her presence to Leonard and Ruth's lives is registered and enacted in the novel.

On the one hand, as Bernard Duyfhuizen points out, the diary technique is, or was at least once, "seen as a stabilizing force": the form, he argues, "symbolizes a

myth of genuineness, an allegory of writing and reading the world" (178). This is an allegory that Andrew Hassam argues is invested with the dominant cultural values of the establishment (8) such as sincerity, authenticity, and personality among others. The same claim of conservatism can also be made of diary novels, which Lorna Martens traces back to the eighteenth century, in accordance with the prevailing conditions of a cultural climate that still prioritised mimesis in aesthetic representations (59ff). Novels, Martens suggests, "established their identity as novels [at a time when the form was putting forth an 'art claim'] by presenting themselves in the guise of genuine documents" (63). On the other hand, Hassam also points out that because it is a distinctly private kind of writing (at least conventionally), there is always inherent in the diary form a paradoxical potential for subversion; at its best, it is a benchmark for individuality and for the autonomy of the self as it is pitted against the masses. Similarly, Martens points out that one of the characteristics of the diary form is its ability to convey "the modern dissatisfaction with the traditional means of expression" (186). Because the diary "communicates an implicitly . . . single opinion," the form, she argues, "makes possible the expression of an individual experience that is unable to identify meaningfully with social reality" (187).

  Three dramatises this tension inherent in the diary novel form and foregrounds its potential to signify dissidence. While the 'main narrative' that revolves around Leonard and Ruth takes on the semblance of a bourgeois novel, the diary in question significantly belongs to a presumed adulterer. In *Adultery in the Novel*, Tony Tanner opposes "the unstable triangularity of adultery" to "the static symmetry of marriage" (12) and points out that "[f]rom the point of view of that [bourgeois] society, adultery introduces a bad multiplicity within the requisite unities of social roles" (13). "If society depends for its existence on certain rules governing what may be combined and what should be kept separate," he argues, "then adultery, by bringing the wrong things together in the wrong places (or the wrong people in the wrong beds), offers an attack on those rules, revealing them to be arbitrary rather than absolute" (13). On a narrative level, S-as-adulterer threatens the stronghold of Leonard and Ruth's bourgeois marriage; on a structural level, she undermines the integrity of the bourgeois novel, which is "coeval and coterminous with the power concentrated in the central structure of marriage" (15). As Tanner sees it, adultery introduces a "gap" (14) or "silence" in the bourgeois novel that "finally leads to its dissolution and displacement"; as such, he declares the bourgeois novel of adultery an impossibility

(14).

In *Three*, Quin attempts the impossible by writing a bourgeois novel of adultery that, naturally, neither strictly confines itself to the form of a bourgeois novel nor presents a straightforward representation of adultery. The gap or silence that S makes evident in Leonard and Ruth's world (and the bourgeois novel) is nothing less and nothing more than the gap and silence of her very self. S is less character than principle of mystery (or symbol, in the specific way that Blanchot describes it) and the autonomy she asserts through her private language in which her diary is rendered must be understood as the autonomy of mystery itself. S's diary entries (audio and written) are physically set apart from the 'main' narrative that revolves around Leonard and Ruth: unlike Leonard and Ruth's diary entries, they are not embedded in the latter but begin as 'new chapters,' and the formless-ness of S's audio diary entries provide a stark contrast to the comparatively conventional prose of the rest of the novel (including the couple's diaries).[26] The latter is key to an understanding of S as a principle of mystery. Not only does it suggest the gulf that exists between S-as-stranger and the married couple, it also gestures to the fact that S speaks a different language altogether from the language of known reality, a 'subterranean language,' as the narrator of Quin's unfinished manuscript, *The Unmapped Country*, puts it: "If speech at all then it was the spaces between words, and the echoes the words left, or what might be really meant under the surface" (167). It is not merely a different perspective that is presented here but a different reality.

Although *Three* as a whole does not make for easy reading, the reader arguably only begins to really lose his or her bearing when he or she encounters the text of S's audio diary. We might have previously found it difficult to navigate the narrative because of the omission of punctuation but that in itself puts up no substantial obstacle to our understanding. The reader gets used to the stylistic 'quirk.' *The change settles into corners.* At the first words of S's audio diary, we are plunged into a space that is so evidently governed by its own rules—rules that we are not made privy to—into our blind spot, as it were. Unlike Leonard and Ruth's diaries, or the 'main narrative,' S's audio diary breaks free from the constraints of the diary form as well as the constraints of reality to which the former is conventionally bound to.

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[26] On this note, S's written diary entries, which are particularly fragmented and sketch-like (one need only compare them to Leonard or Ruth's entries), share many of the implications of the audio diary entries. That said, it is the more obviously experimental form of the audio diary entries that more effectively conveys the sense of S's otherworldliness and hence, that is the focus of this reading.

All these it rejects as inadequate to its own mode. Instead, playing jump rope with chronology and shedding all obligations represent realistic order, S's diary offers access to "[a] place that becomes/another place. Defeats time. Contradicts/ movements/ gives dimensions" (101). Here, stones transform into sheep (24), "hours become hands," a "Woman naked" is "crushed/ by grapes" (17). Without suggesting that Quin was directly informed by Levinasian philosophy, we might draw an instructive parallel between her 'subterranean language' and Levinas's primordial ethical language, with which it bears more than a passing resemblance. Like Levinas's primordial ethical language, Quin's subterranean language "occurs as a collision between world and that which exceeds world" (Robbins 58); both Quin and Levinas are dealing with a way of relating to the world that demands a transformation in perspective.

Although Quin (and Levinas) refers specifically to speech, there is an advantage in visually depicting the subterranean language: writing in this instance is more than merely 'voice-painting,' as Voltaire puts it, or the "mimicking [of a] spontaneous and improvised speech" (Williams-Korteling 81). In seeing the subterranean language breaking through the form, in seeing the spaces drawn out between words, in seeing the breaths and the pauses in the line breaks and the enjambment, we are constantly reminded that it is our vision that is under attack, a vision which is in turn "emblematic of the habitual economy," to cite Robbins (6). We particularly see the interruption of this economy by the interruptive force of the subterranean language in the paratactic juxtaposition of images. (S herself can be said to be placed paratactically into the lives of Leonard and Ruth, with the barest of context.) Parataxis has to do with the eye. Breaking the ties between words and sentences, it allows the space that lies between to emerge perceptibly; in other words, it gives form to the blind spot in the eye.

Space is the crux of the technique. As suggested in Erich Auerbach's loose definition of the technique as it is used in the Bible, parataxis involves "the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative" with "all else left in obscurity," and as a result, "the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal . . ., remains mysterious" (11-12). No wonder then that it is the technique that the Bible favours: parataxis makes of its narrative one "fraught with background" as the obscure looms (in the form of God and time), in order to suggest a depth of experience that cannot be

adequately reduced to epistemological categories (12). "It is precisely the absence of causal connectives, the naked statement of what happens—the statement which replaces deduction and comprehension by an amazed beholding that does not even seek to comprehend—which gives the sentence [and hence, the narrative] its grandeur," suggests Auerbach (110).

S's audio diary entries share a similar paratactic style that invokes the obscure at every turn. Unlike the Bible however, the obscure is entirely foregrounded in S's entries since we often cannot even speak in any meaningful way of the "decisive points of the narrative [that] alone are emphasized" (Auerbach 11). Or rather, to put it more accurately, the obscure so extensively permeates the narrative that we can no longer speak of a background or foreground, since the white spaces in between the words and images are as independently significant as the words and images that they separate and define as such, much less speak of any orientation toward a 'goal.' This is not an obscurity that can be banished by knowledge, as is evident in the way S's diaries resist being excavated through analysis. When Leonard and Ruth venture something of a psychoanalytic conclusion to the mystery of S, it comes across as woefully insufficient: Ruth points out that "Of course [S] being an only child makes a difference I'm sure" (Quin, *Three* 40) while Leonard glibly reduces her ("a need in her for security yet at the same time she rebelled background convent family everything contributed," 117). To quote Doris Lessing's diary novel (which Hassam examines in his study), *The Golden Notebook*, the satisfaction of the psychoanalyst is "The pleasure of recognition, of a bit of rescue-work, so to speak, rescuing the formless into form. Another bit of chaos rescued and 'named,'" (qtd in Hassam 143). No such satisfaction is afforded Leonard and Ruth; the landscape that S offers them in her audio diaries is one that they do not have the apparatus to interpret.

Nothing of depth is lost in Quin's text however. Rather, what we get is *depth into the present*. A diary, after all, always stresses the present-ness of the moment of writing, and the present that we are given to perceive is an absolute present that is defined by obscurity. In conventional diary novels, it is the future that is "always somewhat uncertain," as Duyfhuizhen notes (172). In contrast, what we see in S's entries is that which is hidden behind the banality of the present, of the everyday, of common thought and language and knowledge: the subterranean. "The novelist has a completely different destiny than making himself understood," writes Blanchot, "rather he must cause us to grasp what cannot be understood in inauthentic daily

language" (*Faux Pas* 169). Beyond merely illuminating the presence of absence, parataxis, particularly as it is wielded by Quin, places us *in* absence, in the blind spot, *in* the space between. In *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, Sarraute offers a description of what Quin might well have been aiming at in the novel, particularly with S's audio diary[27]:

> an immense profusion of sensations, images, sentiments, memories, impulses, little larval actions that no inner language can convey, that jostle one another on the threshold of consciousness, gather together in compact groups, loom up all of a sudden, then immediately fall apart, combine otherwise and reappear in new forms, while unwinding inside us, like that ribbon that comes clattering from a telescriptor slot, is an uninterrupted flow of words. (105)

It is into this "stream of subterranean dramas" that Quin "plung[es] the reader," whereas, previously, writers like Proust, "only had time to obtain a rapid aerial view, and . . . observed and reproduced nothing but the broad motionless lines" (Sarraute 117).

There is a vulnerability that comes with being so unmoored, a sense embodied in Ruth, who, more than Leonard, is distinctly unnerved by their inability to decipher S: after listening to one of the latter's tapes, she asks, almost pleads, "what did she want of us Leon what was she after I really don't understand" (Quin, *Three* 116); and later, writes in her diary, "What did she want of us, need from him, myself? We shall probably never know" (125). It is this vulnerability stemming from disconcertedness that is the conditioning principle for an ethical engagement with reality for it is in this state that habitual, conformist, insincere thought enters a moment of hazard and discovers in itself a space for error and hesitation; which is to say, it begins to unfreeze into thinking. As Sarraute notes, the comforts of "harmony and visible

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[27] It is unknown if Quin drew the idea of the subterranean language from Sarraute, though this conjecture is not implausible. Joseph Andrew Darlington, citing Rayner Heppenstall's *The Master Eccentric*, notes in his thesis that Quin was, at the very least, aware of Sarraute's work, having heard the latter speak at least on one occasion about the *nouveau roman* (51). Similarly, Martin Seymour-Smith asserts that Quin has "undoubtedly been influenced by French novelists such as Sarraute and by the *nouvelle vague* movement in the cinema"; he also adds, "*Berg* is something of a breakthrough in the sense that, for the first time, these techniques have been used to produce a novel that is both wholly English in atmosphere and quite unpretentious" (545). Much has been made of the relationship between Quin and the *nouveau roman* movement in general, perhaps partly as a result of *Berg* having been published by John Calder, who also published and promoted work from authors associated with the movement, such as Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet. See, for instance, Jordan's commentary on Quin in *The Times Literary Supplement*, in which she also quotes Ronald Hayman's accusation that Quin borrows from Nathalie Sarraute and Robert Nye's suggestion that Quin "imagined she was imitating" the "fashionable French new-wavers"; or, Gordon's introduction to *Berg*, in which he notes Quin's use of the "technical advances of the *nouveau roman*" (ix).

beauty" are "constant, dangerous temptation[s] for writers" (129)—and it must be said, for readers as well, who are happy to make themselves "quite at home, among objects that are quite familiar" (124-25).

But this vulnerability is not passive in itself. Sarraute's criticism of such comforts is directed in large part at the laziness they encourage in writer and reader alike;[28] it is merely *effort* that prevents Ruth from leaving Leonard: " . . . I could go, but the effort. Effort. And we remain" (Quin, *Three* 125). Like Arendt, Sarraute points out the ethical implication of resting among familiar things: in our compulsion towards all things consolatory, for all things that confirm our place in the world and confirm it as not being solitary, we "lose all sense of judgment" (126). Sarraute's choice of diction in the long quote above is telling, as is her use of the phrases 'subterranean drama' and 'subterranean action' elsewhere in the essay. For Sarraute makes the case for *work*, that is, for the engagement with the subterranean being work. The writer, in order that he or she might offer up a representation of reality, *breaks form*, "works unceasingly to rid what he sees of the matrix of preconceived ideas and ready-made images that encase it, as also of the surface reality that everyone can easily see and which, for want of anything better, everyone uses" (128).

And the reader responds in kind:

> being deprived of all his accustomed stakes and landmarks, removed from all authority, suddenly faced with an unknown substance, bewildered and distrustful, instead of blindly letting himself go, as he so loves to do, [the reader] was constantly obliged to confront what was shown him with what he could see for himself. (105)

Importantly, and by no means as a secondary effect, "[a]t the same time that they had awakened his powers of penetration, the [writers] had awakened his critical faculties and whetted his curiosity" (105). The subterranean, which reaches into the profound depths of experience, is such that it can only be approached by way of a thinking state of mind in which one is alive, and alive to possibilities and hence to the profound depths of experience.

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[28] See "What Birds See" in *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*.

A Thinking Form

The breaking of form in Quin's text allows the inherent obscurity of experience to come through with a startling clarity; it is also the means by which an engagement with the obscure that does not constitute its domestication is initiated, an engagement we have termed 'thinking.' Thinking, Levinas suggests, "probably begins through traumatisms or gropings to which one does not even know how to give a verbal form: a separation, a violent scene, a sudden consciousness of the monotony of time" (*Ethics and Infinity* 21). We might conceive of the abrupt change in 'key' from the 'main narrative' to the text of S's audio diary as a traumatism by which we are divested of our usual means of proceeding and expectations. The diary genre as a whole speaks to a certain sense of traumatism: engaged in the act of making present what is absent, its entire endeavour is a striving against the "material and metaphysical empty centre" at its heart (Martens 196). What it stages is a confrontation between the self and nothingness, and what results is the state of vulnerability that is conducive to the initiation of thinking. In Quin's novel, this is dramatised in the destabilizing effect that not only S's disappearance but also and especially the act of listening to her disembodied voice emitting from the audiotapes have on Leonard and Ruth.

In *Three*, the diary genre's affinity with thinking is foregrounded by its enclosure within *l'espace littéraire*—specifically, the space of the novel. The novel form notably occupies a similar liminal space that lends itself to a thinking state of mind. As Bakhtin argues, the novel is positioned on the threshold of what is familiar and what is unknown, and hence, it is in its nature to always be questioning its own form and processes. In "Postmodern Fiction and the Rise of Critical Theory," Patricia Waugh notes that the tradition of the British novel, in particular, is one that "has always been skeptical about rationalistic grand narratives" (69). This inclination intensified in the sixties and seventies (during which Quin was writing) with the turn towards metafictional self-consciousness, which makes explicit the dialogism of the novel. The diary *novel* hence lends itself not just to the representation of thought but also to the interruption of this representation; which is to say, it has the potential to tap into the very process of thinking.

Quin's literal drawing out of space between words (through enjambment, line breaks, and parataxis) in the text of S's audio diary entries enacts the diary novel's

openness to interruption and revision, marking the text as a skeptical, *thinking* text that puts into play an ethics of blindness. In an interview cited in Walter Murch's *In the Blink of an Eye,* film director John Huston declares, "[Film is] the closest to thought process of any art," and relates this to the way the physiological mechanism of blinking can be likened to film cuts (60). Murch elaborates, drawing a connection between the acts of blinking and thinking: "the blink is either *something that helps an internal separation of thought to take place,* or it is *an involuntary reflex accompanying the mental separation that is taking place anyway*" (62). "*And that blink will occur where a cut could have happened, had the conversation been filmed,*" he adds (62); with each successive film cut then, we are tracing an active thought process. The breaks in the text of S's diary—the breaks in her sentences and phrases as much as the breaks in her 'narrative logic'—similarly enact the blinking-thinking process, especially because the aural entries are written down for the eye, pauses and all. Moreover, the juxtaposition of space and discursive lines create a rhythmic pulse that attests to the aliveness of the text. We might contrast the audio diary entries to the 'main narrative,' wherein the effect of Quin's minimal use of punctuation, as Hodgson points out, is that it robs the characters' speech of rhythm (153), and therefore of life, giving the narrative the fitting tonal quality of a droning on. "Quin's unpunctuated sentences are certainly not Joyce's," writes Hodgson, "They connote not the breathless, word-tripping discharge of vibrancy and human vitality of Molly Bloom, but the mere monotone accretion of banality upon banality" (153). S's diary, on the other hand, pulses with life, with the restlessness of thinking. Ironically, as a result of Quin's specific rendering of her narrative space, the missing, presumed dead S comes across as being more present and more alive than Leonard and Ruth.

Not only does the reader see a mental process at work before him or her, Quin also, more importantly, draws the reader into the thinking process in way that escapes more conventional prose. In *Real Presences*, George Steiner makes a distinction between the role of a literary critic, that "academic vivisector and judge," and that of an executor, "one who 'acts out' the material before him so as to give it intelligible life" (7). The executor is more evidently identified with performing arts but Steiner suggests that a way in which "understanding can be made action and immediacy" in non-dramatic literature—that is to say, a way in which it can be 'executed'—is by learning the text by heart:

> To learn by heart is to afford the text or music an indwelling clarity and life-force. Ben Jonson's term, 'ingestion,' is precisely right. What we know by heart becomes an agency in our consciousness, a 'pace-maker' in the growth and vital complication of our identity. (9)

What Steiner refers to as 'learning by heart' needs to be differentiated from what we understand as rote learning, which is associated with thoughtless habit. The former involves processes of recognition and discovering, wherein, as Steiner takes pains to point out, "to re-cognise is to know anew" (9-10). It is hence a procedure that is alive. Quin offers us an arguably more profound way of 'ingesting' the text: the stylistic rendering of S's audio diary entries allows us to *execute* her thinking process, rather than follow behind her train of thought.[29]

Murch argues that not only is the fact of the blink significant, "so is the actual *instant* of the blink" as it signals an opening for understanding (62). This is the logic behind the montage technique, whose procedures of creating meaning through collision the paratactical text of S's diary repeats. Here again, the lacuna is the thing: those disturbing 'jump cuts,' those moments of interruption within a text that is an interruption in itself, that stark space of thinking that prevents "Mountains" from simply "appear[ing]" without hesitation in which everything of significance occurs (Quin, *Three* 24); those "white abysses of silent nothingness," as Steiner puts it, "fissure[s]," that

> disseminate any naively cosmological sense of a meaningful continuum, of a legible 'text of the world' in which grammar, logic and the implicit theorems of causality inherent in grammar and in logic provide safe bridges between word and object, between past and present, between speaker or writer and receiver. (*Real Presences* 122)

S's highly elliptical entries are not an exercise in filling in the blanks but of moving in them. We slip from thought to thought with S, from "Spaces between clouds" to "tide-marks. Never rubbed out" to "lying in/ bubble-baths/ under snow"; we take leaps from "Blowing faces" to "Hollows are eyes" (Quin, *Three* 17). If not for the spaces between the words, we would merely be gathering S's crumbs of thought. The space—open as it is to the unintended, the uncertain, the accidental, the subterranean

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[29] In texts like Joyce's "Penelope" (in *Ulysses*), where Molly Bloom's interior monologue is presented in more or less complete sentences, what we encounter are Molly's *thoughts*, more or less fully formed, even if they are open to revisions.

connections—is that which defines the thinking process as being in progress; and it is to this space that Quin returns us repeatedly.

Our understanding of the text is bound up in our act of reading the text, and both come together in a vital collaboration, "an act of penetrative response which makes sense sensible" (Steiner, *Real Presences* 8) *that yields no truths*. In his particular brand of reader response theory, Wolfgang Iser proposes that reading is "a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written" ("The Reading Process" 283). He argues that a part of the literary text must be 'unwritten' such that the reader's imagination is engaged in "the task of working things out for himself" (280), and that it is a "convergence of text and reader [that] brings the literary work into existence" (279). Although Iser points out that "this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" (279), the written work acts as a limit to the extent to which the reader's creative participation is stimulated. Iser's reader is therefore engaged in an act of 'shading in outlines' (281) or 'filling in gaps' (285), where 'gaps,' as Brook Thomas points out, is translated from the original German, *leerstelle*, which is "a form of emptiness that determines to an extent how it can be filled" (56). This is not to say that there are hidden meanings in the text that the reader is meant to seek out, as Iser clarifies in *The Act of Reading* (1978), merely that the literary text offers a structure for our meaning-making procedures. Iser's (Gestalt) analogy of two people stargazing is illustrative: "two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper" ("The Reading Process" 287).

In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge suggests that while a responsive reading of a literary text consists in part in identifying the *modus operandi* of the text (i.e., its norms and its codes, the outlines to be shaded in), it also requires an openness to the singularity of the text that manifests in the "showing [of the fact] that even the fullest explanation does not exhaust the [work]" (82). To put it in the terms of the philosophical discussion that opened this chapter, the structure that the literary text offers is supplemented by an inherent 'ruin' that necessitates a failure of reading, which in turn defines a text as singular and affirms this singularity: an originary blindness that sees the otherness of the text. In *Three*, the reader cannot help but fail to read the text. Its 'unwrittenness' far exceeds the degree that Iser has in

mind and the text is much less 'stable' so as to resist concretization almost entirely, to borrow a term from Roman Ingarden, whose *The Literary Work of Art* was a major influence on Iser. We cannot say of Quin's text that the 'stars are fixed,' at least not in anything more than a superficial, literal way. Our failure to read throws us back onto the fundamental sense of the text being, not an end product, but the very collaborative *process* between the reader and itself, a process that is presently being broken down. There is no 'intended meaning' or 'realised meaning,' only the highly unstable meaning forged in the present/presence of S's recording and in the present/presence of our reading. Quin is not after inspiring "a shuddering awe" (Auerbach 110) with her rejection of causality and continuity, nor is she seeking to provoke deduction and comprehension, even in as 'virtual' a form as Iser suggests—as Ruth laments, all those words and still, "not a word not a clue" (Quin, *Three* 116). She seeks simply to plunge the reader into the stream of the subterranean, of otherness.

What the text of S's audio diary entries stages is the struggle between the self and the profundity of experience; what we get in these entries is depth into *an obscure present*. The "temporal difference [that] exists between the present and the present-becoming-past" (Martens 188) that characterises diary narratives is continually overcome in S's entries; even the events of S's past are 'recuperated' into the present as S shifts seamlessly between timelines as past and present are juxtaposed paratactically. It is here where Arendt locates the thinking ego: in the "in-between of past and future, the present, this mysterious and slippery now, a mere gap in time" (*The Life of the Mind* 208). She figures the activity of thinking, the "thought-train" (208), as a "diagonal force, whose origin is known [i.e., rooted in the present], whose direction is determined by past and future, but which exerts its force toward an undetermined end as though it could reach out into infinity" (209). The present is our "place in time" to think, where we consider the conditions of our existence, without "arriving at a final solution to their riddles but ready with ever-new answers to the question of what it may all be about" (209-210).

We might draw a parallel here with what Levinas speaks of as the *incessant*, which he argues, is essential to an ethical language (indeed, for ethics itself as a whole) for it allows the perpetual interruption of "the meaning and the form given to any expression" (Naas 90). In the incessant present of thinking, the past is once again made present, the frozen thought/word is unfrozen, and the reader is drawn back into the process of thinking and of meaning-making. In the same spirit, Attridge argues, in

his Levinas-influenced study, that the singularity of literature is an *event*, an important aspect of which is its *"sense of its real-time unfolding"* (*The Singularity of Literature* 71). This sense of real-time unfolding is not just the result of "actual temporal relations" but also that of specific formal features (71). Attridge refers here specifically to poetry and contrasts it to the novel, arguing that in the case of the latter, this quality "makes little difference" (71); he adds: "To the extent that these decisions *do* make a difference, I am reading the novel as poetry" (71). *Three*'s particular form forces a refashioning of the norms of prose-reading, which, in turn, occasions the advent of that which is other; or, conversely, that the encounter of the other prompts a "destabilization of the field of the same" (24). To quote Attridge, "both these statements are true, though each is incomplete without its counterpart" (24). We might hence refer to the literary text as 'a writing' rather than 'the written,' Attridge suggests (104).

Meaning, Terry Eagleton suggests, is "a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together" and as such, "Reading a text is [or ought to be] more like tracing this process of constant flickering than it is like counting the beads on a necklace" (cited Steiner, *Real Presences* 123). (Although, again here, 'tracing' suggests more concreteness than we can attribute to Quin's text unless we use it in the Derridean sense of the word.) Allowing the reader to think after the narrator is the prerogative of any first-person narration (especially in the case of diary or stream-of-consciousness narratives, whose engagement with the present moment is limited by the inevitable after-the-fact nature of the act of reading). Enabling the reader to think along with the narrator is another matter altogether—a matter, as it turns out in *Three*, of life and death. To our sclerotic eyes (to borrow Steiner's word), so given to a certain slant of light, S's narrative offers "No sign of anything living" (24). "But bend closer," says S/Quin, "Turn up/ stones./ Separate/ plants./ Leaves./ Branches": "*These stir. Rotate. Forests stride in the night*" (24, own emphasis). In thinking with the text, we do not merely approximate to the role of the executor as we do when we learn it by heart—in performing the text, we live the life of the text. Put another way, in thinking with the text, we learn it by heart but in the sense in which Derrida employs the term in "Che cos'è la poesia?" Defining poetry as an impossible structure that "renounce[s] knowledge" (*Points* 289) and that "always leaves something to be desired," Derrida suggests that to learn poetry (or Quin's poetic prose) by heart is to engage with this structure of desire and to be led by the heart on "the aleatory

rambling of a trek, the strophe that turns but never leads back to discourse, or back home" (291).

Martens laments, "One often has the sense that what the writers really need is a convention for reproducing the flow of the thought processes, and that the diary form is an only partially satisfactory stopgap" (134). In *Three*, Quin adapts the diary form to this very end, achieving what Sarraute only dreamt of: a form that "give[s] the reader the illusion of repeating these [subterranean] actions himself, in a more clearly aware, more orderly, distinct and forceful manner than he can do in life, *without their losing that element of indetermination*" (Sarraute 117, own emphasis). Here again, it is fidelity that is required of us, not just in the sense of committing presently, time and time again, but also of doing so *unknowingly*. To think, Arendt tells us, is to continually "make up your mind anew" (*The Life of the Mind* 177). We move through and feel presently, by way of our eyes, the very "Fibres/ texture/ of thought" (Quin, *Three* 23) in all its opacity and all its mystery. Even when a word or phrase seems to lead without complications into the next, the overall atmosphere that Quin creates is such that one cannot escape a nagging doubt that any comprehension achieved is merely a misunderstanding. "Clarity" slides consistently, though not without hesitation, into "confusion" on the page (20). For the lacuna in and of the text is also where one comes to the realization of the final intractability of the world, which "Move[s] forward. When one is static" and "Retreat[s] when approached" (24), and where one is repeatedly presented with the choice of making an effort to engage with it despite its intractability, or to withdraw from it. There leaves one more comment to make about the breaks in the form of S's audio diary entries: they suggest a lack of confidence, or to use the term mentioned in the introduction, a lack of hubris. The sense of hesitancy Quin creates is the appropriate response to a reality in which nothing ought to or can be taken for granted, least of all the other who stands before us. Here, obscurity and clarity are not defined in opposition to each other but made allies in a single striving: one's sight is thrown into jeopardy in order that one might see more clearly.

The space highlighted by the open structure of the paratactical text of S's audio diary entries is not that of nothingness per se but rather of an effacement of knowledge and, therefore, of a *meaningful* obscurity. As Hassam points out, Quin's novel, including and especially so in the case of S's audio diary, is characterised by "clarity of image"; the obscurity exists in the form of "a confusion of a recoverable

meaning" (136). It might seem disingenuous to say that any analysis of S's audio diary would ultimately be pointless (in both senses of the word: without use and without goal). If we recognise S as symbol, then we might appropriate Blanchot's words for the symbol and apply them to S: "The symbol is always an experience of nothingness, the search for a negative absolute, but it is a search that does not succeed, an experience that fails, without this failure being able to acquire a positive value" (*The Work of Fire* 81). The symbol can only be expressed in writing as a demand (81). Insofar as the other presents himself or herself as symbol, we might turn to Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*, where he speaks similarly of the relationship with the other, especially as it is mediated through language, as being

> beyond the reach (of the one who says it as much as of the one who hears it). It is between us, it holds itself between, and the conversation is the approach on the basis of this between-two: an irreducible distance that must be preserved if one wishes to maintain a relation with the unknown. (212)

Faced with a mystery like S, we are as much at our wits' end as Leonard and Ruth are. In the manner of Socrates's aporetic dialogues, we have come so far only to go nowhere at all, only to move in circles.

We are rendered helpless but are not castrated. Arendt takes pain to point out that "thinking itself is dangerous" but its non-results are not negative results; thinking does not lead into nihilism or the jettisoning of all meaning (*The Life of the Mind* 176). By denying us recourse to our epistemological apparatus, Quin's text challenges us to (re)activate our thinking faculty and to exercise our capacity for thought. That we never arrive at a final 'answer' as to who S is, that any conclusions we have are only ever partial or tentatively proffered, that we only proceed by constantly reverting to the process of thinking, does not invalidate or devalue the process; thinking, as Arendt reminds us, is after all not a quest. On the contrary, it is this very fact of our failure that, Steiner argues, "confirms both the autonomy of the meaningful presence in the poetic and the integrity of our reception" (*Real Presences* 175). "[A] good reading," he suggests, "falls short of the text or art object [or person] by a distance, by a perimeter of inadequacy which are themselves luminous as is the corona around the darkened sun" for this falling-short is "a guarantor of the *experienced* 'otherness'" (175, own emphasis). Steiner suggests that the act of committing a text to heart "generate[s] a shaping reciprocity between ourselves and that which the heart knows"

(8). The infinitely more intimate encounter of thinking and therefore, of living the text results accordingly in a more profound relationship of responsibility, wherein failure is refigured as an "authentic experience of understanding" where one responds to responsibility in a manner that is most alive and awake to vagaries and nuances, to profundities and possibilities (8). It is hence that in the absence-infused text of S's audio diary entries—where failure is our only guarantee, where failure is the condition of our fidelity to S as the essential, mysterious other—we approach what Steiner refers to as "the unspeakable and unspeaking visitations of the freedom and mystery of being" (112). If the novel form, in its dialogic nature, always puts us in touch with the other, *Three* emphasises the extent of the other's otherness and just how tentative this 'touch' is.

In "The Art of Criticism," Steiner declares that our failure ought not to be seen as a "humiliating defeat or a piece of mysticism" but rather as "a kind of joyous invitation to reread." Quin's text extends just this invitation to its reader: the effect of Quin's 'difficult' and obscure style, Evenson argues, is such that the reading process is slowed down and the reader is made to "constantly step back and reread, re-envision what one has begun to think" (xii). In reading Quin, we are asked to continually make and re-make a commitment to her texts, to attend faithfully to her novels in the face of their blinding obscurity. A conscious choice to engage and to think follows in the wake of the break in our habitual state of mind. *Three* begins with just this scenario: Ruth attempts to engage Leonard in a discussion of the violent death of a man (in which is inscribed the death or disappearance of S) and is abruptly dismissed: "No one can be blamed," Leonard says, before covering his ears with shells and pebbles (1). The reader is given a similar choice and it is necessarily an ethical one because what is at stake is S herself: she is, after all, no more and no less than this difficult, mostly incomprehensible language of spaces and echoes, of innuendoes and secrets, of mystery and depth. As Evenson argues, S's concerns, "often for the ephemeral, for fragmentary gestures," seem "unrelated to the main thrust of her existence" but they are in fact precisely what constitutes S (as other and as a character in Quin's novel): "Her diaries are less about preserving facts than about asserting even performing, a self, and providing a world to go with it" (x). To choose to work through the difficulty of S's narrative, then, is to choose to engage with her ethically.

The Broken Limit

Filtered through the haze of her diary entries, the almost brutal truncation of Leon's ledger and the half-sentences exchanged by the couple, S never really comes into being. She is all "glimpses and hints, indistinct shapes" (Evenson x), and little else—the ghost they imagine they see "crossing the street" (Quin, *Three* 80) or in the window, the opposite of "everything… [that] has substance [and] gives security" (124), the lacuna at the heart of the novel. Her presumed suicide by drowning sets the seal on her mystery: "My certainty shall be their confusion," she writes (53). As Steiner puts it, "In death the intractable constancy of the other, of that on which we have no purchase, is given its most evident concentration" (*Real Presences* 140). Not only does death put S permanently out of Leonard and Ruth's reach, but S favours drowning for its inherently enigmatic nature. In her diary, she writes, "How easy for a body to drift out, caught up in a current, and never be discovered, or for anyone ever to be certain" (Quin, *Three* 139); she also notes that the water is that which "could be touched, and would not be fragmented by [her] touch" (143).

"Drowning is the quintessentially female way of death," writes Hodgson:

> With its symbolic associations of engulfment, disintegration and dissolution . . . the trope has been employed to depict woman's anguished subsumption by the 'dark waters' which themselves correspond elementally to the fluidity, irrationality and flux associated with female consciousness. (34)

That S (presumably) dies by drowning is fitting not only because she is a troubled and troubling female but because she is the locus of madness in the novel, though only in the broad sense of madness being a transgression of known boundaries (physical, emotional, social, generic, etc.). A transgression that nevertheless *remains* within said boundaries since the mad man is declared mad by social standards and lingers as a haunting presence in society, never able to be fully expelled. As Foucault notes in *Madness and Civilization*, the mad have always been either consigned to society's margins or confined within sanctioned institutions within society. Madness is that very condition in which one 'breaks through a form that nevertheless delimits him.'

There is madness in Quin's method (i.e., her stylistic experiments) and method in S's apparent madness. The act of drowning, and of suicide, is not necessarily wholly destructive. In *The Politics of Experience*, R. D Laing writes, "madness need

not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death" (qtd in Hodgson 36). It is no coincidence that S uses the particular diction that she does when she expresses a desire to "*wade in* up to the limits of imagination if possible. Gain another level, an added dimension" (62, own emphasis). It is towards possibility that she wades, or as Hodgson would have it, the paradoxical "potential for living" (36) when she departs on the boat at the end of the novel. Hodgson argues that for Quin, suicide invokes the "possibility . . . of transgressing human limits, of accessing a register of experience characterized by freedom and formlessness" (36). Arendt implies as much when she writes in *The Life of the Mind* that "the most radical experience of disappearing is death and withdrawal from appearance is dying" (80), wherein 'withdrawal from appearance' refers to the renunciation of the visible world and all its operations.[30]

    A more demonstrative commitment to the possibility of suicide can be found in Jean Améry's *On Suicide*, in which Améry writes, "[Suicide] is no longer the crime of a dark and gloomy temperament . . . but an answer to the oppressive provocations of existence, especially the passage of time, in the stream of which we are swimming along and watching ourselves drown" (45). This quote, which Robert Buckeye cites under Quin's name in *Re: Quin*, offers a reading of S's (possible) suicide in *Three* as a culmination of her efforts to jeopardise Leonard and Ruth's bourgeois lifestyle. Suicide presents itself to S as a potential means of liberation from all that is habitual and banal, and therefore, insincere. In his meditation on the self-annihilating act, Améry suggests that suicide can be seen an active defiance of "*the logic of life*" (5), which is "prescribed for us, or 'programmed,' if you wish, in every daily reaction" (13). Its absurdity is not simply or necessarily an issue of psychic constitution: by merely attempting to commit suicide, the potential suicide "give[s] expression to something deeply mysterious and logically contradictory" (14). Améry argues that 'voluntary death' can be justified if we recognise that it is oriented towards the achievement of individual autonomy and meaning, albeit in "a monstrous way" (133), since "[t]he subject decides for itself in full sovereignty" (61). Suicide, as he sees it, is "a precisely *free and voluntary* death and a highly individual matter that, to be sure, is never carried out without social reference, with which however and finally *human*

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[30] It is hence that, as Arendt points out, throughout the history of philosophy, an affinity between death and philosophy persists: to think is to withdraw from the world of appearances is to be out of order and therefore, to 'take on the color of the dead' (as Zeno was told by the Delphic oracle) in some sense (*The Life of the Mind* 79-80).

beings are alone with themselves, before which society has to be silent" (97). To this 'laying of hands on oneself,' he opposes society and religion's laying claim to the individual human being: "[they] demand of individuals . . . that they relinquish their freedom of choice: not voluntarily, but in obedience to God or humanity" (96).

If our death, particularly at our own hands, is the ultimate source of authenticity and possibility (as Blanchot similarly puts it in *The Infinite Conversation* and *The Space of Literature*), it is also a possibility that cannot be realised in its entirety for the water closes over one eventually and engulfs one finally. Death is after all no life at all. Moreover, it cannot be overstated that S is less character than an embodiment of the essential mystery of the other; her death, hence, should be read as a matter of (her) course, the 'out of order'-ness that is part of her operation. The ethics of blindness that is the overarching theme of the present chapter argues not for *surrender* to mystery, only *recognition* of it. Blindness is—as variously articulated by Weil, Bataille, Levinas, and Arendt—an *a priori* condition; to reiterate, the aim of the thesis is to see eye-to-eye. In recognizing the existence of mystery, we then make way for possibility, which is what the force that S represents ought finally to be understood as: a possibility that must only ever remain as such if it is to be true to itself, which is to say, an *impossibility* that is not defined against possibility but that emerges from it.

S is the (im)possibility inscribed in the interruption, the (im)possibility of the ethical moment, of a more meaningful relation between the couple and the world at large, between husband and wife. Hassam argues that "[w]hether or not S's death will shock the couple out of their domesticity is left open" (138) although S's last words in her diary—"I know nothing will change," (Quin, *Three* 143)—suggests not. There is however the possibility that it will (a possibility which always remains a possibility, that teases from within) since the space has already been made for such possibility to be fulfilled; S's words only conclude S's written diary (and the novel, although here one could also argue that it is a 'false' conclusion since it brings us back to the beginning) but not the couple's narrative, which notably ends not with an image of reconciliation but of *seemingly* insurmountable separation—which is the basis of every ethical exercise, every relationship between the self and the other.

Moving On: Naming the Possible, Responding to the Impossible

Hitherto, an ethics of blindness has largely been discussed in relation to Levinasian

thought. Although it is founded on the ethics that Levinas develops in his work, the ethics of blindness that is being investigated here ought not to be understood simply as a reiteration of his thought. Levinasian ethics is an impossibility and as such, can only exist as a founding condition that is destined to be betrayed. The situation of Levinas's thought within the present project of bringing the gaze back down to eye-level by way of an ethics of blindness constitutes just such a betrayal of his work, which seeks to escape ontology; but to seek to escape ontology is no less a betrayal, no less untrue to our existence. As the complications in Levinas's work show, there is no escaping ontology: for instance, C. Fred Alford points out that the lines between the abstract divine other (who is the main 'subject' of Levinas's ethics) and the particular human other are often blurred in Levinas's writing (34). In expanding the implications of Levinasian ethics, Blanchot also notably reconceives of Levinas's transcendental ethical relation as taking place between human beings, in the form of an infinite *conversation*. Because there can be no possibility of reciprocity for Levinas, just as there can be none of comprehension, and therefore no possibility of dialogue—or, indeed, a relationship (in any real sense of the word)—co-existence can exist only as a problem, a tension held within his ethics, which is ultimately disregarded in favour of the transcendental.[31]

An ethics of blindness, in contrast, is committed to the negotiation of the problem of co-existence and to the task of forging a meaningful relationship with the other-as-other. It is self-conscious about its status as an *a priori* condition and looks beyond itself to attempt a conversation with the other—a conversation that, as Blanchot suggests, must be infinite insofar as it is a working through of thought rather than something consolidated and monolithic. Its concern, in other words, lies in giving a form to that which breaks through it. An ethics of blindness is a betrayal of the ultimate goal of transcendence in Levinasian philosophy insofar as it attempts to bring ethics into the realm of possibility, even if only momentarily, by figuring the ethical as the very attempt of ethics itself; it is not something to be achieved but rather a task to be performed, where meaning lies not in any 'goal' or fixed end point but in the movement, the effort of trying.

To put it another way, an ethics of blindness is an investigation into the

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[31] Alain Badiou suggests that for Levinas, the Other is "quite obviously the ethical name for God," and that Levinas's argument must be and can only be read in the register of the religious (*Ethics* 21-23). Derrida makes a similar comment in "Violence and Metaphysics" (*Writing and Difference* 102).

betrayal of Levinas. On the one hand, there is the necessity of espousing an impossible ethics of blindness that respects the enigmatic other; on the other hand, there is the fact of the human condition[32] to make possible by making meaning, which always carries the risk of totalizing the other. Quin's *Three* stages the problem of forging an ethical relationship in light of these demands. Unseen and unknown, and unseeing and unknowing, people move through Quin's world, colliding and interacting with still other unseen and unknown, unseeing and unknowing people, even falling in love; or something like love, since one hesitates to call what transpires between these "shadowy" creatures (Mackrell 610), who verge on being faceless (or rather, to use the word in a Levinasian context, are all face and all mystery), 'love.' Love, in the context of Quin's novels, is more shorthand for a relation of meaning to an indescribable other. It is important to point out that Quin's experimentation with form, especially with the conventions of the diary form, is not ironic in *Three* as it is in *Tripticks*; in *Three*, it is meaning that Quin is after. Such is Quin's aim in making bedfellows of obscurity and clarity: to find a form for this relation of and to otherness without committing the violence of reducing it to the economy of the same.

Declaring the impossibility of the ethical relation is not to define it against possibility. Instead, such a declaration serves to draw our attention to that which exists beyond the limits we have set on our capacity to engage with experience. An ethics of blindness sustains the dynamic and productive rhythms required of the way we process experience such that we avoid falling into an appalling lethargy, in order that we might never become incapable of dealing with the mystery of a strange sky or a strange room, and more importantly, that we never become incapable of encountering the mystery of the other. The most important takeaway from an ethics of blindness is, to turn to Blanchot for the better way of saying, "the privilege I am to recognize as belonging to *autrui*, and whose recognition alone opens me to him, this recognition of height itself, is also the one thing that can teach me what man is, and what is the infinite that comes to me from man as *autrui*" (*The Infinite Conversation* 57-58). And what ensues from this? "A denunciation of all dialectical systems" that might well signal "the end of philosophy" and "the approach of . . . the affirmation of a power of judgment capable of wresting men from the jurisdiction of history," writes Blanchot (58). Perhaps, but also quite simply, a faithful attention to the nature of our

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[32] 'Condition' in the sense of it being our natural impulse but also of it being that which makes us human and able to co-exist in a world of fellow humans.

experience. Quin's openness to obscurity, interruption, and blindness finally points to the kind of vision she is committed to as an honest loving attention to otherness, which is finally also an honest loving attention to experience in all its complexity.

Such attention is no tyrannical gaze or passive contemplation but is always already a *response* to what presents itself before the eye—"a response of responsibility," in Levinasian terms (Robbins 9). After all, the face of the mysterious other opens out to us in invitation, and it is the matter of *co-existence* with which we are concerned. It is this invitation of the other to respond that Aidan Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry* addresses by way of an epistolary exchange between lovers who also happen to be writers. In the novel, Higgins orchestrates a three-cornered dance among love, art, and reality in the dark; and like Quin, demonstrates how art, as much as love, hinges on one being able to respond to and in blindness, how both insist on fidelity as commitment to otherness in the face of uncertainty. "Poetry is not there in order to say impossibility: it simply answers to it, saying in responding," writes Blanchot, "Such is the secret lot, the secret decision of every essential speech in us: *naming* the possible, *responding* to the impossible" (*The Infinite Conversation* 48). And by 'responding,' he means not the formulation of an answer "in such a way as to appease the question that would come obscurely from such a region; even less in transmitting, in the manner of an oracle, a few truth contents of which the daytime world would not yet have knowledge" (48); but responding by way of an infinite conversation, in the form of poetry (art) itself. Love is that same response to the impossible, in which the unknown is affirmed and attended to in faith.

Chapter 3: Mind the Gap—Ethics of the Imagination in Aidan Higgins's
Bornholm Night-Ferry

> The first revelation of the other . . . does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and in circumventing him by ruse. I do not struggle with a faceless god, but I respond to his expression, to his revelation.
>
> —Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

Ethics begins with a suspension of thought that constitutes a recognition of mystery in the other, which is to say, it begins in blindness, a darkness for which we have no name and yet to which we are called to respond. The need for response is paramount for an ethics of blindness: it is that which defines ethics. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida's blind man is a site on which an encounter with mystery is continually staged, and his step is accordingly, always hesitant:

> . . . [the blind men] must advance, advance or commit themselves, that is, expose themselves, run through space as if running a risk. They are apprehensive about space, they apprehend it with their groping, wandering hands; they draw in this space in a way that is at once cautious and bold; they calculate, they count on the invisible. (5)

We respond in blindness, to blindness, Derrida suggests, in anticipation, with "trembling *hesitation*" (92), and it is this trembling hesitation that Derrida focuses on. But hesitation is no response, its very definition being a lack of response, what precedes a response. *Memoirs of the Blind* notably ends with Derrida's "I don't know" (129), a non-response to a question posed by the unknown interlocutor, and the study circles back on itself and returns to its opening statement of incomprehension: "You'll observe that from the very beginning of this interview I've had problems following you. I remain skeptical" (1). Derrida's trembling hesitation translates into a characteristic equivocation that amounts to abstention, an accusation often levelled against poststructuralist ethicists.

On the one hand . . . On the other hand: a common rhetorical gesture in Derrida's work not only signals the suspension of thought and guards against error, but is also no way of navigation. "If I have to carry a cup of tea from this room into the next, I can do it," writes John Hull in *Touching the Rock*, his memoirs on being blind, "If you put a full glass into my other hand, then I cannot do it" (82). Despite

Derrida's insistence on the blind man's groping and his need to advance, one is caught in a dilemma, a stalemate where Derrida is concerned, trapped in what seems to be, for him, a perfectly ethical position though the lack of movement ultimately denies any possibility of meaning. In reading Derrida, one may feel like a blind man walking, hands outstretched and groping, only to come up against nothing, against more darkness, against more blindness. It is a game of blind man's buff that never comes to an end. All is an "infinitely echoing discourse" (*Memoirs of the Blind* 15) and Derrida would ideally have us permanently installed in this bardo. As Martin Jay points out, "Infinite deferral . . . is a luxury not afforded us in most circumstances" ("The Morals of Genealogy" 47).

In *Eros the Bittersweet*,[1] Anne Carson offers us a way of responding to and in blindness: subterfuge. A blind man employs various means of subterfuge to get by. Hull notes the tricks he employs: for instance, he learns to "[see] with a stick" through the use of his walking cane, which acts as "an extension of [the blind man's] perception" (28), and hence, an imaginative extension of his self; on occasion, he operates involuntarily by means of echolocation, wherein he experiences "a sudden, vivid awareness of an object" (19) that he cannot see. To help him lecture, he records what he has to say on cassette and listens to it repeatedly until the moment of the lecture (92-93); at academic conferences, he networks by memorizing the names of attendees and then asking to be taken to specific people until he makes it through the list (73). That subterfuge is an essential part of the blind man is (bizarrely) made emphatic by an incident Hull recalls, in which he is accused by a stranger of lying about his blindness: to protect himself from the stranger, Hull had to consciously 'act blind.'[2] He adds: "A blind friend who makes a living by busking in shopping centres told me that he is often attacked by youths who accuse him of being a fraud" (69). Of course, the blind man himself is especially vulnerable to the ruses of others: Isaac's wife, Rebecca, for instance, as Derrida points out, "takes advantage of her husband's blindness in order to substitute one son for another . . . at the moment of the testamentary blessing" (*Memoirs of the Blind* 23); Hull too writes of an incident in which he is the target of "young fellows having a bit of fun" (69).

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[1] Though Carson's study focuses specifically on *eros* (that is, desire), the present project treats a broader definition of love that necessarily includes *eros*. As such, the distinction between *eros* and love is not maintained in the following discussion.

[2] "I tried to resist the impulse to lift up my briefcase and hold it in front of me, for I had the impression that he was about to attack me, to punch me, to see whether I was blind or not. Perhaps he would see whether or not I would try to duck. I resisted the temptation . . ." (68).

Subterfuge is the mode of the blind; as it is of the lover, Carson suggests. In every love story, a gulf stands between the lovers, an "amorous impasse" (Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* 172) on the other side of which the beloved threatens to withdraw from sight. "[L]over, beloved and that which comes between them"—these are the three "structural components" that Carson suggests is required for *eros* to be activated (16). Love, Carson argues, is defined in the reach of the self towards the other across 'that which comes between'; or as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, "it is space that is needed for touch to begin in the first place" (qtd in Fernando, *in fidelity* 20). This space, 'that which comes between them,' "plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by *eros*" (Carson 16). Carson writes: "The lover wants what he does not have" (10). In keeping with the argument presented thus far on sight and knowledge, we might reimagine this statement as: *The lover wants what he does not know.* In James Salter's words: "In the woman who overwhelms us there must be nothing familiar" (*Light Years* qtd in Higgins, *A Bestiary* 607); and in Aidan Higgins's: "No, we will never entirely understand each other . . . and therefore we will never bore each other, and this is grand, yes" (*Bornholm Night-Ferry* 164). "That which is known, attained, possessed, cannot be an object of desire," writes Carson (65), and so the lover's task, his or her ethical response to the beloved, is to maintain the distinction between two images, the known self and the mysterious other, that "cannot merge in a single focus": "To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called *eros*" (69).

An Ethics of the Imagination in Aidan Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry*

At the heart of Aidan Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry* (1983) is blindness, and therefore, the subterfuge called *eros*. Between Elin Astrid Marstrander and Finn Fitzgerald, a great gulf is fixed: they are each married to other people; they are separated by geographical distance, spending only approximately forty-seven days physically together over the course of a five-year-long relationship; they do not speak the same language; and, as the end of the relationship suggests, they are finally too unlike each other. The love letters they send to each other that make up the novel is their means of traversing this gulf, in the sense of navigating it rather than overcoming it. The ruse is also perpetuated on a formal level: the 'novel' is comprised

largely of these letters, yet without resembling a straightforward epistolary novel; it is also 'fiction' drawn from reality, derived from real-life exchanges between Higgins and the Danish poet, Anna Reiner. At every turn, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* is other than what it presents itself to be, reaches for that which is other to what it knows itself to be.

On Writing as the Subterfuge Called 'Eros'

> Every letter is a love letter.
>
> —Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*[3]

"It is nothing new to say that all utterance is erotic in some sense, that all language shows the structure of desire at some level," writes Carson, "Already in Homer's usage, the same verb (*mnaomai*) has the meaning 'to give heed, to make mention' and also the meaning 'to court, woo, be a suitor" (108). The Greek goddess, *Peithō*, personifies both rhetorical persuasion and seduction, she points out, and that "in earliest metaphor, it is 'wings' or 'breath; that move words from speaker to listener as they move eros from lover to beloved" (108). "Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire," writes Roland Barthes (*A Lover's Discourse* 73). Julia Kristeva likewise speaks of the bodily associations and erotic nature of vocal utterance[4]; as does Luce Irigaray, who explores in her essay, "When Our Lips Speak Together," the relationship between meaning as articulated in language and the body, mediated here through the category of love.

As Carson sees it, of all utterances, writing, in particular, is erotic in nature as it emphasises the separation that is at the heart of *eros*. Unlike the spoken word, which expresses itself through breath that is everywhere, the written word emphasises the edges of the self by training the individual to close aspects of himself off from his environment in order to focus on the written word. "A written text separates words

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[3] Kraus's text, like Higgins's, merges both the epistolary novel and memoir forms. It consists of a series of love letters (from Kraus and occasionally from her husband) to 'Dick,' a man as strange to Kraus as Fitz is to Elin, and vice versa. As in *A Bornholm Night-Ferry*, the letters are a reaching out from a lover to a beloved. Kraus's examination of intersubjective relations, is, however, grounded in a wider study of semiotics and gender dynamics.

[4] Kristeva locates the conversation in the field of Lacanian psychoanalysis: see *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Desire in Language*.

from one another, separates words from the environment, separates words from the reader (or writer) and separates the reader (or writer) from his environment," writes Carson (50). And in the process of making the effort to read and write, the individual "becomes aware of the interior self as an entity separable from the environment and its input" (44): "As separable, controllable units of meaning, each with its own visible boundary, each with its own fixed and independent use, written words project their user into isolation" (50). She notes that the Greek alphabet, the bedrock of modern literacy, is differentiated from its predecessor (the Phoenician alphabet) by its introduction of vowels and significantly, of consonants, which start or stop a sound and are unutterable by themselves; a consonant, Carson suggests, might be said to "mark the edges of sound" in the same way that "*eros* insists upon the edges of human beings and of the spaces between them" (55).

Literacy makes evident the most important edges and the most important space of all: that which stands between one and the other, the space that Carson argues is necessary in order for *eros* to be activated. And just as *eros* is defined in the reach across 'that which comes between,' literature also proposes to traverse this space. At this intersection of love and literacy lies the epistle, which is the exemplary physical manifestation of that which intercedes between the self and other, the aesthetic image that is most evidently always engaging with the fact of the other's otherness and apartness from the self. Not only does it share a natural affinity with love by nature of being textual, it also foregrounds the notion of *response*, which is at the heart of the ethical relationship. In an echo of Bakhtin's concept of addressivity, Janet Gurkin Altman points out that "The *I* of epistolary discourse always situates himself vis-à-vis another; his locus, his 'address,' is always relative to that of his addressee" (119). For Bakhtin, this configuration necessitates that every utterance is therefore not just "directed toward an *answer*" but also dependent on it, and hence, "cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 280). It follows then that the meaning of the epistolary experience is derived from a collaboration between the writer-self and reader-other, wherein the former engages the latter in a reciprocal relationship, "simultaneously seek[ing] to affect his reader and *is [in turn] affected by him*" (88). The epistolary form hence shares a structural similarity with the ethical relationship, and is hence potentially a metaphor for it, through which we might explore its possibilities.

Equally valuable to the present task is the epistolary genre's self-consciousness. Manifestly and unavoidably self-reflexive, the letter is very much a text in the Barthesian sense of the word: it is a text that "knows itself as text" (Barthes, "From Work to Text" 157) and is already in the process of investigating its own structure and processes, making it something of a natural ally to the present project.[5] It is this self-consciously textual nature that epistolary fiction exploits, and Altman suggests that epistolary fiction is a genre "constituted by discovery of a medium and exploration of its potential" (*Epistolarity* 211). In *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*, Linda S. Kauffman posits that "[the] [e]pistolary is a destabilised and destabilising category in both twentieth-century fiction and critical theory": "From [Viktor Shklovsky's] *Zoo* forward, the epistolary novel becomes the subject of profound deformation and experimentation" (263). She argues that this is especially the case in love letters, which direct their self-reflexive tendencies towards the destabilizing of literary systems. Love's letters (its discourse, its literature, its epistles), as Roland Barthes points out on the very first page of *A Lover's Discourse*, are "*of an extreme solitude*" and "completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts)" (1). From this position of imposed marginality, "[love letters] each write of and *to* literature in order to displace the false canonical hierarchies that relegate love letters to the margins of discourse. . . . [and] defamiliarize the habits of thinking that praise scholarship over love, center over margin, conscious over unconscious" (Kauffman 96-97). It is hence that Barthes adopts an arbitrary and "*absolutely insignificant*" structuring principle in his book—"that of nomination and that of the alphabet—such that one cannot presume to read in it a "philosophy of love," only an "affirmation" of it (*A Lover's Discourse* 8). What is at work here then is the same calling into question of fixed and dominant systems of thought that is explored in the previous chapter.

In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, Higgins avails himself of the epistolary genre's dialogic nature and self-reflexivity and takes them to their extreme in a reiteration of an ethical imperative that preoccupies him throughout his *oeuvre*: the need to respond to a world populated by so many 'others' who "[refuse] to be named, either in writing

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[5] See Barthes's essay, "From Work to Text" for the seven propositions he lists in his tentative attempt at articulating a 'Theory of the Text.'

or in living" (Murphy, "Aidan Higgins" 50), as well as the desire to know what form this response might take. As Rüdiger Imhof puts it in "'Bornholm Night-Ferry' and 'Journal to Stella': Aidan Higgins's Indebtedness to Jonathan Swift," since the novel begins in 1980 at the close of the love affair, "[t]he *recherche* is for what happened in between" (7). What happened in between were the love letters.

The Love Letter: A Bittersweet Paradox

> To write words I put a symbol in place of an absent sound. To write the words 'I love you' requires a further, analogous replacement, one that is much more painful in its implication. Your absence from the syntax of my life is not a fact to be changed by written words. And it is the single fact that makes a difference to the lover, the fact that you and I are not one.

> —Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*

When faced with the distance between the self and the other, one might choose to run; alternatively, one can also "stand and throw," Carson suggests (20), that is, attempt to 'get around' this impasse. This is the aim of such 'projectiles' as apples[6] or glances, or indeed, letters. Carson argues that "[though] properly a noun, *eros* acts everywhere like a verb" (63). The same subterfuge might be claimed of the letter[7]: the preferred (oblique) approach of the lover, the epistle is a similarly duplicitous noun that also acts with all the force of a verb. The capacity of the letter to act like a verb is made evident in what François Jost refers to as the 'active,' 'kinetic,' or 'dynamic' letter of drama in "*Le Roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIIIe siècle*," whose purpose is to push the plot forward (406); this he opposes to the 'passive' or 'static' letter of confidence that is interested only in the reporting of events. In novels like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,*

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[6] In the myth of the huntress, Atalanta, for instance, suitors were challenged to beat her in a footrace; those who lost to her would be killed. Hippomenes sought the help of Aphrodite, who gave him three apples that Hippomenes used to slow Atalanta down by distracting her. Through this subterfuge, Hippomenes won the race and Atalanta's hand. Another famous apple in Greek mythology is the Apple of Discord that Eris used to precipitate The Judgment of Paris, which indirectly allows Paris to win the affections of the married Helen.

[7] Mercury, the god of messages, was also after all the god of trickery. Also significant is the fact that the first letter that appears in Greek literature is the result of a lover's ruse. As Homer tells it in the *Iliad*, Bellerophon attracts the unwanted attention of King Proteus's wife, Anteia, who, when spurned, plots to have him killed by accusing him of assaulting her. Proteus, unwilling to violate the rules of hospitality by murdering Bellerophon while he is a guest, schemes to have the deed done by Anteia's father; he sends Bellerophon to the King of Lycia with an order to have him killed disguised as a letter of introduction.

or, The Modern Prometheus, and Michael Frayn's *The Trick of It*, the mechanisms of the genre interfere very little (if at all) with the plot and the story "might well have been told (albeit in a different way) without the letters," as Altman points out (*Epistolarity* 9). That is not to say that the 'letter of confidence' is necessarily comprised of entirely passive retrospective reportages: in a novel like Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, for instance, letters are part of the action of the plot (in this case, Herzog's 'unfinished business' of getting his life back on track) but do not further it.

The plot of L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, however, could not take place independently of the 'postman' Leo Colston and the letters that he conveys between Marian Maudsley and Ted Burgess. As the eponymous 'go-between,' Leo is the pivot of the novel, the "lynch-pin of the whole business" as he puts it himself (216): he is the messenger who enables the lovers to carry out their affair—"we couldn't have carried on without you," says Marian (295)—and who ultimately, albeit indirectly, precipitates the tragic ending by delivering an erroneous message. Similarly, in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, it is Roland Michell's discovery of a letter by Randolph Henry Ash that hints at a secret extramarital love affair, which catalyses his and Maud Bailey's scholarly adventure to identify Ash's lover. Subsequently, it is the need to locate further letters and other documentary evidence that continues to drive them on their quest, as well as provide the basis for the blossoming of the scholars' own romance. Kauffman argues that in epistolary novels, "[t]he letter's transit is a metaphor for the transitory, circuitous routing of love," wherein 'routing' "should be understood in both senses of the word, as the route love takes to its destination, and as the rejection it encounters when (and if) it arrives there" (42). In novels such as Hartley's and Byatt's, which employ the letter of drama to effect and affect the narrative action, the letter's transit is not just a metaphor but the very action of love itself. The use of these letters redefines the static textual form of the epistle as one that is vitally alive and whose action, like love's is, is to reach.

In this aspect, Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry* distinguishes itself. There are novels like Hartley's and Byatt's in which letters are the "primary agents" of action, and there are novels where "the entire psychological action . . . advances through the letter writing itself" (Altman, *Epistolarity* 9), such as Higgins's. Hartley's and Byatt's lovers employ the letter as a means to conduct their love affair and the letters are exchanged in the midst of 'real world' action. For Higgins's lovers who cannot meet, the letter *is* the narrative action, is the love affair, and there is little beyond the text of

their letters: at the prospect of a reunion, Elin worries that neither she nor Fitz will recognise the other in 'real life' (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 129). The baseless fabric of their dream of Bornholm (where they imagine they might achieve their happy ending) dissolves on touch; as Neil Murphy argues in "The Other Day I Was Thinking of You," the "self-contained textual universe" created by the lovers through their letters is "so tangible and richly nuanced" that it renders the real world remote (332).

Passing from hand to hand, from the lover to the beloved through the mailman, the letter is the emblem of the lover's discourse; and by 'discourse,' we refer to the etymological root of the word, of which Barthes reminds us: "*Dis-cursus*—originally the action of running here and there, comings and goings, measures taken, 'plots and plans'" (*A Lover's Discourse* 3). A discourse cannot take place if there is no 'here' or 'there,' if there is nowhere to come from and to go to. The love letter can only be written in the distance from the beloved, just like the words, *I love you*, where "there would be 'me' on one side, 'you' on the other, and in between a joint of *reasonable* (i.e., lexical) affection" (147); but 'reasonable' also in the sense of moderate, of being enough (for now) although not quite there. A letter, both of the alphabetic variety and the epistle, is predicated on this very falling short, this very lack. Writing is after all always inadequate to its task, what more the writing of love. "To try to write love is to confront the *muck* of language: that region of hysteria where language is both *too much* and *too little*, excessive . . . and impoverished," Barthes declares (99). A letter reaches. It *desires*. Every letter is a love letter.

In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, the love letter is a "Floating-flowing" form, to borrow Elin's term (52), connecting lover to beloved, while all the time maintaining the distance between them (the titular night-ferry is the obvious metaphor). "I feel how the transport of the letters brings a artificial shifting in a congruence (?) which is present," writes Elin,[8] to the extent that "Sometimes I have the feeling that we are writing or thinking the same things in the same days, that we are in the same moods in the same periods" (55); and yet Elin is aware that it is an *artificial* congruence that the epistolary exchange achieves. Similarly, Carson declares, "As the vowels and consonants of an alphabet interact symbolically to make a certain written word, so

[8] All of the quotes from Elin have been transcribed as found in Higgins's text; all spelling and grammatical mistakes are Elin's own.

writer and reader bring together two halves of one meaning, so lover and beloved are matched together like two sides of a knucklebone . . .. *Ideally speaking, at least, that is the case*" (108, own emphasis). A letter is a lie aspiring to truth, or a bittersweet paradox, to borrow Carson's words. "Yes, you are here. And you are not here," writes Elin, "So I miss you. So write" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 95).

It is in this sense that Barthes argues that the love letter is not a correspondence. As "a tactical enterprise to defend positions, make conquests" (*A Lover's Discourse* 158), a correspondence exhibits the nature of a function, mapping perfectly onto a singular truth-value; it assumes an uncomplicated and direct access to an objective world that can be known. As Altman puts it, "To write a letter is to map one's coordinates" (*Epistolarity* 119). The letter (like the diary form) is perceived as a material artefact, a witness to experience, and consequently, a testament to Truth,[9] and epistolary fictions traditionally borrow from this aura in the interest of realism. Patricia A. Rosenmeyer notes that letters "frequently allude to the physical nature of the letter itself, and the difficulties of ensuring a safe delivery, as if such references could invest the letters with the sort of concreteness found only in the material world" (22). True to form, Elin notes in one letter that she "sent you a hard and desperate letter yesterday by normal mail. I hope this [present one] will arrived first" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 31); Fitz writes in another: "Against all odds (drunken Piscean Postman never delivering mail, since sacked, following Denunciado, the biter bit) your letter reached me, thrown in through the door. I never saw the postman, the post office was always closed" (140).

Rosenmeyer refers specifically to fictional epistles but her observation applies also to 'real' letters. One can never emphasise the 'real' enough and so, exchanging letters while her friend and might-have-been lover, Frank Thompson, was fighting the war, Iris Murdoch sends him her photo and asks for one in return (Conradi 154); and Anna Reiner writes to Aidan Higgins, "I know you prefer letters with concrete contents" (*A Bestiary* 640) and asks him to "imagine if he would like the [chain]" that she is currently wearing (644). All this to reinforce the idea that the letter does not simply mediate between two points in reality but conflates them into one: that the letter *is* the lover and that the letter, in crossing the distance to the beloved, is capable

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[9] Case in point: When the Oxyrhynchus Papyri was discovered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "scholars turned to the papyrus letters as keys to the past, documents they hoped would allow them unmediated and direct access to classical antiquity" (Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions* 5).

of reuniting lover and beloved. Paris, for instance, draws this equivalency between his self and the letter he writes to Helen: "Long now have I had cheer, for your welcoming my letter begets the hope that I also may be likewise welcomed" (qtd Altman, *Epistolarity* 14). This idea is of course an illusion, a fact that writer and reader are both undoubtedly aware of even as they persist in perpetuating it. As Barthes puts it, writing "is precisely *there where you are not*" (*A Lover's Discourse* 100). "If I cannot have you all in one piece, mail me bits of you," asks Fitz of Elin (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 73), perpetuating the lie; "My beloved Received your letter (not you) days ago," writes Elin, more honestly (41). The letter is not the lover and it is only by a considerable effort of the imagination that one can turn the letter into the lover. "The text of the letter . . . must never be taken *at its word*," cautions Mireille Bossis (75). Similarly, Barthes insists that as a writer, "I continue to fool myself to the *effects* of language," pretending that the self can give a precise expression of meaning using words (*A Lover's Discourse* 98).

That "one cannot write without burying 'sincerity'" is Barthes's conclusion in *A Lover's Discourse* (98). The letter's claim to sincerity-as-Truth was suspect at its inception, suggests Kauffman: "At least since *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, the letter has been identified as 'the voice of true feeling'," she writes, and yet, "there is ample speculation and considerable evidence that the 'feminine' disorder of the *Portuguese Letters* probably came from a masculine pen" (xviii).[10] As Rosenmeyer points out, "Whenever one writes a letter, one automatically constructs a self, an occasion, a version of the truth" (5). The question of who is this *I* that writes is inscribed in the epistle[11]; as is the question of who is this *you* to whom *I* write. This *you* is also always only a constructed version of himself or herself since, as suggested in Chapter 1, we cannot avoid aestheticizing one another. The same questions of love and fidelity and images pertain here as with Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*; "try to write to ME, not to your dream-picture of me," Elin beseeches Fitz (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 92). The love letter is not what it is earnestly believed to be (i.e., a way of bring the lover and beloved together) and neither is it what it presents itself as: an intimate means of communication between two known places, between

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[10] It is now generally acknowledged that the author of *The Love Letters of a Portuguese Nun* is Gabriel-Joseph de La Vergne, comte de Guilleragues, and that the letters themselves constitute an epistolary fiction rather than being authentic letters.

[11] This question is outside the purview of the present project, which concerns itself with the *you* at the other end of the equation. For a discussion of the identity of the letter writer, see Derrida's *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*.

two known individuals. Rather, it is a translation of the aesthetic image that mediates the relationship of the lover and the beloved, that which comes between them, in both senses of the phrase; in Letter 10, Fitz notes that the pencil mark Elin makes on a map to show him her home is "so exact" that he cannot see under it and only finds out where she lives "with great difficulty" (39).

The epistolary genre offers some suggestion as to why we cannot help the mediation/intrusion of the aesthetic image: "*In order to vanquish absence*, a letter must call up images and particularly those of oneself for the other, of the other for oneself," argues Bossis (68, own emphasis). Similarly, Kauffman writes, "writing [a letter] nurtures the illusion of speaking with one *whose absence is intolerable*" (xix, own emphasis). Barthes suggests that the writer of a letter fears a lack of reply because "without a reply, the other's image changes, becomes *other*" (*A Lover's Discourse* 158); perhaps, more importantly, the writer fears it because it suggests that the other is *not there*. "I've feared the silence between us after all this letters, seen it as a stop, an emptiness," writes Elin (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 62). The love letter is a talisman against absence, a stay against loss, which all the time acknowledges that, to varying degrees, absence and loss have already taken place. Elin and Fitzy (have to) write to each other because they are not together: "your absence forced me to [write]," says Elin (163). As long as they are writing to each other, they are *in* love, they are actively inhabiting the space that separates *I* and *you*; the ceasing of the letters at the end of the novel signals the end of their relationship. Bossis reads this impulse towards image-making as a potentially narcissistic enterprise (68)—and such is the case for Charles Arrowby and to an extent for Fitz— but Higgins's novel invites us to consider it rather as a response stemming from our intuition of our limited ability to grasp by sight, to understand. Already the letter writer is aware of the conditions under which he writes; already the lover is aware of the extent to which he cannot know the beloved.

A Terrible Dislocation of Souls

> The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced . . . a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness.

> —Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*

Constantly self-consciously mediating between presence and absence, the love letter is not correspondence in the sense of continuity between word/image and reality. Neither can it be uncomplicatedly understood in the sense of communication: "The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all" (Altman, *Epistolarity* 43). A love letter operates, rather, by means of *relation*. Characterised by a foregrounding of separation, it "brings together two images" (Barthes, *A Love's Discourse* 158) and it does so without erasing the fact that there exist *two* images. This is as opposed to the embrace discussed in Chapter 1, which "melts the two images into a single one" (15). The eroticism of writing is double-edged. The fear of edges, or loneliness, drives the lover to write to his beloved, an act that testifies to their love, but writing ultimately also reinforces their separateness. Such is the dilemma of the lover who is moved to write.

Any sense of correspondence, continuity, or communication is disrupted from the outset in *Bornholm Night-Ferry* by Higgins's particular arrangement of the first few letters exchanged between Elin and Fitz. Chapter one (but Part II) of the novel opens with a letter from Elin although, as is made clear only slightly later, this 'Letter 1' is not the first letter the lovers exchange after their separation, which comes instead from Fitz (designated by Higgins as 'Letter 4'). Additionally, instead of arranging the letters from Elin and Fitz alternately as one might in order to give the impression of a dialogue, as is the convention of epistolary novels, Higgins presents the first three letters from Elin successively, and places the four from Fitz after them. The effect is that for the brief duration of these letters, first Elin and then Fitz seem to be engaged in less of an exchange than a monologue, as Elin herself notes (21).[12] Thereafter, the

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[12] This is even more pronounced in the edition of letters included in *Soft Day: A Miscellany Of Contemporary Irish Writing* that appeared before the publication of *Bornholm Night-Ferry* ("Letters Concerning Bornholm, Knepp at the Third River"): though these are only meant to be extracts, Seán

letters are arranged chronologically but the disruption of 'correspondence' continues. On some occasions, Elin and Fitz both send multiple letters in succession as if one lover was moving faster than the other; on others, letters are not received—such as Elin's letter from Naxos, the loss of which prompts Fitz to insist that "Naxos doesn't exist" (117)—or are not replied to. Otherwise, letters are "no answer" (135) but "the next painfull step" (108) in an unknown direction, suggesting "the dream of the [ideal] life . . . fading out" (109). As Garin Dowd points out in *Epistolary Structure and its Theoretical Field in Aidan Higgins' Bornholm Night-Ferry*, "For every 'calming', 'curing' 'fixing' letter there is a letter with 'poisonous contents'; there is a 'turbulent letter' or a 'waspish one'" (26).

All of which emphasises the fact that the letter is a "discrete unit" (Altman, *Epistolarity* 135), just as the letter-writer himself or herself is also a 'discrete unit.' By Chapter 16, most of the conventions of the epistolary genre are dropped: missing greetings and closings (prompting the question: *who writes to whom?*), the letters increasingly approximate to private diary entries, or as Higgins suggestively puts it in the subtitle for Chapter 17, "*Notations in the Void*" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 153); and what are private diary entries, un-received or un-replied letters, but notations in the void? It seems a matter of course that this compilation of letter-exchanges between lovers 'culminates' in a dream in which one of them is "weightless" and "unseen" as if a "spectre" (175). In addition, Higgins's deliberate choice to number some letters and not others in order that the total number comes up to sixty-five is a nod to Jonathan Swift's *Journal to Stella*, which has the same number of letters, as critics have pointed out (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 69; Imhof, "Aidan Higgins's Indebtedness to Jonathan Swift" 7), and to Swift's rumored love affair with Esther Johnson, the titular 'Stella.' Like Higgins's lovers, Swift and Johnson's relationship was characterised by distance: in age, in physical location, for a time also in affection; in Swift and Johnson's case, they were finally separated by the absolute distance of death (Johnson's at forty-seven).

As Jost sees it, the static letter of confidence is always addressed to a confidant while the letter of drama is addressed to an antagonist since it progresses by way of conflict (406). But because the very act of writing a letter emphasises the edges between the writer and the addressee—that is, their otherness to one another—

Golden examines them as completed texts in which "[t]he correspondence is one-sided; the man's response must be inferred" (210).

the confidant inhabits a precarious position in which he or she is always already also an antagonist in some measure[13]: in the preface to his epistolary 'novel,' *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*, Viktor Shklovsky points out that the addressee, confidant or otherwise, inevitably "acquire[s] a certain configuration, that of a person from an alien culture, because there's no point in writing descriptive letters to a person of your own culture" (3-4).[14] The love letter takes on the role that S performs in Quin's *Three* in giving form to the otherness that intrudes between the writer-lover-self and the reader-beloved-other. In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, Higgins gestures to this essential otherness of the latter by highlighting the fact that Elin and Fitz have different mother tongues; in addition, they also speak a variety of other languages, official and otherwise. This confluence of voices creates a Bakhtinian heteroglossia, in which a diversity of voices co-exist and interrelate dialogically (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 263).

In "German Influences on John Banville and Aidan Higgins," Imhof reads Higgins's 'German influences' in the novel as an example of Irish literature's engagement with all that is non-Irish in an attempt to participate in a wider tradition. From this standpoint, he unsurprisingly finds *Bornholm Night-Ferry* lacking, declaring that the "artistic purposes" of the German references "remains somewhat questionable" (344), "their ostensible function being to show off Higgins's command . . . of the German language" (347). (Imhof looks specifically at Higgins's (mis)use of German but we can imagine that his comments might also apply to the author's general play with languages since the same 'flaws'—the misspellings, the confusion of meaning, etc.,—pertain.) "It seems to be much about nothing," is Imhof's misconceived conclusion (347), misconceived because he makes central what has never been high on Higgins's list of priorities. Higgins's main preoccupation in his work is with the ephemerality and profundity of experience, the very thing that threatens the epistemological structures we construct to make sense of life. The un-translated smatterings of German, Danish, and Dutch, as well as their variations— "bogus Deutsch" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 24) and "kitchen-german" (34), for

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[13] 'Antagonist' is not too strong a word for one who is other: recall that Levinas suggests that we experience the encounter with the other as something violent and traumatic.

[14] Shklovsky's *Zoo* is a novel of subterfuge, much like *Bornholm Night-Ferry*: it is an epistolary novel that blurs the lines between fiction and autobiography; it consists of a series of love letters that are not allowed to appear as such since the narrator's beloved has forbidden him to write of love; and at the same time that it reads like a story of unrequited love, it is also 'about' aesthetics, political revolution, and exile—so a series of love letters not just to Elsa Triolet, but also to art, and to Russia.

instance—are not something that the "almost sensually meticulous" Higgins "allows . . . through his net," as Bernard Share argues (156).[15] They are an important reminder to us that here in these pages, an encounter with something other than the self is being staged.

These 'scraps' are a manifestation of what Patrick O'Neill refers to as "cultural intertextuality" (249), a favoured device of Higgins, which the former interprets as a playful indication of the author's fascination with "the foreign, the other, the non-Irish, not-now, not-here" (249). This reading allows O'Neill to excuse the 'irritatingly' frequent incorrect translations of foreign languages in Higgins's other novel, *Balcony of Europe*, but amounts somewhat to a dismissal of an important aspect of Higgins's poetics. Higgins's use of 'cultural intertextuality' gestures towards a more profound struggle between individual consciousness and what lies beyond it,[16] which includes the consciousness of the other. William Irvin points out in "Against Intertextuality" that the concept of intertextuality as it was first articulated by Julia Kristeva was a "synthesis of Saussure's structuralism and Bakhtin's dialogism" (228). From the former, she borrowed the necessary separation between signifier and signified that precipitates an unmooring of meaning,[17] which paves the way for Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism where the "minimal unit of poetic language is at least *double*, . . . in terms of *one and the other*" (*The Kristeva Reader* 40). Kristeva points out that language, as Bakhtin conceives of it, is a space where "one reads the *other*" (39). In Bakhtinian dialogism, the 'literary word' is hence an "*intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning)," a "dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context" (36) wherein their individual meanings persist and develop in relation to one another, without one being subordinated to another. Bakhtin's heteroglossia is the composition of such literary words, such textual surfaces: "Heteroglossia is a plurality of relations," writes Holquist, "not just a cacophony of

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[15] Share refers here to the incorrect transcriptions of Spanish in *Balcony of Europe*: "Sheer pedantry," he proclaims, and a "minor irritation," in much the same fashion as Imhof (156).

[16] Higgins's preoccupation with this struggle more frequently takes the form of an obsession with memory and the fugacity of life; see Murphy's "The Other Day I was Thinking of You: Love Remembered in *Bornholm Night-Ferry* and *Lions of the Grunewald*" and "Aidan Higgins."

[17] In "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Kristeva notes: "Saussure's poetic *paragram* ('Anagrams') extends from *zero* to *two*: the unit 'one' (definition, 'truth') does not exist in this field. Consequently, the notions of definition, determination, the sign '=' and the very concept of sign, which presupposes a vertical (hierarchical) division between signifier and signified, cannot be applied to poetic language— by [definition] an infinity of pairings and combinations" (*The Kristeva Reader* 40).

voices" (*Dialogism* 86)—as Imhof suggests of *Bornholm Night-Ferry.* Irvin suggests that the fundamentals of Kristeva's thought are realised in their fullest potential by Barthes, who extended it to its logical conclusion in "The Death of the Author." Here, Barthes replaces the author with the 'scriptor,' who is "much like a scribe, *taking dictation on what she may or may not understand and which she certainly does not authorize with meaning*" (Irvin 230, own emphasis). Instead of being determined by the author as tradition dictates, meaning is derived from the text through the reader's engagement with all the other texts inscribed within it (148). In *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes writes of the scriptor, "I realize the best of myself (= I realize the Other that's within me)" (251).

There is inherent in intertextuality a radical unfixing of meaning and its processes at work: of meaning as unified and singular, and of meaning as issuing from a few dominant sources. As Irvin points out, where Kristeva and Barthes are concerned, this process should be understood as being politically charged and "truly revolutionary," as Barthes himself puts it ("The Death of the Author" 147), a part of a larger agenda for social change, "since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law" (147). Irvin suggests that the revolutionary nature of their ideas was motivated by their socio-historical circumstances: both thinkers dealt in their time with "the oppression of the French Academy, post holocaust pessimism, mistrust of communication [the clarity of which had not hitherto led to the betterment of society], and Marxist principles" (230). Bakhtin too, being "born of a revolutionary Russia that was preoccupied with social problems," as Kristeva reminds us (*The Kristeva Reader* 39), argues along similar lines. In "Discourse in the Novel," for instance, Bakhtin argues that a unitary language gives expression to ideologically-unifying sociopolitical and cultural forces, which seek to suppress voices of difference. It is in opposition to these centripetal forces that he conceives of the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia (*The Dialogic Imagination* 270ff). Kristeva points out that there is "identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law" (*The Kristeva Reader* 36); and describes Bakhtin's dialogism as essentially "a social and political protest" (39), being rooted in carnival, which "breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics" (36). Kristeva's, Bakhtin's, and Barthes's ideas concerning intertextuality speak directly to the need to challenge existing authoritarian power structures and to liberate the individual.

With this in mind, we can understand intertextuality more broadly as an acknowledgement of the encroachment of external forces on the individual, an iteration of the complex relationship between the self and other. Graham Allen notes that intertextuality "foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life" (5). This is particularly so in the case of multilingual intertexts such as those in *Bornholm Night-Ferry*. Margaret Waller, the translator of Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, writes how "the translation inevitably appropriates the 'alien' through the familiar," and that "insomuch as it replaces the previous work, a translation is not only a transformation of the text but also its elimination": "the homage paid is a covert form of parricide" (vii). In contrast, the juxtaposition of untranslated fragments of foreign languages (legitimate and pseudo, correct and otherwise) alongside passages in English in multilingual texts preserves a sense of alterity and prompts an awareness of it, and an awareness of it as an ungraspable alterity. A border is established between the fragments and the passages in English, marking out an area of untranslatability, and therefore of a speaking silence, that lies between cultures and more broadly, between individuals. Sanford Budick suggests that it is this very untranslatability, this "hollow space or boundary" (19), that speciates the irreducible quality of the other and that shapes its "normative self-definition" (16), whether the other is a particular culture or individual.

In making evident the necessary hollow space that lies between the self and the other, Higgins's extensive use of multilingual intertextuality in his work emphasises the coincidence of two paradoxical facts about experience: firstly, that one is not alone in this world, that one will not be left alone in this world; secondly, that one is also always already destined to suffer from loneliness, or a failure to know others and to be known by them. *Balcony of Europe* boasts an impressive "multilingual and multiracial" (O'Neill 249) cast of characters while in *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, Higgins's shifts in consciousness are limited to Elin and Fitz; for that, his engagement with the struggle between self and other is more intensely depicted. What we get in the latter is not a sense of "the ultimate relatedness of all things" and hence, "total entropy, the stillness of death" that O'Neill suggests is the effect of Higgins's "play with intertextuality" in *Balcony of Europe* (250); but rather, a sense of the separateness of all things and the ambivalent energy that is the matter of life. It is the struggle, always doomed to be futile, that Elin's "poor English" (Higgins,

Bornholm Night-Ferry 26), which Higgins deliberately leaves 'uncorrected,' stages on the page. Despite the lack of translation on Higgins's part, a process of translation is already at work in the text as Elin attempts to give her feelings and thoughts a form that is recognisable to Fitz (i.e., in English)—a process that paradoxically announces her "essential *foreignness*" (O'Neill 249), *her* "unutterable strangeness, the unspeakable, unforgettable *foreignness*" (Higgins, *A Bestiary* 468). Such is the "*crisis of alterity*" that accompanies every act of translation (Budick 22, own emphasis).

"I'll talk, scatter as you say," writes Elin (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 97), gesturing to the 'brokenness' of her language but also at the same time evoking a comparison between her particular language, "Elinish" (95), and scat singing. In "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat," Brent Hayes Edwards cites the most well-known known 'origin story' for scat, in which Armstrong is said to have 'invented' scat when he dropped the lyrics sheet for "The Heebie Jeebies Dance" during a recording and had to improvise: " . . . I did not want to stop and spoil the record which was moving along so wonderfully . . . So when I dropped the paper, I immediately turned back into the horn and started to Scatting [sic]" (619). Scat, Edwards notes, is narrated "as a fall, as a literal dropping of the words—as an unexpected loss of the lyrics that finally proves enabling" (620). It is a falling *towards*, Edwards points out, "a kind of erosion or disarticulation" that is "not a sudden loss" (620) because something else, something new emerges in its place. The sounds vocalised in scat develop into a singer's "signature traits": "Finding [ways] to describe musical subtleties . . . is a challenge that the verbally agile and creative jazz musician meets with the descriptive language of *personality* and *emotion* found in poetry," argues Paul Berliner (126, own emphasis). Scat singing then can be understood as a kind of truth-telling, the expression and communication of an individual's timbre.

Like scat, Elinish is a broken language where the faults allow for an expression of Elin's self in relation to Fitz, an expression in which she is the other who always already breaks through the form that delimits it—the antagonistic correspondence, the beloved. In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, Elinish is that which permits heteroglossia to enter. As a language that falls outside the norms specified by linguistic systems, Elinish might be perceived as nonsense; it is often the case that what Elin says is undecipherable. Nathaniel Mackey argues that scat's "apparent mangling of articulate speech testifies to [the unspeakable]" (qtd Edwards 624)—

specifically the unspeakable history of racial violence—and is a "telling 'inarticulacy'" (qtd Edwards 624), which Edwards suggests gives form to "the edges of the voice" (625), much like Carson's consonants. Charged with feeling and private meaning, the vocabulary of scat, which is received more as sound than words, exceeds official linguistic codes.[18] A seeming absence of meaning that is really an excess of meaning, Elinish-as-scat is a "*Cri de coeur*" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 92), an expression of the lover's reach for the beloved across an impasse, beyond the edges of the self; as well as an invitation for the beloved's reply—literally so, in the case of Higgins's epistolary novel. The phonetic quality of 'Elinish' sustains the form of Elin's voice and expresses her desire for Fitz's response, for the gulf between them to be bridged: "When I write this letter in hand, in your strange tongue—isn't it tenderness then?" she asks Fitz (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 162).

Through Higgins's rendering of Elin's scat and his use of multilingual intertexts, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* is transformed into a space of uncertainty that is at the same time a space of potentiality. We can hence read Higgins's novel as another example of blind literature: the recognition of the other as other (the necessity of which Quin's *Three* made abundantly clear) is here followed by an attempt to respond to the other as other, and to therefore forge a relationship with the other. Budick suggests that the failure to know the other, in its necessary mutuality, may paradoxically "aid in creating the potentiality for a sharing of consciousness" (21). Higgins's lovers create a "lovelanguage, the oppersite language" out of 'Elinish' and 'Fitzish,' which has "secret meaning hidden in the appearance" (*Bornholm Night-Ferry* 87). This 'lovelanguage' is a kind of esoteric knowledge—Elin compares it to the Rosicrucian Manifestos, "the wise-men-middle-age-language" (87)—a manner of 'jive talk'[19] (to follow through with the comparisons to scat), which can only be accessed by the lovers, by those in the know, as if it were a code. Such exclusive dialogue is a commonplace in letters between intimates and, when used in epistolary

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[18] "I remember Pops' recoding of 'West End Blues' and how it used to gas me. It was the first time I ever heard anybody sing without using any words. I didn't know he was singing whatever came into his head when he forgot the lyrics. Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba and the rest of it had plenty of meaning for me—just as much meaning as some of the other words that I didn't always understand . . ." (Billie Holiday on listening to Louis Armstrong, cited by Edwards 624).

[19] 'Jive talk': "a secret language, a language of the inside," describes Edwards (627). Mezz Mezzrow speaks of it as "a private affair, a secret inner-circle code cooked up partly to mystify the outsiders, while it brings those in the know closer together because they alone have the key to the puzzle" (qtd Edwards 627).

novels, contributes to the illusion of authenticity. In these novels, authors often offer a key to 'cracking the code' by way of footnotes or other supplementary texts (a letter written by a third party, for instance) to avoid "hopelessly losing his outside reader," suggests Altman (*Epistolarity* 120). There is the risk, Altman suggests, that "what remains obscure appears minor" (120).

This is evidently not the case in Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry* (as well as Murdoch's and Quin's novels), in which he argues the contrary: in the novel, what remains obscure carries the most significant meaning. Higgins purposefully denies his readers access to "the inside meaning . . . the private meaning" of the lovers' vocabulary (112). Elin and Fitz's shared language is built around enigmatic phrases, the meaning of which is withheld from the outsider/reader. Phrases like 'The Third River,' 'The Bath,' and 'The Grassy Place,' gesture toward 'landmarks' in their relationship and constitute the core of their shared poetic vocabulary. These three phrases, for instance, allude to 18th April 1975, a day that Elin "only dare[s] to give titles" (33) for "[t]hat day was to me the turn from a loveaffair to love" (20); in the same vein, Fitz writes, "I loved you so much that day" (25). When these phrases appear in the discourse, they carry with them all the weight of 18th April 1975. Letter 7 from Fitz, for example, is an outpouring of emotion and Fitz returns to these phrases as a way of anchoring his feelings for Elin and of communicating the depths of his longing: "I would prefer to howl or groan because when I try to think of you here I am lost in bits and pieces," he writes,

> . . . you are somewhere else my life is somewhere else . . . there are no others no touch no Cataluña kiss nor Grassy Place no nights here no you asleep in the next room no candle gutting no water in the bathroom no shower no Third River . . . I am nothing without you I miss you very much. (27)

Later, Elin reads Fitz's sexual encounter with another woman at 'the Third River' as a deep betrayal: "NEVER MORE I want to hear who you are fucking at the Third River with the deep smooth vessel. There are so many places in the world,—why the Third River?" she asks (51). That these terms—'The Third River,' 'The Bath,' 'The Grassy Place'—come across as generic to the reader who is not in the know, but at the same time, are clearly loaded with private and significant meaning for the lovers, points to the way our experience always exceeds our linguistic systems.

'*Knepp*' is another enigma in the lovers' vocabulary. Ostensibly a Danish word meaning, "fuck, *the fuck*" (31), *knepp* takes on greater significance when used in the context of the lovers' discourse. Elin first uses it in the phrase "*Das Knepp an sich*" (20) and by relating it to Kant's theory of the thing-in-itself, "the reality as it is apart from our judgement" (31), endows the term with unprecedented gravitas; her use of the phrase also notably coincides with her declaration that she is in love with Fitz. Imhof argues that Elin's understanding of Kant's concept is that of a layman's and that *knepp*, as it is used by the lovers, does not correspond to the idea of thing-in-itself. "Whatever purport the phrase . . . '*Das Knepp an sich*' is intended to possess, must remain a mystery, unless Higgins . . . sought to suggest that [Elin] had no idea of what she was talking about," Imhof declares ("German Influences" 345). While the meaning of the phrase remains a mystery, *knepp* (and *Das Knepp an sich*) evidently carries weight, even power, for the lovers. When Fitz writes, "[Miss Mouse] was the one I went to bed with after you, nothing *Kneppen* happened, it was no good" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 44-45), his use of *Kneppen* suggests something significant, which makes his confession that he "had *Kneppen* with C. in the pool" just a few lines earlier in the same letter even more devastating for Elin, who lashes out at him in her response (44). *Knepp* is not just a word for the act of having sexual intercourse (for that, they have 'fucking') but is a symbol—*their* symbol—tied intimately to the particulars of their relationship. As Imhof observes, when *knepp* appears in the novel, the term "serves to emphasize Elin's wish to have sex with Finn, not with someone else, and not merely for the sake of having sex either" (345): "My *Knepp* was good, . . . I fucked with the chap twice, . . . Then I stopped because he approached to me, approached *your* regions," writes Elin (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 68).

Imhof points out that the "secret meaning [of the lovers' language] is at times almost impossible to decipher" ("German Influences" 344) and perceives this as a flaw in Higgins's novel; his dismissal of *Knepp* and its significance however proves the point by attesting to the exclusivity of the lovers' vocabulary. Indecipherable to outsiders, these terms are meant only for the eyes of the lover and the beloved. As Fitz puts it, "out of the middle of your pages [they] strike at me it's your feelings striking at me" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 26). The terms strike at Fitz in a way that they touch no other because he is lover and she is his beloved; in the same way,

Elin announces that Fitz's words "catched me in my heart, beating me in my stomach, taken the air out of my lungs" (64) because she is lover and he her beloved.

To say that Fitz embraces Elin and 'Elinish,' and that they share a 'lovelanguage,' is not the same as saying that they are in communion. The particular language that Fitz and Elin share both connects and separates them, just like the letters that are the vessels of this 'lovelanguage'. "Hit hit hit," writes Fitz, "how strange even in your poor English which I love that you hit at me" (26). In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, Elin and Fitz's 'lovelanguage' make the edges of the self painfully evident and what it ultimately demonstrates is that "we are—you in one way, I in another way—in the middle of the love," notes Elin (95). This is her preoccupation in Letter 38, which marks a watershed in their relationship: no further letters are exchanged between them for a little more than seven months, the longest break they experience during their affair. The letter, aptly written "in bits and pieces" (105), is Elin's attempt to understand Fitz and to get Fitz to see their relationship as she sees it. She breaks down his previous letter and addresses his pleas, excuses, accusations, questions, and ultimately, what she increasingly perceives as his selfishness. She points out the fact that even when they use the same words, they understand them differently. For instance, Elin argues that she understands 'forgive' as "to leave that subject which demands the forgiving, to keep silent" while Fitz perhaps understands it as "to forget, to go on as nothing had happened" (105-06). Or when Fitz asks Elin, "Why are we right together?" (102), by which he means to ask for an explanation for their love, and Elin interprets 'right' in terms of morality (something which Fitz never appears to consider) and insists, "We are not right together. When you assert that, by asking about why we are, you close one eye. Even you know, that everything was not right . . ." (106). It is, naturally, the simple common words—like 'forgive,' and 'right'; and also "responsibility, obligations, etc.," those "stiff dead words" (112)— that finally trip them up. "No, we will never entirely understand each other (and this is not only a question of language)," acknowledges Elin (164).

The notes she makes about their time in London, which make up the second half of Letter 38, further highlight the ways in which the lovers operate by "[their] own norms" (109). The privacy of the diary-like format, especially coming after the intimate quote-and-respond structure of the previous half, intensifies the isolation Elin feels within the relationship, the sense that "F wants never . . . what I want" (109). Within this echo chamber of sorts, Elin's anxieties about their relationship, about the

difficulty and the ridiculousness of "laying in another woman's conjugal bed," literally and figuratively, resonate painfully: "And the children. What do they feel? What do they think?" she wonders to herself as Fitz sleeps, apparently unflustered (108). "No response, no obligingness, not at all any commonship, only self-will. And the worst: No curiosity," she laments (109). Though not disturbed by the same concerns as Elin, Fitz himself experiences a similar isolation in London, a similar suffering from a lack of interest on the other's part. He writes, "The only 'disappointment' I found . . . was your deafness to what I said sometimes because I suppose you were thinking in Danish, heard only sounds" (93); here again, their different languages foreground their differences and separation from one another. Fitz dismisses this sense of their apartness ironically in light of his 'knowledge' that "you for your part were reaching deep into me, and I for my part deep into you" (93); that he appears not to have felt the same 'terrible dislocation of souls' on the trip that Elin does reinforces their 'lack of correspondence,' as it were.

In the moments when they seem to feel the loneliest in their relationship, Elin and Fitz alike turn to the consolation of the diary form: Elin has her London diary, and Fitz his Bornholm and Atepmoc diaries; significantly, London, Bornholm, and Atepmoc are all figured at some point as oases in the troubled waters of their relationship. (Without making too much of the fact, it is interesting to note also that diary entries bookend what is ostensibly an epistolary novel.) O'Neill describes *Bornholm Night-Ferry* as "a novel about the possibility of communication, the possibility of researching one place from another, reaching one person from another. Or more accurately, it is a novel about the impossibility of such an endeavour . . ." (254). Letters, and love letters most of all, rarely succeed in communicating, insofar as this means corresponding with a known other.

Elin's diary entry of 29th April 1975 reads in part: "I went for a walk around the town, couldn't really find home, understood the direction but was on the wrong level all the time" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 36); this poignant image of being out of sync depicts the dominant mood of Higgins's novel. The disrupted correspondence between Elin and Fitz, and the repeated turns to their private diaries, are telling of the greater gulf that exists between them, a distance that is not merely geographical: "We will never fit together," Elin points out bluntly, ". . . not in nationality, language, upbringing, style, tempo" (163). The novel opens with Fitz's diary entries for their last trip together and essentially signals the end of the love

affair. The entries are scant, the tone subdued. What is described is not the happy long-awaited reunion of lovers forced apart by circumstances but lovers falling out of love, perhaps already having fallen out of love, despite what Fitz says of Elin being his "true love" and his noting of the latter's initial excitement (9). There is little tenderness in the 'reportage' of their trip, from the ferry ride to Sweden ("The passengers went calmly aboard. It was hot in the saloon. We sat on a bench . . . Changed Kroner in Malmö . . . ," 9) to the time spent in Bornholm, which previously had been for them "filled with promises" (61).

Of her earlier trip to Bornholm without Fitz, Elin writes that "A calm came to me in this days" and that "So many things found their place in this days, my restlessness vanished" (62). Their time spent in Bornholm together, as Fitz experiences it, in contrast, seems to be pure restlessness. More often than not, the lovers seem to be merely "killing time" (10), as they drift from bar to museum to their house. The land does not rise to meet them. "[Bornholm] was singularly deserted," notes Fitz, "The real character of the island failed to reveal itself to us" (11). His unforgiving summary of their three days there reads: "Rock" (11). Fitz's inability to experience Bornholm in the same way that Elin does is indicative of his inability to enter her life and to know her fully, and of their inability as a couple to inhabit the same space. Bornholm, the dream of loving union, dissipates. "Of that journey then what now remains?" writes Fitz,

> A meager enough display of fruit and vegetables in the market at Ystad. The brewery smell and my torn jacket. The persistent rain, a smile lingering on Swedish lips, Sweden's folkless fields, invoking sadness; a settled land. (12)

And the smile, the one potentially redeeming thing in Fitz's pitiful list, a "sinister smile" from a bar-lady in a restaurant where "no one looked happy" (9-10).

In these diary entries, Fitz sees everything but Elin, who, unseen, is also unknown and unloved. In Sweden, he notes the "expensive briefcases" the businessmen are carrying, that they take their coffee without sugar (9); on the Rönne-Copenhagen night-ferry, he notices a passenger, "a long cigarette-holder tilted at a truculent angle, voraciously read right through *Frankfurter Algemeine Zeitung*" (11). Of Elin, he says next to nothing, save for the brief first entry in which he writes of her excitement at going to Bornholm. Fitz's 'Bornholm Diary' stands in stark contrast to his 'Atepmoc Diary' of 1975, which marks the beginning of his love affair with Elin.

The latter is all Elin. Once she "sail[s] into view" (169), Fitz sees nothing else but her surprising tallness, "the nudeness of [her] ears," her "white linen shirt" and her "flared skirt of pale colours" (169). Left behind are the "usual fucked-up aspect" of the Plaza (169), "the time alone, the dead stillness, bat and lynx faces amongst the cobwebs, stirrings and gnawings in the heat of mid-afternoon, the incessant drone of flies, a small bird suspended on the wire outside" (170). *You, you, you*, Fitz writes, over and over again in these first entries; in the last entries, it is precisely *you* that is so obviously missing. Here in these first diary entries, Higgins foreshadows the lovers' disappointing (at least on Elin's part) trip to London. "We can seemingly see everybody except each other," Elin points out (154); tellingly, in the lovers' dreams, one tends to hide from the other (172, 174).

Bornholm Night-Ferry begins at the end and in a subtle mirroring trick, Higgins ends it at the beginning. Part V opens with Fitz's diary entry right at the start of the love affair in April 1975 and ends in '*Last Dream*,' arguably the dream of 30th April in the same year, which Elin refers to in her "Resumé" of their days together (36). Already then, in the first month of their relationship, Fitz dreams of them "in the midst of our despair," with him moving furniture around a dingy hotel room and Elin watching "but as if unseen, a spectre" (175). Already then, degrees of lonesomeness and strangeness. A woman asks a question of Fitz and then leaves without waiting for the answer; travellers speak in an unfamiliar language; a four-foot toy snake coiled up on the floor, "a foreign joke," lies coiled up on the carpet in their "strange and uncomfortable room" (175). With a sleight of hand, Higgins reveals the ruin at the origin and reiterates the distance between lover and beloved.

An Unexpected Direction

All that said, Elin and Fitz are in agreement on one thing:

> *"Surely with us no week-end affaire."*
> Surely with us no week-end affaire. (107)

In this moment, amidst all their differences, Elin and Fitz come together. Here, we bear witness to their 'lovelanguage' at the moment of its triumph: two lines from two different voices resonating. To be sure, the lovers' discourse is not dialectical: reason,

Truth, and synthesis do not participate in this particular conversation. Rather, Barthes argues, it "turns like a perpetual calendar, an encyclopedia of affective culture" (*A Lover's Discourse* 7); which is to say that the love letter works like a *metaphor*. Carson describes the metaphor as "A virtuoso act of imagination [that] brings the two things together, sees their incongruence, then sees also a new congruence, meanwhile continuing to recognise the previous incongruence through the new congruence" (73). She might as well be describing the mechanisms of the love letter here, which is conditioned by the very distance between two distinct parties that it attempts to bridge. But what to make of this new congruence that the metaphor achieves, for which the love letter is also a metaphor? It is not strictly congruence since, like the love letter, the metaphor not only preserves but is founded on the incongruence between the two things (or people). To complicate this first proffered 'definition,' Carson refers to it elsewhere as "act of arrest and interception that splits the mind and puts it in a state of war within itself" (74).

In *Sense and Sensibilia*, J. L. Austin suggests that there exists a category of 'adjuster-words' in our vocabulary, such as 'like,' that make up for the deficiencies of our language: "If we think of words as being shot like arrows at the world, the function of these adjuster-words is to free us from the disability of being able to shoot straight ahead" (74). For Austin, 'like' is "*the* great adjuster-word . . . the main flexibility-device by whose aid, in spite of the limited scope of our vocabulary, we can always avoid being left completely speechless" (74), and he argues that the word "equips us *generally* to handle the unforeseen, in a way in which new words invented *ad hoc* don't and can't" (75). But the capacity of 'like' to engage with the unforeseen is limited. After all, 'like' is the indicator par excellence of congruence and also of a simile, which depends on an apparent resemblance, or at least one that requires the minimal amount of effort to discern. Austin suggests as much when he notes that the 'targets' of adjuster-words "[lie] *slightly off* the simple, straightforward line on which they are ordinarily aimed" (74, own emphasis). A simile *deals* with the unforeseen and assimilates it somewhat to an economy of the same. Denis Donoghue suggests that when Marcel Proust claims in *Le Temps retrouvé* that a metaphor enables him to locate the "common essence" of two objects and therefore "[liberate them] from the contingencies of time" (qtd and trans. in Donoghue, *Metaphor* 172), he is really describing a simile (172). He cites Gérard Genette's criticism of Proust's 'metaphor,' which is really a criticism of the reductive mechanisms of the simile:

> Thus, between its conscious intentions and its real execution, Proust's writing falls prey to a singular reversal: having set out to locate essences, it ends up constituting, or reconstituting, mirages; intended to reach, through the substantial depth of the text, the profound substances of things, it culminates in an effect of phantasmagoric superposition in which the depths cancel each other out, and the substances devour one another. (qtd Donoghue, *Metaphor* 172-73)

A simile, as Genette's choice of diction suggests, has something of the lifeless in it since it depends on a reduction of the unknown to "established terminology," whose purpose is, Donoghue argues, "to make sense of an obscurity by bringing to bear upon it the sense that has already been made in another way" ("The Domestication of Outrage" 102).

A metaphor, on the other hand, delays the moment of recognition since it is more mysterious than a simile and oftentimes demands that one expend some effort in order to 'decipher' the relationship. "In a metaphor, the relation between tenor and vehicle is much more daring than a comparison; it has nothing in common with the law of causality in science," writes Donoghue (*Metaphor* 172). It is hence always an exercise in engaging with the unforeseen as if in a Bakhtinian dialogue. Donoghue argues in *Metaphor* that resemblance between the tenor and vehicle is not a prerequisite for a figure of speech to be defined as a metaphor, even in the form of an "occult likeness" (99). Rather, the "essential requirement" of a metaphor, as he sees it, is *a shift of position* (99) enabled by a "[p]erception of incompatibility" (Ricoeur qtd in Donoghue 173): a word or a phrase is transferred "from its natural position in the language to an improper position elsewhere" (170).

A metaphor, Donoghue argues, always "drives the statement in an unexpected direction" (1). It veers off course, slips into abandoned back alleys, and makes sharp turns (occasionally threatening whiplash). A metaphor is the poet's means of carrying out his duty, which is to "see to it that language [and thought and life along with it] does not petrify," declares Ezra Pound (qtd in Donoghue 119). Similarly, where Higgins is concerned, the static is to be feared, or at the very least to be suspicious of. "If that's your Ireland, I do understand you left. Standstill, deadly boredom, impenetrable selfishness, bog, all the worst in myself," writes Elin (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 15). The "appeal of 'the marooned one'" (O'Brien 284) for Higgins—Elin and Fitz being two of many such "beached, becalmed but not by any

means finished" voyager-figures that populate Higgins's oeuvre (288)—is the accompanying compulsion to travel, to move out of boredom, to escape "[a]ll this demi-waiting that reduce[s] . . . life to nothing" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 76). Possibilities, Higgins suggests, are lost in the petrification of language (and thought and life along with it), "by taking the consequence immediately and call it the same" (52) as one does in a simile. A metaphor, on the other hand, salvages these as it works to 'make the static flow,' which is the task Higgins sets for himself in *Bornholm Night-Ferry* (Letter to Bill Swainson, qtd in Murphy, "The Other Day" 327). To make the static flow to what end? Appropriately, a metaphor comes to mind: that of the blood coursing through a body and keeping it alive. Citing Gustav Stern, Donoghue suggests that the 'value' of a metaphor lies in the way the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle results in the former being "brought into a new light" and "comprehended more vividly and completely than before" (*Metaphor* 53). This is for him the "supreme value" of the metaphor: it is "a device to make further experience possible"(64), something that "gives us more abundant life" (71).

Reality, Higgins argues, is a matter of perspective: "[it] is not a matter of showing real things, but of showing how things really are" ("Foundering in Reality" 98). *Bornholm Night-Ferry*'s formal structure is built on a metaphorical logic: to borrow Murphy's words, the novel demonstrates Higgins's hope "that some sense [of experience] can be communicated by building extraordinary images from which networks of binding associations can emerge" ("Aidan Higgins" 50). At the center of its networks, lies Elin. Because Elin is other to Fitz, every one of her words—her misspellings, her awkward grammatical structures, her malapropisms especially—is unexpected, "surprising as an angel in a low-class-pub" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 98), potentially a metaphor come to disturb Fitz's familiar universe. The 'z' she puts in 'flowing' to make 'flowzing' to differentiate the word from 'floating' is a characteristic gesture because Elin is that which turns the floating in Fitz's world into the flowing, "a strolling person" (77). In a "dreary and joyless time, with parts of teeth falling out and eyes worsening, hair uncut in years," Fitz writes to Elin that he "[n]eeds your mixture of neo-german-urEnglish with some Danish thrown in for good measure, *to keep me awake*" (123, own emphasis). "My uncalm is you," says Fitz (80); with Elin, "everything begins to flow again, and I in it, pulled towards you, longing for you" (79). Similarly, in "The Bird I Fancied," Higgins writes: "Ortega says that in loving we abandon the tranquility and permanence within ourselves and

virtually migrate towards the objects of our desire; this constant state of migration is what it is to be in love" (337). As it turns out, the lover and the beloved are not two halves of a whole but rather, two parts of a metaphor, perpetually moving towards each other, taking unexpected meandering paths.

A Truth By Other Means

> 'Every day in Denmark is different' is a roundabout, not to say torturous and evasive, way of admitting that one was once infatuated with an enchanting Danish siren.
>
> —Aidan Higgins, *A Bestiary*

A metaphor, to borrow Elin's words, is "Like a prophecy you don't understand untill it has come true" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 19). That which works by a metaphorical logic takes a road less travelled, cutting through or circumventing consolatory mirages, and brings us back to life, to the profound substance of things, to truth. Barthes offers an anecdote:

> The truth: what is *oblique*. A monk once asked Kao Tsu: "What is the unique and final word of truth?" . . . The master replied: "*Yes.*" I take this answer not as a vague prejudice in favour of general acquiescence as the philosophical secret of truth. I understand that the master, bizarrely opposing an adverb to a pronoun, *yes* to *what*, replies *obliquely* . . .. (*A Lover's Discourse* 231)

Just as the Oracle of Delphi was said never to offer straight answers, the master in Barthes's anecdote seems to answer a different question from the one asked of him. In *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, D. Z. Suzuki describes Zen *koans* as "some anecdote of an ancient master, or a dialogue put forward by a teacher, all of which are used as the means of opening one's mind to the truth of Zen" (102). *Koans* employ a metaphorical logic and aim at displacing the rational intellect (i.e., they effect a suspension of thought) because, as Suzuki declares, "[s]o long as we think logic is final we are chained, we have no freedom of spirit, and the real facts of life are lost sight of" (60). (We might count Zen Buddhists among the philosophers of the blind.) To 'grasp' the truth of the *koan* then, one is expected to pay attention to it, meditate on it until 'enlightenment' dawns and "you see what is showed for you: a knock-out of precision and truthfulness" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 98). Similarly,

Donoghue suggests that "the most acute quality of a metaphor" is its existence—or, more precisely, the existence of its vehicle, the unexpected term—on the "extreme limit of identity" (*Metaphor* 200). A metaphor "provokes the resistance of common sense," and to bring it forward, one must "compel attention to the whole of the vehicle, not just to the qualities on which a strict comparison would thrive" (200).

The truth of a metaphor is oblique and hinges on its otherness, its absurdity. The 'enlightenment' it offers is "a new viewpoint for looking into the essence of things" (Suzuki 88). (Here, we return to Weil's exercises and her reminder that if we are not sure of what we see we change our position while looking.[20]) "It is not that *something different is seen*, but that one *sees differently*," argues Jung in his foreword to Suzuki's study (17). In answering 'nonsensically,' the master in Barthes's anecdote turns the question from a correspondence into a relation between two images without erasing their difference. Here, Barthes uses Zen philosophy to gesture towards the manner of thinking that governs the metaphor—thinking in the Arendtian sense rather than in the conventional sense, which would mean along the lines of rationality and logic. *I shut my eyes in order to see*, says Paul Gauguin. Obscurity "inscribe[s] a blind point at the center of the story" (Carson 105) that initiates a new perspective, such as in the case of Elin's friend, Finn Sildehoved, "one of the difficult types who is word-blind, not orthographical but in their expresses, their choice of words" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 61): "You must find a certain dictionary in order to understand what he means," writes Elin, "When you understand that you discover that he is seeing the most delicate connections" (61). (Of course, a dictionary that unravels the mystery of the beloved is not ever at hand; and so we always move in love like blind men.) Of Beckett's oeuvre, Higgins writes, "The angle of attack was always unusual and unexpected, a pincer-movement directed at the heart" ("Introduction" 19), more deeply felt perhaps for being unusual and unexpected.

That which is oblique tends to be treated with suspicion and often rightly so. Consider a common symbol of indirection, the knight in chess, which moves obliquely, in an L-shaped manner, making a brief feint in one direction only to slip off to another. The knight's move is suggestive: there is always something of the deceptive in the oblique. The letter is not the lover, the lover is not at hand. Hippomenes's throwing of apples to distract Atalanta and slow her down is a trick

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[20] Weil, *Gravity and Grace* 120.

that allows him to beat her in the race since he is not truly faster than her. In *The Go-Between*, Marian and Ted exploit Leo's innocence and naivety to get him to deliver their letters under the guise of 'business.' Love always depends on the oblique in some measure, and as such, it tends to deception: the lie is in the images that proliferate in a relationship—the image the lover constructs for the beloved and the image of himself he presents to the beloved, as well as the image both create of a possible, harmonious union. When Dan Ruttle, Higgins's protagonist in *Balcony of Europe*, refers to "the wonderful, dangerous *intensification of feeling* that comes with lying and cheating in love" (288, own emphasis), he is picking up on the lover's naturally deceptive nature. This is not to say that lying and cheating are matters of love's course. To rephrase Murdoch, there are bad images, which are mired in self-indulgence, and there are good images, which aspire to the perfection of artifice, wherein 'perfection' is understood in terms of honesty, attentiveness, and fidelity. If love really *is* love, all of the lover's subterfuges are made on the way to truth.

By naming the collection of correspondences between him and Anna Reiner a 'novel,' and in giving each fictional identities, Higgins places experience squarely within the realm of the imaginary, and declares, as his counterpart in the novel does, that 'reality' must always be enclosed in quotation marks (*Bornholm Night-Ferry* 93). What the quotation marks indicate is that 'reality' can never be taken at face value and that it is always reached obliquely; that is to say, by way of the imagination. "Everything depends on if we are clever enough to dream. And believe in our dreams. And realize our dreams so fervently we are able to," writes Elin (21). It is not (necessarily) the case that we are drawn to that which is false. What we are drawn to is the profound depths of truth that are not readily apparent as Truth and that are accessible only by the circuitous route of the lie; that is to say, 'truth' in the sense of whatever constitutes 'reality' for the particular individual. The deceptions of good images—that is to say, art—are forged in the name of truth, with the awareness that, as Julian Barnes puts it in *Flaubert's Parrot*, "directness confuses" (116) because it assumes that meaning can be corralled in such a way that there can be a definitive answer to a question, which amounts to a Truth, and gives the illusion of being able to provide a path to that Truth. (In this novel, Geoffrey Braithwaite searches for Truth in the form of Flaubert's stuffed parrot in vain; he ends up being told that the parrot could be any one of fifty in a museum.) The 'truth' is elusive and multiple: elusive because multiple, multiple because elusive; this is the truth that art reaches for. In

gesturing to wider fields of meaning beyond our reach, the lie that is art establishes itself as being more honest to experience than anything that we have hitherto refer to as Truth.

In "On Truth and Lying," Friedrich Nietzsche speaks of Truth as "less colorful, cooler concepts" drawn from the truths of the individual's "sudden impressions" and "intuitions" (250). The former is necessary—we have made them so—for the building of society and they stand before us "as the more solid, more universal, more familiar, more human, and therefore as the regulatory and imperative world" (250); but these, Nietzsche notes, are only the *residues* of the "intuitive metaphor[s]" that form our experience in the world, that are "individual and unique and therefore always [elude] any commentary" (250). Nietzsche argues that art's consciousness of its own dissimulative procedures is that which frees it to "celebrate its Saturnalia" (255) and to run through the gamut of experiences that life has to offer. He illustrates the difference between an unconscious dissimulation and a self-conscious one by comparing the rational man, the man of fixed concepts, who remains deceived by their apparent Truth, to the intuitive man. The former, he writes, is motivated by "ward[ing] off misfortune" and

> does not wear a quivering and mobile human face but, as it were, a mask with dignified harmony of features, he does not scream and does not even raise his voice. When a real storm cloud pours down upon him, he wraps himself in his overcoat and walks away under the rain with slow strides. (256-57)

(Here, we can hear the echoes of Levinas's criticism of images that fix life unethically, and of the patterns Leonard and Ruth put into place to defend themselves from the contingencies and intensity of life in *Three*.) The intuitive man, on the other hand, "reaps from his intuitions a continuously streaming clarification, cheerfulness, redemption" (256). He "suffers more violently when he does suffer; indeed, he also suffers more often" (256) but he is more in touch with reality than the rational man; his self-consciousness, that is art's self-consciousness, places him in the midst of life.

In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, John Ruskin argues that not only does self-conscious dissimulation place us in the midst of life, it is also a standard by which man might hold his life to. He defines the "action of the imagination" as "a voluntary summoning of the conceptions of things absent or impossible" (34) and, like Nietzsche, suggests, "the pleasure and nobility of the imagination partly consist

in its knowledge and contemplation of them as such, *i.e.* in the knowledge of their actual absence or impossibility at the moment of their apparent presence or reality" (34-35). In his view, the imagination avoids the charge of deception precisely by "confess[ing] its own ideality" (35). In contrast, the poor imagination that creates bad art insists on its own authenticity; Ruskin goes as far as suggesting, "When the imagination deceives, it becomes madness" (35). "All the difference lies in the fact of the confession, in their being *no* deception," he argues, "It is necessary to our rank as spiritual creatures, that we should be able to invent and to behold what is not; and to our rank as moral creatures, that we should know and confess at the same time that it is not" (35).

Self-reflexive fictions like Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry* lay their ruses bare, confessing the inevitably artificial nature of the forms we conceive for categorizing experience. "Our ideas are only the left-overs of a breath," acknowledges Higgins ("Foundering in Reality" 98). The epistle is a useful entry point to begin thinking about the forms of experience from this point of view because it formally and explicitly stages this reach and the fictions that emerge with it point to the fact that the beloved is not *here*. Epistolary novels, in particular, offer a distinct advantage as the novel brings with it self-questioning procedures, its practice of "keep[ing] the thought clear for a long time" as Elin notes (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 115), its attention to the human minutiae; as well as, of course, its subterfuges and its tricks, its artifice: for what is the novel but an oblique form, a lie aspiring to a truth?

The Novel in Bornholm Night-Ferry

But that's hardly a novel at all!

—Aidan Higgins on *Bornholm Night-Ferry*

"And of course it is a novel but what he meant was that [*Bornholm Night-Ferry*] wasn't something he had invented for novelistic purposes," explains Murphy (*Aidan Higgins: The Reach of Words*). In speaking of *Bornholm Night-Ferry* as a 'novel,' one must enclose the term in quotation marks the way one does for 'reality.' For one, it is comprised of actual letters exchanged between Higgins and Anna Reiner, "reprinted without revisions, and replete with 'Elin's' pigeon English, to preserve the essence of Reiner's character," as Higgins informs Murphy ("The Other Day" 330).

Moreover, as Murphy points out, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* lacks the conventions that identify a novel as such: "[it is] almost entirely bereft of a central narratorial form and what structure there is emerges primarily from the intense nature of the emotional variations played out in the exchanges between the two writers" ("The Other Day" 330).

In telling its story, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* stretches the form of the epistolary novel to its limits. Of Higgins's play with form, Murphy writes,

> In refusing to avail of recognisable literary conventions in communicating his vision, Higgins effectively breaks the coded agreement between reader and writer, and in doing so, he erases many points of recognition necessary for the reader. ("Aidan Higgins" 81)

And yet, he adds, "surely the act of reading is not simply an act of recognition—it is also an act of exploration during which we discover rather than simply recognise" (82). Here, Murphy describes the procedure of a metaphor. A metaphor is generative: though it ultimately establishes some measure of resemblance, this resemblance is the *aftermath* of bringing two images together, not the origin. In *Models and Metaphors*, Max Black suggests, "it would be more illuminating . . . to say that the metaphor *creates* the similarity than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing" (37, own emphasis). Like *eros* and the epistle, a metaphor is a noun that acts everywhere like a verb. Jeanette Winterson describes the metaphor as such: "Meta = above. Pherein = to carry. That which is carried above the literalness of life" (*Art & Lies* 136-37); the metaphor, that is, as the attempt to look beyond the written words, beyond what they conventionally refer to (i.e., an objective world) to a truth the words themselves are reaching for together. The truth of a metaphor's resemblance is therefore resonance rather than mimesis, a matter of creative effort.

The metaphorical logic governing *Bornholm Night-Ferry* demonstrates that the act of recognition, of naming truth, is *imaginative labour*. *Labour*, not least because, as Philip Weinstein suggests, "To see how things [knowing subject and object known, lover and beloved] go together requires a strenuous undoing of how they are normally said to go together" (6). In the same vein, Nietzsche argues in "On Truth and Lying" that it is by man's "*unconsciousness*," his "forgetting" of the concepts that are the result of "[o]verlooking the individual and the real" (that is, his Truths, or 'how things are normally said to go together') in favour of that which is

general and abstracted that he "arrives at his sense of truth" (250). To attempt to name 'truth' requires a conscious effort on the part of man. Furthermore, Bataille, in his urging of us to move beyond knowledge into un-knowing "in which nothing is ever given, in which we have no guarantee of any kind" ("Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears" 100), notes that this cannot "be done straight off" (102). He argues that "a certain boldness" (100) and "matchless courage" is necessary "so that we may endure the exhaustion, and even the tedium of the ant's labour carried out within our heads" (102). It is by way of work that "our only possibility [of coming into contact with the depth of experience] might be found" (100). Accordingly, Higgins writes: Elin is "violent" and her love "difficult, terrible," and Fitz "take[s] it, and it is terrible" (*Bornholm Night-Ferry* 38).

The persistence that is required of Higgins's lovers, and that they exhibit despite the strains on themselves, parallel Higgins's persistence in giving shape to his experiences, which are "reissued, relocated, and revised" across his *oeuvre* (Murphy, "Aidan Higgins" 51). What emerges here also is the idea that the naming of truth is a *necessary* labour. Higgins draws extensively from his personal experiences for his work and tends to revisit the same events multiple times, sometimes even within a single work as in the case of his autobiographies (*Donkey's Years, Dog Days,* and *The Whole Hog*, collected as one in *A Bestiary*). On this, Murphy writes, "To suggest that Higgins turns the same literary sod each time is not altogether untrue, but his understanding of his piece of soil is more refined with each new visitation" ("Aidan Higgins" 68). Higgins argues in "Foundering in Reality" that we are compelled to keep trying to name our truths because the modern imagination initiates a new meaning of authenticity by recognizing that the old ways, perspectives, and words no longer fit: "we are heirs to a new world; our beliefs are different, our points of reference have been fixed anew," he declares (97). Similarly, when Barthes states, "one cannot write without burying 'sincerity,'" his use of quotation marks betrays a suspicion that the word in the sense of Truth (or what one takes to be Truth) is being misused, is already irrelevant (*A Lover's Discourse* 98). In order to write, one must bury an archaic sense of sincerity: "always the Orpheus myth: not to turn back," adds Barthes in parentheses (98).

This labour of (re)naming truth takes on a particular urgency in the speaking of love, which is often taken to be synonymous with truth. In a way, to name truth is to name love. In *Written on the Body*, Winterson laments that love is "always a

quotation": "You did not say it first and neither did I, yet when you say it and when I say it we speak like savages who have found three words and worship them" (9). This, despite a common conviction in the absolute originality of one's particular love for one's particular beloved. "All loving persons promise each other that *their* life will be different," Elin points out (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 76). We might even go as far as to say that the very existence of a particular love is conditioned by this presumption of its uniqueness, which begets an intensity of experience, a depth that enables us to transform the ephemerality of experience from something we immediately perceive as cruel into something meaningful. More than any other image, the lover's image of the beloved is "a stop the mind makes between uncertainties" (Higgins, "Foundering in Reality" 93): "your hair that binds me, your photo eyes that regard me, lift me up out of this pit of uncertainty I am drowning in," writes Fitz (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 80).

Love is arguably the singular aspect of experience where the stakes of the labour of naming truth are highest. But love's paradoxes and complexities, along with our inclination to believe in the absolute originality of our love, are such that it exceeds our existing forms for it. As Barthes argues, love can be said to be adequately "accounted for today by no major system of thought" (*A Lover's Discourse* 210). "[T]here is no system of love: and the several systems which surround the contemporary lover offer him no room (except an extremely devaluated place)," he declares (211): Christian discourse is dated, psychoanalytical discourse is contrary to love's movement and knows only to despair where love is concerned, and Marxist discourse speaks of something else entirely (211). To further dissociate his lover's truth from Truth, Barthes encloses the word in quotation marks since the world-at-large does not see it as truth, and he later refers to it as his "madness," though this he also places within quotation marks since the lover knows there is method in his madness ("I am mad to be in love, I am not mad to be able to say so," 120). Like *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* is born of a dire necessity: the need for a form to speak of love and to hence, bring it into being. Similarly, while Winterson's narrator acknowledges that our forms of love are woefully unoriginal, she (or he) persists in fashioning a form nonetheless because what else can a lover do but speak of love? (And a lover is after all recognised only by his declaration of love, failed though the attempt may be.)

In "Together," Donoghue suggests that the need to forge new, honest forms for experience is something Irish writers are particularly attuned to as a result of their history.[21] He writes, "it is my impression that Irish writers sense a rift between experience and meaning, but in reverse: the meaning is premature, already inscribed by a mythology they have no choice but to inherit, and then, if they must, to resent" (152). Higgins's response (not necessarily characterised by resentment) towards his inheritance and now the loss of it—as well as his inheritance of loss[22]—is to attempt a rescue of meaning. This rescue takes the form of technical innovation partly because, as he argues, the truth-'value' of any new meaning is to be tested by its relationship to labour: "If a thing isn't worth [the work of] getting the technique to say, it is of inferior value" ("Foundering in Reality" 97). But also because Higgins's notion of sincerity includes something that our understanding of it has hitherto ignored: that is, to borrow Joyce's words, that "One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot" (146). And so, Higgins must invent in the original meaning of the word, as pointed out by Winterson in *Art & Lies*: "Strictly, from the Latin Invenire, Inventum, it means 'To come upon.' In = upon. Venire = to come. . . . Not to devise or contrive or fabricate but to find that which exists" (199); which is to say, Higgins must discover again what he ought to be able to recognise through the forging of new forms. As Winterson observes,

> Perhaps everything that can exist does exist, as Plato would say, in true form, but perhaps those forms with which we have become the most familiar now pass for what we call actual life. The world of everyday experience is a world of redundant form. Form coarsened, cheapened, made easy and comfortable, the hackneyed and the clichéd, not what is found but what is lost. Invention

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[21] "The real trouble is that our natural experience has been too limited to be true. Our categories of feeling have been flagrantly limited; our history has been at once intense and monotonous. . .. A limited history, congealed mythologies, a literature of fits and starts" (150).

[22] The Irish writer's inheritance of loss can be understood in relation to Ireland's history as an English colony, which resulted in the traumatic near-eradication of Gaelic culture and language in favour of the English language. The Irish poet Thomas Kinsella writes, "I recognize a great inheritance and simultaneously a great loss. The inheritance is certainly mine but only at two enormous removes—across a century's silence and through an exchange of worlds. . .. I recognize that I stand on one side of a great rift and can feel the discontinuity in myself. It is a matter of peoples and places as well as writing—of coming from a broken and uprooted family, of being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives" (qtd Richard Kearney, "Introduction" 10-11). Hence, the oft-cited figure of the Irish artist as an exile at home. Higgins does not directly address this loss in his fiction but a sense of it emerges in the not-negative form of cultural intertextuality—his 'cosmopolitanism,' as Banville and Rob Doyle note in their tributes ("In praise of Aidan Higgins")—that characterises his work.

then would return to us forms not killed through too much use. Art does it.
(*Art and Lies* 199)

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno similarly suggests that "[a]rtworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience" (5). Susanne Langer makes this liberation from perception "from all practical purposes" central to the purpose of art in *Feeling and Form* (49). She argues that "the true power of the image lies in the fact that it is an abstraction, a symbol, the bearer of an idea" (47), and its purpose is to "give forms a new embodiment in purely qualitative, unreal instances, setting them free from their normal embodiment in real things so that they may be recognized in their own right" (50). In other words, art, in dislocating itself from the world at large, "exist[s] only for the sense or the imagination that perceives them" (50): it gives a form to our individual truths and enables us to name them; and in doing so, puts us back in touch with the vitality of experience. Art is a measure of our capacity to engage with the dimensions of experience that we are helplessly blind to although mystery surrounds us on every side, and with the all-important meaning that always threatens to escape us; that is, to engage with that 'great part of every human experience' that Joyce refers to. The successful artwork then is one that demonstrates a metaphorical form of knowledge that is partly the result of recognition and partly of discovery. Recognition comes easy to us since it is in our nature to 'domesticate'; it is with the latter that we need art's help with.

For all the reasons already covered in this chapter and in the previous chapters—its openness to the suspension of thought, its inclination for self-reflexivity, its affinity with dissidence and difference, its oblique movement—the form of the novel is suitably adapted to the endeavour of naming truth. Though, as Murphy points out, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* lacks novelistic conventions, it feels inevitable that Fitz and Elin's attempts to lay claim on their reality and to name the truth that is their labourious love and their reaching for one another that wears them both down over time, find a sympathetic shape in the genre of the novel. The idea of necessary imaginative labour is after all absolutely essential to the novel as a form.

In opening a novel, we ready ourselves for work: for the writer's finished labour and our own that is just about to begin. In the past, the reader's labour was

literal since one had to cut open the pages of the book oneself, an act akin to an initiation ritual. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Italo Calvino describes the cutting of pages: "Opening a path for yourself, with a sword's blade, in the barrier of pages . . . you cut your way through your reading as if through a dense forest" (42); the diction here is plucked straight out of an adventure novel in which one embarks on a quest. Calvino's novel is all about the reader's labour: from going to the bookshop to purchase the book to finding "the most comfortable position" (3) in which to read, to slashing one's way between pages, and to finally "attack[ing] the first lines of the first page" (9). In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, the reader's labour extends to and is embodied in a literal quest to search for the narrative, a quest in which the reader is not merely a person who labours but a hero. Moreover, Calvino's novel is also about the labour of the novel-as-form: it runs the gamut of genres, from detective novel to Western, and cites just as many artists (Chekhov and Borges, for instance), demonstrating Bakhtin's theory that the novel is form-in-process, "plasticity itself" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 39). The novel (the form in general, as well as Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry*) is more than a story: it is also its telling, an "attempt to formulate a unique way of focusing on the world," as Murphy puts it ("Aidan Higgins" 68). By making of *Bornholm Night-Ferry* a novel, rather than publishing the letters as a series of correspondence as in Swift's *The Journal to Stella*, Higgins foregrounds the necessary imaginative labour that goes into paying attention to the world and to the beloved, and into giving a form and therefore according significance to experience.

In "Three Academic Pieces" (collected in *The Necessary Angel*), Wallace Stevens speaks of poetry as "a satisfying of the desire for resemblance" (77) by the imagination; he adds that "metamorphosis might be a better word" (72) since the created resemblance initiates a transformation or a sublimation. Poetry, he suggests, "touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it" (77). It is this that distinguishes poetry (or art, in general, as one might extrapolate) from any other endeavour. This is the nature of art's resemblance: resonance as opposed to mimesis, a matter of recognition as much as one of active discovery, and consequently, honesty as opposed to identity. By dint of Higgins's poetic effort, his indirection and his metaphors, his necessary imaginative labour, the real is "made more acute by the unreal," to borrow Steven's words in "The Bouquet" (qtd in Donoghue, *Metaphor* 206). As Elin writes, "Your memories of us are too full of

'unreliablenesses' but mostly more true than the reality. But reality stands in no need to be true to life" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 65).

A Fragile Form

> Circumstances are never fully our own because they contain another person, we forget that. We thought of the other person as part of our perplexity: in reality that perplexity is part of the other person.
> —Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Strangeness is a word that Murphy frequently associates with Higgins:

> Higgins's mature fiction seems consumed with the problem of how to locate a form to accommodate the strangeness of a life that is frequently incomprehensible, forever on the point of departure, but always somehow anchored by bright moments of love, however brief. ("Aidan Higgins" 50)

The beloved is part of the strangeness of life, as the epigraph from Djuna Barnes suggests. Necessarily escaping the lover's grasp, the beloved is 'forever on the point of departure' such that there is inevitably something of the otherworldly, of the ghostly about the beloved, something always already irretrievably lost—that yet confronts us as an absence presently felt in the face of the beloved. In the fictional Elin Mastrander, who, being the other whose reality is perplexity, is always already on the point of departure, is inscribed the real-life loss of Anna Reiner. Anna haunts the pages of the novel, emerging through the cracks of the text, of Higgins's image of Elin. The tongue slips: The tongue slips: "The name for me I love, variations over the same theme, the old theme: Annelise (also in *Torn og Engle*), Hannelore, Anna, Hannel . . .. I love the name Anna," writes Elin (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 50). "Hannelore Schmidt of Berlin" and "Hannel Vang of Copenhagen" are previous lovers of Higgins's, as noted in *A Bestiary* (524), and 'Annelise' is perhaps Annelise Lundesgaard, "the Danish wet dream who adorns [a] come-on, catch-as-catch-can advertisement" (616). It is a coincidence, Higgins notes in his autobiography, that "All five of my heart-scalds have similar names and identical or near identical initials: Harriet, Hannelore, Hannel, Anna and Alannah" (515). Not that any of these matters: in the context of *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, the other names have no faces behind them and each serves only to elicit the hidden figure of Anna.

Later, Elin states more explicitly, "You called me Anna Bornholm" (64). 'Anna Bornholm' is Higgins's pet name for Reiner and "Pet names are a guard against loss," writes Higgins (*A Bestiary* 680); already at work is a process of recuperation. In this instance, it is clearly not a matter of Fitz calling Elin "by a different name" in error, and hence provoking the end of the affair as he fears in his *Atepmoc Diary* of April 1975 (169) since Elin goes on to say, "You have done it again. You have seen me again, seen me as I am (can be), you have lighted me through again, you are a seeing person, seeing me anyway" (64). Anna is also the name of Elin's friend, and the name is also iterated in Santa Anna, a place that the lovers visit together and separately. Anna Reiner persists in the text as the already lost beloved, a strangeness that jeopardises the status of the novel as a novel by threatening to pull it into reality, and that yet holds the novel together as a structural principle. *Bornholm Night-Ferry* is a love story that mourns.

It might be as Elin says, that the beloved's strangeness is such that, "Towards the loneliness (the disappointment, the end) we are leaded so necessary" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 67), but as Murphy's quote cited above suggests, the beloved, in her strangeness, can also offer us momentary deviations out of our solitude. By the circuitous way of love, strangeness in the form of the beloved is not necessarily a reason to despair but can also be an occasion for affirmation: we imagine, we *see*, that the vagaries of life can be "mesmerizing" (Murphy, "Aidan Higgins" 73), that the incomprehensibility of the beloved can inspire wonder. The absolute mystery of the other can also be an occasion for creation, a way of taking up arms against the tides of loss, against the tides of its own loss. From the beginning, it is Elin's strangeness that draws Fitz to her, that compels him to write the first letter in order to reach out to her: "You spoke in an accent unfamiliar to me, you were several women simultaneously, come from different directions. It was the beginning," writes Fitz (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 169). In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, as in Higgins's other novels, the beloved (and the texts she generates: the letters, the diary entries, the novel itself) is always presented as "[s]ome sort of stay against wreckage" (O'Brien 295), a means of escaping the noise of experience and of achieving a kind of truth: "you are lying naked on the white bed, I am with you, we are at peace. All else is just *Ausswallung* [*Ausstellung*, as in 'for show'?]" (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 125). What Higgins shows us in his novel is just how much we stand to lose when we fail to permit the

already given strangeness, to permit the things in heaven and earth that exceed our philosophy into our lives.

All of *Bornholm Night-Ferry* is a response to the strangeness of the other (as well as its possibility), and the strangeness of the position we occupy in relation to the other, wherein we are compelled by our desire for meaning to give form to that which resists form, and we are (if we are) driven by an ethical imperative to give it a form that is faithful to its nature. In this precarious position, we are negotiating a delicate balancing act, among a myriad of other polarities, between what can be known and what must elude comprehension. (To recall Carson, love's subterfuge depends on the existence of two distinct images and the lover's delight, his or her *raison d'etre*, lies in reaching, as in an arabesque, the body pulled in opposite directions.) In "Foundering in Reality," Higgins writes:

> All successful 'thought,' all language that grips, and the words whereby one then recognises a writer, are always the result of a compromise between a current of intelligence that emerges from him and an ignorance that befalls him, a surprise, a hindrance. The rightness of an expression always includes a remnant of hypothesis. (97)

The same difficulty pertains as with Carson's use of congruence in metaphor: though Higgins speaks of a 'compromise,' it is not strictly one since the tensions persist in the fullness of their strength (as Higgins's *oeuvre* demonstrates) and make of the 'successful thought,' and whatever shape it takes, a rather fragile form, the 'remnant of hypothesis' being the chink in its armour. Calvino writes, "It is only through the confining act of writing that the immensity of the nonwritten becomes legible, that is, through the uncertainties of spelling, the occasional lapses, oversights, unchecked leaps of the word and pen" (183); the nonwritten and also the unknown, what cannot be written even if we tried. All these—the misspellings, the clumsy grammatical structures, the malapropisms—Higgins employs in *Bornholm Night-Ferry* and deliberately places within the space of a novel (where the editor's hand is heavy and explicit) in order that we might not mistake them for what they are not: errors and aberrations to be corrected and assimilated into a standard grammar, as Imhof evidently attempts to do. The novelization of reality allows Higgins to give shape to the beloved, and to the love affair, in all their strangeness. In a novel, there is no need to assimilate the strangeness and to fill in the gaps: it is enough to simply mind them,

to note their existence and to note their existence in relation to ours. Accordingly, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* is a flickering form, constantly negotiating the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, the relationship between the self and the other.

Higgins's "are never comfortable fictions; they never seek to ingratiate themselves with a public that demands the luxury of recognizable conventions," as Murphy argues ("Aidan Higgins" 77). Similarly, Derek Mahon describes Higgins as "an austere and often difficult writer . . . known for an elaborate and exigent style derived from, among other sources, Elizabethan and Jacobean prose, Swift, Joyce, Djuna Barnes and Beckett" (75). In the same vein, Annie Proulx similarly cautions that Higgins's play with form and erudition has the potential to work against him: "His fictions, with their abrupt partitions, layers of collage and interlocked allusions make it likely that some duller readers put aside his books as they would a maddeningly incomprehensible codex" ("Aidan Higgins's *Flotsam & Jetsam*" 26). And it does work against him: like Ann Quin's novels, Higgins's work is meaningfully positioned between obscurity and clarity; and again as with her novels, his too have all too often been prematurely dismissed by critics who, as Proulx points out, "accuse him of . . . untidy endings, of density and melancholy, of abrupt stops and over-portrayal of frustration and *accidie*" ("Drift and Mastery" 7).[23] With reference to *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, Share declares that Higgins's technical innovation "holds little other than the surface excitement," which cannot salvage the novel from being a "traumatically weary book, an entirety of selfishness" (156). Imhof especially has been particularly dismissive of Higgins: in "How It Is on the Fringes of Irish Fiction How It Is on the Fringes of Irish Fiction," he writes, "The trouble with Aidan Higgins is that his way of telling his novels and shorter pieces puts the reader in a position where he can connect nothing with nothing" (155).

Like most of Higgins's later novels, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* tells a love story in which the lovers are, in a sense, hidden from view, from each other's view as much as from the readers' view. What comes to mind as a companion piece is René Magritte's comparably strange *The Lovers II*. Here, as in Higgins's novel, the lovers, with their heads wrapped in cloth, cannot see each other, and the viewer cannot see them. By

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[23] Roger Garfitt laments of Higgins's first work of fiction, *Felo de Se*, "the external world of experience is accurately perceived, but it is rendered into a dense, highly subjective linguistic structure which becomes finally a bulwark against the experience itself" (225), while John Banville argues that "So much fine writing is blurred and even lost in the formlessness" of Higgins's magnum opus, *Balcony of Europe* ("Colony of Expatriates"18).

blinding the lovers to each other, Magritte brings up the question of the mystery of the other; in the same way, by blinding us to the painting, he brings up the question of the mystery of art, of art-as-other, and therefore, of experience. "(W)hen one sees one of my pictures, one asks oneself this simple question, 'What does it mean?'" writes Magritte (qtd in Ariella Budick, "Magritte: The Mystery of the Ordinary"). An encounter with *The Lovers II*, as with Magritte's work in general, is an exercise in understanding after the fashion of that which Simone Weil discusses in *Gravity and Grace*, where the method is "Not to try and interpret . . . but to look . . . till the light suddenly dawns" (120), just as in the case of the koan. What Magritte demands of us as viewers is our attention: our response lies in part in the very attention we pay to the entirety of his work.

Encountering Magritte is an exercise without an end in sight in more ways than one since when the light finally dawns on a Magritte painting, what it shows us is "reality as absolute mystery" (qtd in Torczyner 15); and by mystery, Magritte means, like Weil, that "to which we are forbidden to give a meaning, lest we utter naïve or scientific absurdities; mystery *that has no meaning* but that must not be confused with the 'non-sense' that madmen who are trying hard to be funny find so gratifying" (qtd in Torczyner 60).[24] In *The Lovers II*, the invisible is not disciplined into visibility, but is given form as it is, and shown to be consistent with the fabric of reality. In the same way, Higgins's oeuvre can be described as comprising of "waiting book[s]," to borrow Mahon's term (78): books, that is, that wait patiently and attentively, on the mysteries of experience, the "revealed truths which we cannot comprehend" (Higgins, *A Bestiary* 288), and that require of us a similar patience and attention.

'Now': A Present of Shared Meaning

> . . . the ethical relation is always both immediate and singular, a question of responsiveness and responsibility to what is at hand. . .
>
> —Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*

Art is dedicated to experience and its particularities, and the novel is privileged among other forms as being of the present. The reality it presents, if it is true to the

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[24] Here, Magritte's use of the word, 'meaning,' coincides with what has hitherto been described as 'knowledge,' as evident in his relation of it to 'scientific absurdities.'

nature and the demands of its form, is always incomplete. The acceptance of incompleteness is reciprocal: the novel accepts the conditions of our reality and the incomplete present-ness of our experience, and we respond in kind; conversely, because we are prepared to meet the novel's inconclusiveness, it is free and empowered to make contact with the present, *our* present, and hence, to give shape to our truths. Higgins explores our relationship with incompleteness in his work primarily through the theme of memory but *Bornholm Night-Ferry* clarifies just how of-the-moment this struggle with meaning is: the stakes, as they are presented to the reader, are all current: the lovers move in and out of love before our eyes; their honesty is conveyed in real time. We are never more ourselves than when we inhabit the present and hence, never closer to our truths.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger suggests that "in the 'most intimate' Being-with-one-another of several people, they can say '*now*' and say it 'together'" (463). *To say now, now, and now*, and to say it *together* is a way of being *within* time, a state of being that needs to be differentiated from "the ordinary everyday understanding of time" (278), which proceeds linearly. 'Within-time-ness' is rooted in *preoccupation* (or *care*, or *concern*), which Heidegger defines as "existing in the unity [of the world into which we are thrown]" and a "making-present," wherein the 'present' transcends its meaning according to ordinary time as an abstract instant within a chronology (458). Although Heidegger uses 'preoccupation' in a wholly neutral sense, as "an ontological term for an *existentiale*" (83), we might usefully reconceive it as a spectrum as a way of extending his thought. At one end of preoccupation-as-spectrum are the 'acts' of "Leaving undone, neglecting, renouncing, taking," which are "*deficient* modes [of concern], in which the possibilities of concern are kept to a 'bare minimum'" (83); at the other end, preoccupation is a more significant investment in the world that we can align with the notion of ethical attention that has been the backbone of this thesis. In "Narrative Time," Paul Ricoeur succinctly articulates the significance of Heidegger's distinction of these two levels of experiencing time (while gesturing to the more 'sentimental' meaning of 'preoccupation'): "It is our preoccupation [and the degree of it], not the things of our concern, that determines [our] sense of time" (173).

Ricoeur figures narrative time after Heidegger's model of within-time-ness, as that which escapes the ordinary, by-the-clock concept of time. To begin with, he suggests that narrative is governed by "the paradox of contingency," which combines

the necessarily teleological progression of storytelling with a Bakhtinian notion of novelness grounded in contingency (174). It is hence that, Ricoeur argues, the narrative is always placed 'in' time, which is made evident in the way characters always "reckon *with* time" (175)—by which he (and Heidegger) means that characters are always engaging with the world in meaningful events. Narrative time stands on a threshold. Insofar as it partakes in the scientific and indifferent measurements of ordinary time (i.e., weeks, days, and hours, etc.) that "[punctuate] the sovereign firmament" (177), it reveals the characters' "thrownness" in the world; yet, it is also always already "reckoned time," time defined in relation to the characters and their *preoccupied* experience (175).

This characteristic of the narrative's temporal structure is foregrounded in epistolary novels (or diary novels, for that matter), the structure of which is held together by the tensions between these two models of time: ordinary time and within-time-ness. On one hand, ordinary time is at work, making its presence known (and felt) through the dates on the letters, which seem to proceed regardless of and without care for the contents of the letters, in which Higgins's lovers desperately seek to remain in the past, to escape the confines of their present which would sunder them, or to imagine an ideal future that would have them loving reunited. Nor do the date stamps say anything of the "peculiar time, swimming under the surface and ever reaching air" that each experiences in-between (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 140). Ordinary, by-the-clock time is "indifferent to human beings, to their acting and their suffering" (Ricoeur 175); December marches on without change, without care, to January, and January to February, come what may. In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, the dates of the letters, along with the greetings and goodbyes, remind us (and the lovers) that they are not in sync with each other, that there is no 'now' that they can speak of together. And yet, narrative time strives against and alongside ordinary time: the lovers' letters are letters not just of pure longing but also of reaching through the indifference of ordinary time.

The letters demonstrate the way the lovers reckon with time. In their selection of events to relate to one another as much as in their making and aborting of plans, they are responding not to the mechanical passage of clock time but to the stuff that their time is made of, their 'objects' of preoccupation; and it is their preoccupation that makes up the sense of time in the novel. The lovers' capacities to respond to the world and to act against ordinary time, as it were, are what, Ricoeur suggests, makes

narrative activity "the privileged discursive expression of preoccupation and its making-present" (176). This "phenomenon of 'intervention,'" which necessarily takes place within the boundaries of the world order, is a way of making present that Heidegger's definition of within-time-ness as 'existing in the unity of the world into which we are thrown' precludes (176). The heroic quest may present itself to Ricoeur as the exemplary "narrative of preoccupation" (177) in the way in which a character's actions explicitly 'make the present' of the narrative; but the epistolary novel, particularly in the form of *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, illustrates just how fraught the process of 'making-present' against the march of indifferent ordinary time, of preoccupation interpreting itself into the saying of 'now' and the saying of it together is.

In addition to the readily apparent resonance here with Bakhtin's thoughts on the prevailing novelness of the novel, Ricoeur also evokes the latter's concept of dialogicity in the novel in referring to the "public time" of the narrative (175). He points out the way in which the novel demonstrates that within-time-ness is always a way of being in time that is a Heideggerian 'being-with-others,' since to be in time is to be in the world is to be in the world with others. The world into which the characters are thrown is manifestly a world inhabited by others; who, in *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, are portrayed as intruders into the lovers' narrative. Narrative time is public time in the way it is always "woven in common by . . . interaction" between the characters (175); as well as between the writer and the reader, and among the various readers, who are distinguished by their concern or investment in the work at hand (176). Under the cover of the novel, Fitz and Elin are *in* time in a way that they cannot be in relation to ordinary time. They are in a 'now' of preoccupation, of interaction and intimacy—or, at the very least, are continually aspiring toward it. As Higgins puts it, "Love is time and space the heart can catch" (*Lions of the Grunewald* 198).

In Chapter 1, it was argued that the novel as a form urges us towards a redefinition of the term, 'fidelity': the novel's faithfulness to reality is not measured by the extent to which it is mimetic, but by the degree to which it engages with experience—that is to say, the degree to which it engages with 'now.' Implicit in this proposition is a similar redefinition of 'now,' the nature of which Chapter 2 makes early forays into by considering Quin's *Three* as a thinking, living form. Finally, here in Chapter 3, we reach something of a clarification: 'now' as *a present of shared*

meaning. If we accept the proposition that aesthetics and phenomenology are closely intertwined, if we accept that they are of 'the same structure' as Murdoch puts it (and as Ricoeur's study, as well as the critical and literary works discussed throughout the course of this thesis speaks of them), then this understanding of 'now' invites a more authentic reflection on the nature of our experience. What is of concern here is not just a re-evaluation of narrative time and experience but a different way of being in the present, of being in the world—a way that remedies any belief in the present as "horribly egocentric" and as "a kind of perspectivism which centres any enquiry in the spatial and temporal position of a particular person or set of person" (Mark Currie, *About Time* 15).[25] To say 'now' and to say it together is to be placed in time, to be constantly open to all its contingencies and vagaries, and to move within time as public. It is a task that needs to be met by a loving attention and that is rewarded with an honest and meaningful relationship with the world.[26]

It is by the indirect way of art that we have reached this 'conclusion.' Art is the better way of seeing. In it, the demands of our experience are clarified: space and time are given for an ethical response to the world-at-large to be refined. The attention we pay to a novel is not the same as that which we pay to a factual document like a letter because the attention the novel pays to the world is not the same as that which the systems of thought we have in place pay to the world. Art invites our attention— insists on it—to an extent that the human other, the beloved, cannot for he or she is a being so apparently similar to ourselves; with the beloved, we are always tempted to 'call [him or her] the same': Elin is *Schwesterlein* and Fitz is *Brüderlein* (Higgins, *Bornholm Night-Ferry* 23). With the beloved, recognition devolves inevitably (and

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[25] I have focused on the way in which certain narrative treatments of the present have established it as spatial i.e., as being in a world with others. As for the temporal decentering of the present, we can turn again to Heidegger, whose thinking on being in time culminates in an understanding of the human experience of time that he terms 'originary temporality,' whereby 'now' is constituted by a non-sequential, triadic structure of the present, the past, and the future. Insofar as reading a narrative "involves the passage of events from a world of future possibilities into the actuality of the reader's present, and onwards into the reader's memory" (Currie, *About Time* 16), narrative activity can be said to demonstrate originary temporality; our discussion in Chapter 2 of Quin's narrative style as bringing about an incessant present has already led us to the threshold of this complex layering of time in novels. In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, this understanding of time is enacted through prolepsis, which Currie argues is "a kind of time experiment that actually installs retrospect within the present, as the anticipation of retrospection" since the written past is revived into the present as an event that takes place in the future of the plot ("The Novel" 324).
[26] Significantly, for Ricoeur, the act of saying 'now' shares the same movement of necessary continual return, as Levinasian Saying and Arendt's thinking: "But it is when within-time-ness is leveled off that saying 'now' slips into the mathematical representation of the instant characteristic of ordinary time. Saying 'now' must therefore continually be carried back to making-present if this abstract representation is to be avoided" (176).

often quickly) into determination. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes writes,

> Endlessly required to define the loved object, and suffering from the uncertainties of this definition, the amorous subject dreams of a knowledge which would let him take the other *as he is*, thus and no other, exonerated from any adjective" (220).

And again: "do not forget that I desire you—a little, lightly, without trying to seize anything *right away*" (224). But good art resists the temptation of tricking the eye with false consolations. Poetic vision admits—allows, confesses—the depth of human experience to which we are necessarily blind and is an ethical vision that aspires to a present of shared meaning—that is to say, *love*.

Conclusion: Loving Artfully in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and Ali Smith's *How to be both*

From this study of Murdoch's, Quin's, and Higgins's novels, it emerges that the kind of ethical attention, or loving attention, that has been the central preoccupation of the present project is neither passive absorption nor disinterested contemplation, neither wholly empathetic nor wholly sceptical. Rather, it is an *aesthetic activity* that negotiates immersion and distance, empathy and scepticism in tandem: an imagining of the other that is faithful and responsive to his or her absolute otherness, and that seeks neither to totalise nor to rest in easy consolations but to recognise its own blindness and to move within it. And the reward for such labour is the possibility of meaning, which is not moral value (not being intrinsically 'good' although from it is born the further possibilities of kindness and compassion) but the experience of a present, living relationship between the self and the other.

The height of this experience is love, which, it follows then, cannot function as a regulative ideal. Love takes place at eye-level, between the self and the human other, in real and present time; and it cannot be parsed in terms of the systems of thought we have in place to make sense of experience because it exceeds the realm of thought. Love is so entirely of human experience that to frame it within the narrow confines of morality would be to reduce it and to diminish its value. Love is an infinite conversation, to recall Blanchot. We are more likely to want to think of love in terms of the Good and the True, and it is often the case that love exists in relation to them. But these are ultimately arbitrary standards whereas love understood as a relationship of meaning, as *form*, possesses some degree of stability and resilience, unfixable as it is; and the same goes for art, which is of the same structure.

On Beauty as a Form of Life

> Some say a host of cavalry, others of infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the black earth, but I say it is whatsoever a person loves.

> — Sappho, Poem 16

Residing thus on the level of ordinary experience, meaning is that which takes on *recognisable* forms. In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein

argues that such recognisability is fundamental to any philosophical inquiry, which must "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (48) in order to resolve philosophy's problems. In other words, he suggests that systems of meaning such as language need to be placed within the broader patterns of their particular, ordinary, lived contexts in order to perform their function of creating and communicating meaning—contexts that he refers to as "forms of life" (226).[1] These forms of life, which he notably refers to in the plural, are varied and subjected to constant change,[2] and can even be entirely enigmatic (225); which is to say that systems of meaning can function without being fixed. Nowhere is this more obvious than when we try to articulate ethical and aesthetic concepts, which must be understood within the form of life from which they emerge *and understood as unfixable*.

Although he rarely addressed them directly, Wittgenstein's arguments about the nature of meaning as being grounded in forms of life have significant bearing on ethics and aesthetics. Already in his earlier investigations in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), he had shown a mistrust of the capacity of metaphysical concepts (or any linguistic logical proposition) to address the aspects of experience that are engaged with under the auspices of these fields. Concluding that ethics and aesthetics are ultimately "transcendental" in nature (86) and can therefore only be made manifest, but not said (88), he ends his study of the limits of language with the famous statement, "What we cannot speak out we must pass over in silence" (89). Wittgenstein similarly argues in "A Lecture on Ethics" (1929-1930) that the notions of 'absolute good' and 'absolute value' are "chimera[s]" (7): insofar as ethics means "*to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language," it is outside the limits of logical thought, and cannot be verified by analysis or reference to facts, and is, therefore, "nonsensical" (11). That said, by the time of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein appears to have settled into a more moderate position: while there are aspects of experience that are ineffable, they submit to an extent to

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[1] There is some dispute among scholars as to what Wittgenstein meant by 'forms of life.' In "Wittgenstein and Forms of Life," Nicholas F. Gier discusses various interpretations of the phrase before proposing his own, which is closest to my reading: that forms of life refer to "the formal conditions, the patterns in the weave of our lives, that make a meaningful world possible" (257). In addition, Wittgensteinian forms of life are only nominally reminiscent of Platonic forms since they are distinctly grounded in lived experience.

[2] Wittgenstein refers to the "fluctuation" of scientific definitions (37); see also *Philosophical Grammar*, where he describes the understanding of language as "infinitely various" and refers again to its "fluctuating use" (10).

forms of life; he likens attempts at defining ethical and aesthetic concepts to drawing "a sharply defined picture 'corresponding' to a blurred one" wherein "[a]nything— and nothing—is right" (36). Philosophy, Wittgenstein proposes, "[runs] its head up against the limits of language [as exemplary of forms of life]," and its task is limited to the clarification of these forms (48-49).

In demarcating the limits of philosophical activity as such, Murdoch argues that Wittgenstein betrays an 'embarrassment' at the concept of experience, and that his forms of life are 'cages' with "stern and clearly defined limits" that would expel "the messiness of ordinary life and its mysteries" (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* 282-83). What Wittgenstein depicts as the limits of philosophical activity, Murdoch reconceives of as "the border-lines of thought and language" where one can "often 'see' what we cannot say," and "come close to these things and do them justice" (*Metaphysics* 283). Aesthetic endeavour takes place on the edges of forms of life and is a matter of saying the unsayable: of attempting to put into a 'system' of meaning grounded in the ordinary forms of life, everything that is irrational, nonsensical, and unknowable (in the terms of analytic philosophy or metaphysics). We might speak here of aesthetic *saying*, in the Levinasian sense of the word, as opposed to Wittgensteinian philosophical language, which is more akin to Levinasian Said in its concern with "complete *clarity*" (*Philosophical Investigations* 51); aesthetic saying, on the other hand, is interested in revealing something as unknowable rather than in disclosing something as knowable.[3]

Murdoch, Quin, and Higgins work on the border-lines of thought and language, and their novels are, accordingly, fragile and incomplete forms that unabashedly acknowledge, reflect, and confront the messiness, complexity, and elusiveness of life. In *The Sea, The Sea*, *Three*, and *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, life exceeds the ordinary forms we make of it *without being other than itself*: love and art, their dominant themes, are depicted as the extraordinary 'miracles' or 'ecstasies' of the everyday, to borrow Woolf's words (*To The Lighthouse* 229). There is no 'going

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[3] This difference between philosophical language and aesthetic 'language' is of thematic significance throughout Murdoch's philosophical writing; it has also been famously addressed in C. P. Snow's 1959 lecture, "The Two Cultures," and the controversy that followed, sparked by the corresponding lecture of the Cambridge literary critic F. R. Leavis. Snow's lecture was published as *The Two Cultures*; Leavis's response in *The Spectator* (9 March 1962) was published as *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow*. See Patricia Waugh's "Iris Murdoch and the Two Cultures: Science, Philosophy and the Novel," in which she gives a detailed account of Murdoch's engagement with the exchange between Snow and Leavis.

beyond the world' then, as Wittgenstein puts it (by which he really means 'to go beyond the known world'); there is only ever more of the world, if only we would pay it the right kind of attention.

Meaning is forged out of and reflected in ordinary forms, which is not to say that recognizing them is an easy task. In fact, the movement from Murdoch's novels to Alan Hollinghurst's and Ali Smith's (whose novels, *The Line of Beauty* and *How to be both*, I examine in this section) traces the changes in what we take to be the ordinary forms of life, as a result of global social, cultural, and historical upheavals— and with it, the demands on our attention. Reality as we used to know it, to the extent that we used to know it, seems increasingly to recede from view as Murdoch's world of illusory theatre, and Quin's and Higgins's of unreliable artefacts, lead into Hollinghurst's and Smith's contemporary, technology-driven, distraction-filled world, in which the self is at best distanced from and at worst estranged from any semblance of meaningful reality. It would be easy to lose sight of meaning in such troubled waters, if not for the one form it takes that persists in spite of everything, which is also aesthetic meaning's most historically recognisable form: *beauty*.

When we find something beautiful, whether it is an artwork or something of nature,[4] we are reacting to it not simply as an aesthetic object but also as an ethical object: that is, an object with which we form a meaningful relationship, whether the meaning is political, moral, religious, or ultimately undefinable in nature. The quotation from Sappho's "Poem 16" neatly sums up the way in which meaning (in its highest form of love) translates into beauty: what is beautiful is what is most meaningful to us. For Sappho, it is the beauty of her beloved rather than that of military might that rings true. This is also what is meant when we say that beauty resides in the eye of the beholder, or that beauty is relative—these are far from casual statements, as I will endeavour to show. It is no surprise then to find that our notions of beauty and our criteria for it have changed with time in tandem with our ever-

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[4] For reasons that will become clear in the next few pages, philosophers in the eighteenth century tended to refer to beauty in nature when they spoke about beauty. Hegel, however, argues that the beauty of art is "*higher*" than beauty in nature because it is "beauty *born of the spirit and born again*" (*Aesthetics* 2). As T. M. Knox points out in his footnote, Hegel's statement is obscure; Knox takes it as referring to the essentiality of the individual's cognition to the concept of beauty as it relates to art. I would argue that the same applies for beauty in nature: not everyone is as persuaded by the beauty of the countryside as Wordsworth and Coleridge. Our determination of what is beautiful in nature depends as much on the relationship of meaning we can cultivate with it. By focusing on the beauty of artworks in this thesis, I mean to emphasise, among other things, this aspect of it: the deliberate nature of the whole affair.

evolving value systems. That said, beauty, being of a sensual nature, provides a much-appreciated foothold in a 'pointless' ethical-aesthetic conversation that takes place in large part in the dark, where we consistently face the risk of being lost or disempowered as rationally-inclined creatures attached to sight and knowledge. Beauty is readily understood and readily understood as unfixable: though Sappho differs from others in what she finds beautiful, all parties participate in an experience of beauty. When philosophy and critical theory confuse, alienate, and repel, beauty alone will convince of the necessity of an ethical relationship with the other.

To set the context for the following discussion of beauty, I begin with a brief account of the changing landscape of beauty, by charting its development within and after the Aesthetic Idealist movement, which brought beauty to the foreground in the nineteenth century and anticipated its 'ruin' in the next; in the twenty-first century, however, a large-scale recovery of beauty is currently being sought by a number of investigators across the humanities. Drawing on Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, I will argue that the metamorphosis of beauty through the ages is suggestive of its essential identity as a Wittgensteinian form of life, and that what is needed presently is a return to this essential identity: beauty as meaning emerging from and changing according to the dictates of ordinary lived experience.

From this cursory survey also emerges the simple observation that in one aspect at least our notion of beauty has remained consistent: it has always been defined and redefined in relation to the human endeavour to locate oneself within a world of others and forge meaning from that position—an endeavour that is always aesthetic in nature since it always involves coming to formal terms with experience. Whether it is yoked to morality, religion, mathematics, or the arts, beauty is the achievement of a formal relation with the particularities of our lives. It is the ordinary sacrament of meaning, the result of living artfully and therefore, meaningfully. I close with a discussion of Smith's *How to be both*, which explores this very notion, affirming in the process the value of attention as a means of allowing lines of beauty to be drawn between self and other across altered latitudes, lines that are in themselves potentially transformative.

Placing Beauty: Aesthetic Idealism—the Beautiful, the Good, and the True

What a strange illusion it is to suppose that beauty is goodness.

—Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

To bring beauty into the present conversation on ethics and aesthetics is not to rehearse the nineteenth-century posture of aesthetic idealism, a major tenet of which was the drawing together of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True as one. In this area, aesthetic idealism can be seen as the consolidation of ideas that proliferated as a result of the intellectual forays into moral beauty and the beautiful soul (briefly explored in the introduction), refracted through the lens of the aesthetic: proponents such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Schiller, and F. W. J. Schelling pursued the notion that (aesthetic) Beauty is an index of the Good (which was often positioned in relation to religion) and the True, and that it can elevate us to the ideal of human perfection, which was central to their worldview.[5] A quotation from Germaine de Stael's *Corrine, or Italy* sums up the concept: "In this contemplation [of art], the soul is uplifted to hopes filled with enthusiasm and virtue, for beauty is one in the universe, and whatever form it assumes, it always arouses a religious feeling in the hearts of mankind" (139).

Aesthetic idealism was problematic and entirely of-its-time, and, just like the concept of the beautiful soul, eventually came to be viewed as implausible and "compromised by a naïve and ill-founded optimism" (Norton ix). As Toril Moi points out in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy*, it has more or less been erased from the annals of aesthetic history, either conflated with Romanticism or subsumed under the larger philosophical movement of Idealism.[6] At its best and at the height of its potential, aesthetic idealism was an "ecstatic, revolutionary romantic vision of human perfection," as Moi puts it (68). At its most regressive and destructive, it encouraged "narrowly moralistic judgments of poetry and art" (78), which, in turn, dictated the kind of art that was being created and celebrated. Because beauty was always implicated in moral discourse for them, the

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[5] See Hölderlin's "Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism," Schiller's "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," Schelling's *The Philosophy of Art*, and Moore's *Principia Ethica.*

[6] Robert E. Norton's *The Beautiful Soul*, for instance, makes no mention of aesthetic idealism, despite its obvious salience to the eighteenth century's embodiment of moral beauty, though he seeks also to recover the beautiful soul from obscurity.

aesthetic idealists favoured idealised representations of experience, rather than realistic ones. Accordingly, the nineteenth-century canon is replete with representations of women, in particular, whose lives are judged according to unrelenting standards of purity[7]; meanwhile, Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) were prosecuted for obscenity for their frank depictions of sex, death, profane love, etc.[8]

Such prejudice not only attenuated the potential of art, it also encouraged an uncritical reflection on beauty that overlooked its capacity for deception (recall Rousseau's *Julie*), while itself translating, in part, especially according to the terms of the present project, into falsification. In contrast to the idealised works of moral beauty celebrated by the aesthetic idealists, the explicit 'vulgarity' of Flaubert and Baudelaire's works serves as an index of their dedication to a truthful engagement with the conditions of flesh-and-blood experience. Consequently, aesthetic idealism was also in danger of espousing an alienating, potentially fatal abstraction. This despite its proponents' belief that aesthetic beauty overcame the split between the sensual world and the transcendental world of ideas and the imagination, since aesthetic idealism often reverted to a transcendental, indefinable Platonic complex of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche offers a scathing critique: "Nobody is likely to consider a doctrine true merely because it makes people happy or virtuous—expect perhaps the lovely 'idealists' who become effusive about the good, the true, and the beautiful and allow all kinds of motley, clumsy benevolent desiderata to swim around in utter confusion in their pond" (49-50).

G. E. Moore, in particular, cherished the notion of the Good as being indefinable and unanalysable. He was far from being an Idealist himself, having famously written "The Refutation of Idealism," but, in leading the turn away from Idealism towards analytic philosophy, he was in the unique position of rejecting many of the Idealists' beliefs while nevertheless not only sharing some of their convictions—particularly with regard to the relationship between the Good, the

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[7] Examples include Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* (1813), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and George Eliot's *Middlemarch, or the Study of Provincial Life* (1871-72).
[8] The exaltation of idealism over such truthful engagement is exemplified in the criteria for the Nobel Prize for Literature, inaugurated in 1901, which Alfred Nobel stipulated was to be awarded to a work demonstrating "an idealistic tendency" (Moi 96): correspondingly, works by atheists and agnostics were generally "automatically disqualified" and obscurity was seen as a flaw in the work (97)— Quin and Higgins would undoubtedly not have been in the running.

Beautiful, and the True—but also the flaws in their arguments. In *Principia Ethica*, he distinguishes the Good from the definable things-that-are-good and proposes that the Good is known to us only by way of intuition and cannot be reduced to any natural property; at the same time, as Murdoch points out, he "took goodness to be a real constituent of the world" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 301) and therefore, not transcendent. Moore's 'definition' of the Good against 'good things' was intended to combat a materialist, post-Darwinian society's reductionist view of human experience, but, to an extent, also to ease the Good's potentially tyrannical hold on cultural life. However, Moore's definition also threatened the possibility of reconciliation between the two worlds of sensuality and ideas because, in essence, according to Murdoch, his argument assumes that the Good cannot be "attach[ed] . . . to the substance of the world" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 65).[9]

That said, Moore's sense of the Good is clarified somewhat by his discussion of it in relation to beauty, which he views as a "necessary element" of the Good (*Principia Ethica* 169)—he goes as far as to say that beautiful things are "the *raison d'être* of virtue" (158). His understanding of beauty is less disengaged from lived experience since it is defined in relation to the individual's consciousness and emotional experience of the beautiful object, and moreover, serves to rescue the Good somewhat from unbearable abstraction since such emotional experience must, according to Moore, result from the mental cognition of material qualities (158ff). But because the Good is not the Beautiful, the recovery is limited. J. M. Keynes remarks on the limitations of Moore's abstract thinking:

> It is remarkable how wholly oblivious [Moore] managed to be of the qualities of the life of action and also of the pattern of life as a whole. He was existing in a timeless ecstasy. His way of translating his own particular emotions of the moment into the language of generalized abstraction is a charming and beautiful comedy. ("My Early Beliefs" 92)

According to Moi, by the end of the nineteenth century, aesthetic idealism had been reduced to a "desiccated moralism embraced by religious and social conservatives all over Europe" (68) and was on its way out.[10] Studied aesthetic

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[9] As Murdoch saw it, this was a fatal error that derailed the course of moral philosophy: see "Metaphysics and Ethics" in *Existentialists and Mystics*.

[10] Contributing to this decline was undoubtedly the identification of beauty with sensual experience since the 1800s, which enabled the concept of the beautiful soul but also laid the seeds for its own ruin

responses to the tenets of aesthetic idealism at the turn of the century include Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, both of which Moi suggests stage a confrontation between idealism and anti-idealist theories,[11] and Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*.[12] With Adorno's declaration in 1967 that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" ("Cultural Criticism and Society" 34), aesthetic idealism's chapter in history was well and truly closed. The socio-cultural upheavals of the twentieth century brought to light, not for the first time but perhaps more irrevocably than before,[13] the difficulty of defining the role and the purpose of art, and the value of beauty—a difficulty that had momentarily been shrouded by the cover of Beauty as a proxy for the Good and the True under the auspices of aesthetic idealism. Adorno opens *Aesthetic Theory* with the statement: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist" (1).

What followed in the next century was not a homogenous aesthetic project but the flourishing of a myriad of trends in which could be observed both attitudes of outright opposition to aesthetic idealism, the proliferation of movements in itself speaking to the idea of aesthetic autonomy, as well as the perpetuation of some of its more appealing aspects, such as the notion of beauty as a regulative ideal. But beauty, in general, as it had hitherto been understood, as an ideal in relation to the Good and the True, was in jeopardy: in many circles, it became something that "mustn't be mentioned now" (Santayana qtd in Danto 28). Evident in critical attitudes towards beauty was a rejection of its classical formulation (which had previously tied it to the

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in offering a way of thinking about beauty that was not simply outside of religion, but also apart from morality.

[11] Although Wilde advocated a separation between ethics and aesthetics, Moi notes that he also comes across as being beleaguered to a spirit of artistic perfection (i.e., of beauty) albeit one divorced from morality and religion (101). In addition, he possessed a belief that art plays a role in social transformation and regeneration: "Wilde split the idealist tradition in two, so as to be able to combine the admiration for revolutionary romanticism with the rejection of moral idealism" (102). See Chapter 3 for Moi's reading of *Ghosts*. Wilde, along with Walter Pater, was also a notable figure of Aestheticism, which prioritised aesthetic values; elements of aesthetic idealism such as a lofty and idealised view of beauty recur here in much more benign forms.

[12] See Patricia Waugh's "Beauty Writes Literary History: Revisiting the Myth of Bloomsbury," where she reads Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as a challenge to aesthetic idealism and its particular notion of beauty, which Woolf exposes for its falsity.

[13] The editors of *The Recovery of Beauty: Arts, Culture, Medicine* note in their introduction that beauty has always been difficult and in need for recovery: even in the nineteenth century, beauty had to be recuperated and was a tool of recuperation against the social condition of industrialization (2).

Good and the True[14]) and its growing politicization, a dismissal of its perceived triviality, and a lack of faith that beauty had anything to offer the new world, or even art (Danto 25ff).[15] In a comment that applies to artists and writers alike, Arthur C. Danto suggests that the dislodgement of beauty from the narrative by the Modernist avant-garde is the correction of the "conceptual error" that was the assignation of moral authority to beauty in the previous centuries (29). T. J. Clark more vehemently and absolutely declares a 'hatred' for the beautiful and posits that Modernist art's worst discovery is the failure of beauty, the exposure of it as "nothing but mechanism, nothing but matter dictating (dead) form" (*Farewell* 167). Similarly, Gertrude Stein proposes that "to call a work of art beautiful means that it is dead" (qtd in Sontag, "An Argument" 22). As Danto notes, Moore's thoughts on beauty as essential to the Good would be "almost unintelligible" in that climate (28).

A Recovery of Beauty: A Twenty-First Century Project

Beauty (and art along with it, since their fates are necessarily intertwined) was hence compromised or liberated from the tyranny of ideals, depending on one's stance; either way, its status was uncertain, and this state of affairs has persisted into present times. This serves as the justification for Corinne Saunders, Jane Macnaughton, and David Fuller's edited collection of essays, *The Recovery of Beauty: Arts, Culture, Medicine*, in which they argue that in the twenty-first century, beauty needs to be recovered—not least against a cultural landscape in which modernism's suspicion of Beauty appears to have developed into a valorisation of *ugliness*.[16] This is Roger Scruton's main point of contention in his essay in *The Recovery of Beauty*; similarly,

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[14] Elaine Scarry's relatively recent defense of the relationship between beauty and justice in *On Beauty and Being Just* relies on just such a formulation of beauty.

[15] Literary treatment of beauty grew increasingly ambivalent from the late Victorian period as writers sought to reconcile Romantic attitudes about beauty, which align themselves to certain tenets of aesthetic idealism, with the changing world around them. The technical innovations of Modernist literature, in particular, by which they have come to be defined, demonstrated a push back against normative standards of beauty. What was at work, however, was not an eradication of beauty and its associated ideals, Goodness and Truth, but rather a reevaluation of these concepts that consisted at times in unyoking them from each other, or at least, loosening their bonds; beauty, especially, was frequently depicted as something unknowable. See Michael O'Neill, Mark Sandy, and Sarah Wootton's *The Persistence of Beauty*, Wendy Steiner's *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art*, and Susan Sontag's "An Argument about Beauty."

[16] This is symptomatic of "an intellectual climate in the United States and Europe since the 1960s" that Norton describes as being "[p]rincipally opposed to systems of thought that rely on generalizing conceptual categories, homogeneity, and self-contained hierarchical structures for their coherence," preferring instead "radical plurality, discontinuity, and decentralization" (2).

David Fuller suggests, in his conversation with the choreographer David Bintley, that the twenty-first century is the "Age of Unbeauty," "an age that doesn't want to attend to beauty where it's got it, or wants to assault beauty where it is too accustomed to having it, or feels—perhaps with good reason—that beauty is a superseded criterion" (152). Consider, for instance, Jeff Koons, whose work has been denounced by critics for its vacuity, and yet continues to be commissioned and to fetch high prices. Or the popular and often critically acclaimed films of Lars von Trier and Quentin Tarantino, that aestheticise violence and despair without the expressed aim of moral correction and redemption, unlike, for instance, Picasso's *Guernica*. Or that of John Waters, the 'Pope of Trash,' whose films were once derided for being repulsive: in 2015, the British Film Institute presented a retrospective of these same films, bestowing on them artistic credibility previously denied.

The question of artistic value aside (who and what determines it, which artwork can be justified as being in possession of it, etc.), it suffices to say that in the contemporary age, there is an undeniable cultural shift away from past ideals of beauty. In "The Beauty of Ugly Painting," Charlie Fox notes that "artists who have skulked the margins of art history for years by ignoring any sort of accepted notions of aesthetic beauty are increasingly receiving institutional recognition" and the term, 'ugly,' amounts today to "ferocious praise." In the same vein, ugliness is also increasingly perceived as a matter for serious critical attention: recent studies include Stephen Bayley's *Ugly: the Aesthetics of Everything*, Andrei Pop and Mechtild Widrich's *Ugliness: The Non-Beautiful in Art and Theory*, and Gretchen E. Henderson's *Ugliness: A Cultural History*. That said, the idea of beauty itself is enjoying a renaissance in the humanities,[17] and it is within this general framework that the twenty-first century's 'valorization of ugliness' is taking place: it is in the larger spirit of engaging in a necessary, ethical dialogue with the present in their practice that contemporary artists and critics are deconstructing past ideals of beauty and pushing the boundaries of what it can refer to.

It is hence unfortunate and even counterproductive that *The Recovery of Beauty* ends with Scruton's call for a reversion to high aesthetic idealism, in which love and beauty are understood as the "elementary ways in which ideals and

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[17] See, for instance, Dave Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, Bill Beckley and David Shapiro's *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*, Suzanne Perling Hudson's "Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism," and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*.

decencies enter our ordinary world and make themselves known" (274); accordingly, he struggles with and summarily rejects 'modern art,' which he argues "desecrates life" by "glorify[ing] ugliness" or by "merely display[ing] life's debris, with a 'no comment shrug of the shoulders'" (273). But beauty (and love) cannot be kept alive as Scruton wishes to do, by being kept the same, by being "kept . . . in place" (274). Relapse is not recovery; there is no going back to that original innocence. As Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) suggests, our notions of love and beauty need to keep up with the times, not for fashion's sake but for truth's sake; in contrast, Scruton remains beholden to dated definitions for which there are no longer any grounds, as the philosopher also acknowledges.[18]

A Matter of Not Thinking Straight: Alan Hollinghurst's The Line of Beauty

Beauty as established in the Idealist tradition is very much an (extra)ordinary form, and the nature of ordinary forms, as Wittgenstein held it, is that they cannot be fixed. The titular line in Hollinghurst's novel, which the author draws from William Hogarth, is a double curve, "[going] first one way and then the other" (225). It is suggestive of "two compulsions held in one unfolding movement" (200), like the "irresistible curve of hope, and its hollow inversion" (174), for instance; or a simultaneously "cruel" and "charming" smile (91); or the love chord, which is "high and low at once . . . [and] seemed to knock him down and fling him up all in one unresisted gesture" (138). It is "a sort of animating principle," Nick Guest explains (225); Hogarth refers to them as 'waving lines' and discusses them in the context of liveliness and activity.[19] In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry similarly evokes the double curve when she notes "the very pliancy or elasticity of beauty" (46), which she parses in terms of its tendency to both "move chronologically back in the search for precedents and parallels" and to "move forward into new acts of creation"—all the while demonstrating "a kind of urgency as though one's life depended on it" (30).

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[18] Alexander Alberro offers the same critique of recent critical writing on beauty in "Beauty Knows No Pain": "To put it polemically, then, recent attempts to revalidate the experience of the beautiful are . . . driven by intensely nostalgic impulses; they promote ahistorical views of the past in the hope of returning us to a state unclouded by the insights and advances made in a wide range of theoretical and discursive practices . . ." (29).
[19] See *The Analysis of Beauty*, where Hogarth suggests that such lines "[lead] *the eye a wanton kind of chace,* and from the pleasure that [this] gives the mind, intitles it to the name of beautiful" (25).

What the line of beauty ultimately signifies for Hollinghurst, as it does for Scarry, is that beauty is, above all, never fixed but always alive with change and possibility. The double curve is the governing motif in Nick's life: he uses it to describe the conflicting rhythms of his longing for Leo (Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* 125), the rise and fall of the music that Leo plays on the piano (174); and the line of beauty is most notably fulfilled in the curve of his beloveds' bodies (187; 327; 423). It stands in contrast to the straight lines of cocaine that Nick and his cohort inhale, which literally "[kills] the appetite" (228), and to the 'straight' heteronormativity that deems Nick's desire for men "vulgar and unsafe" (370). Nick's sexuality, along with his social class and his self-proclaimed status as an aesthete, signals the threat he represents to the bourgeois, heterosexual order symbolised by the Fedden family; he is an outsider, a literal guest. His pursuit of beauty and love within these parameters, and his redefinition of these concepts (through his love affairs) in relation to personal meaning, constitute the queer aesthetic of the novel, as Soon Yeon Kim points out (167), which argues that "beauty [and love] can never be normalized or standardized" (184).

Broadly speaking, queer theory is an analytic model that takes the view that "[t]he attempted stabilizing of identity is inherently a disciplinary project" (Bersani, *Homos* 3), and that demonstrates a resistance to heterenormativity by "dramatis[ing] incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (Jagose 3). Queer theory, Bersani suggests, has the power to lead us to "a notion of difference not as a trauma to be overcome . . . but rather as a nonthreatening supplement to sameness" (*Homos* 7). Scarry's 'formulation' of beauty, grounded as it is in beauty's "liability to error, contestation, and plurality" (52), is developed in parallel to precisely such an aesthetic (Soon 175)—as is the general theoretical thrust of this project. Hollinghurst notably looks toward queer theory when he makes a distinction between a 'gay novel' and a 'novel that had been homosexualised,' the latter characterised by a marginalised perspective grounded in an "imaginative liberation from . . . custom, indifference, cliché and hypocrisy" ("Saved by Art" 15). It is a matter of not "thinking straight" (Hollinghurst, *The Swimming Pool Library* 5), in both senses of the phrase.

In *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst's meticulous, luxuriating, even provocative descriptions of male physicality (in sickness and in health) and of gay sex, assert a subversive queer presence and constitute a "'fleshing out' of the site of

beauty [and love]" as they invite consideration for and valuation of bodies and relationship models that exist outside the normative framework of late twentieth-century Britain (Soon 171)—a framework within which, as Bersani notes, "we have *learned to desire*" (*Homos* 6). Hollinghurst's commitment to a queer, radically challenging aesthetic is most evident in the dynamism of Nick's definitions of love and beauty, demonstrated in part by his capacity to find both artworks and luxury items beautiful, to revise his aesthetic judgments irresponsibly, and most of all, by his capacity to love Wani and to think him beautiful through his various addictions, cruelties, and his illness. Even after Wani's appearance has drastically altered, "command[ing] attention now by pity and respect as he once had by beauty and charm," Nick "thought he still looked wonderful in a way" (Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* 431). Soon cites a scene in the last pages of the novel, in which Nick sees Wani lying on a sofa with his eyes closed and leans over him, "[not] as he used to, for the private marvel of the view, but to check that he was alive" (484). "What is deeply moving is the same action Nick takes . . . which suggests to me the continuance of Nick's love as well as the lasting power of beauty," she writes (183).

Hollinghurst's act of intertwining Nick's pursuit of beauty with that of a nonnormative love tempers its more materialistic and debauched aspects, such as Nick's snobbery and his "reckless appetite for upward mobility" (Brophy and Husain 105).[20] As a result, Nick's generous and vivacious capacity for beauty, his eagerness in extending his lines of beauty in any and every direction, are finally presented as symptoms of "a love of the world that [is] shockingly unconditional" (Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* 501). The queering of perception that he represents enables beauty and love to persist through the wasting of life, though not always and not necessarily in their known and habitual forms, in the light of the moment.[21]

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[20] See also Julie Rivkin's "Writing the Gay '80s with Henry James: David Leavitt's *A Place I've Never Been* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*," in which she discusses the way Henry James's presence in the novel helps elucidate the way "the line of beauty is part of the web of money and power" (289).

[21] Seminal texts on queer theory include Leo Bersani's *Homos*, Jagose's *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, as well as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Novel Gazing*, a collection of essays that engages with the intersection between queer theory and literary criticism. See also Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser's *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*.

Reconceiving Beauty

If beauty is to be rescued along Hogarthian lines, what is required is an account of it that does not involve the forgetting of the intellectual, political, and cultural developments that have taken place since the nineteenth century—an account that meets beauty where it is, where it has fallen to: the world of ordinary lived (and living) experience. This is not simply because we have been disabused of the lofty illusions attached to beauty in the past: beauty was quite literally grounded. Danto notes that what dethroned the high ideal of beauty in the work of the Modernist avant-garde was the "commonplace world of everyday experience" (21); and as Liesl Olson points out, Modernist writers too demonstrated a "proclivity to dwell in the regularity of the ordinary" (4), in their use of lists and repetitions, their historical specificities, and their attention to the minor incidents and small facts of everyday life—a proclivity that "emerges out of a response to what is represented as the hollowness of modern life, the loss of abstract ideals in which to believe" (4).[22] This tendency towards the commonplace was already apparent in the realist novels of the nineteenth century but Modernist writers were working within a transformed landscape in which grand narratives such as the Beautiful, the Good, and the True were dismantled as a result of socio-historical events, and had to be reconfigured according to new parameters if they were to be salvaged as vital concepts. One way they did so was by locating beauty (and the Good and the True) in the "cotton wool of daily life" (Woolf, "A Sketch" 72): to reinvent them as miracles and ecstasies of ordinary lived experience.

It is for such reasons that I reconceive of beauty as a 'measure' of the degree to which we experience a relationship of profound meaning with what is at hand; that is to say, it is the result of the working through of experience, which consists in refining our attention to the world and our response to it. This is, in a way, what beauty has always referred to at heart, whatever narrative it happens to be bound to at a particular moment (religious, moral, art for art's sake, etc.). In relating it to meaning (and therefore to love) rather than the transcendental Good, I am pushing here for a notion of beauty that we *can* speak about, even if only falteringly and subjectively,

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[22] This is, of course, not to say that the ordinary was indiscriminately exalted as beauty-as-ideal was in the previous centuries. As Olson notes, the foregrounding of the ordinary as a sphere for meaningful experience meant that it was also critiqued: as shown in Chapter 2, Quin, Arendt, and Beckett challenge the associated notion of habit.

and not just around—because it does not exist on its own as an ideal Beauty but is always attached and held in relation to particular things; and because its essence lies in the attempt to bring it into form, in the potential of the present being fulfilled in the present.

It needs to be said that such beauty, as Hollinghurst makes of it in *The Line of Beauty*, is what Murdoch has described as 'pointless.' It is not essentially 'good' and cannot be reduced to a regulative ideal (just as it cannot be reduced to that which exists simply for giving us pleasure, which are the two extremes that discussions centred on beauty can take). If it shows us the way to goodness, as it well might on occasion, it is incidental; the experience of beauty might just as soon inspire morally suspect actions or be founded on morally questionable objects. As noted, beauty is a site of contestation in *The Line of Beauty*: it is as likely to be sly and hedonistic and worrying as it is to be spiritually fortifying, as likely to be an empty symbol of wealth and style as it is to be a measure of something more profound like love. Gucci and Mercedes are spoken of in the same breath as Watteau and Borromini; lines of cocaine and the lines of a lover's body are both described as beautiful. The Janus-like nature of beauty is encapsulated in Nick and Wani's magazine, *Ogee*, which is part "art magazine" (224), part ode to the "wonderland of luxury" (488); and in which brothels are celebrated as objects of beauty as much as Gothic revival architecture. To appropriate Nick's words, "[beauty's] splendor [has] a glint to it, a glassy malignity" (489). That we are able to see beauty as "part ugliness" (and "amusement [as] part disgust; pleasure [as] part pain")—in other words, to see one concept as necessarily encapsulating its 'opposite'—is the mark of a modern imagination, according to Virginia Woolf in her essay, "The Narrow Bridge of Art" (16); where she also argues that it is the modern novel that can best hold these contradictions in tandem.

In fact, because beauty-as-meaning is always negotiated in relation to that which is other, it shares an affinity with the strange, and even the violent and the terrible. In *The Line of Beauty*, Leo's face is notably a mix of the beautiful, the strange, and even the ugly in Hollinghurst's novel (29). It is possible that in being faithful, attentive, and responsive to the aspects of otherness in experience, we find ourselves recognizing as beautiful images that evoke unease and distress. In the same way that the difficulty of Fitz and Elin's love amounts to the sum of their love, it might be the case that one finds certain images beautiful *because* they provoke such a

response, because they inevitably put us in a relationship with some profound aspect of experience beyond the proportions of our individual circumscribed lives.[23]

In an article that welcomes the 'return' of beauty, Alexander Nehamas argues that the judgment of beauty is a never-ending questioning discourse because it is "an intimation that what stands before us is valuable in ways we do not yet understand": "We find things beautiful—in nature, in people, in art—when we sense we have not exhausted them," he declares (402). It is hence that beauty is "inseparable from yearning," a longing, Nehemas clarifies, not for "a reality beyond the sensible," but to delve deep into beauty's source (402). It is love for that which is other that lies at the heart of beauty. It is for this reason that beauty has, as the editors of *The Recovery of Beauty* note, persisted throughout the ages as "a flashpoint, mobilizing powerful social, psychological intellectual and aesthetic forces" (10). Beauty was never a merely a matter of the right lines meeting the right lines at the right places, in the most banal sense. It is an index of our humanity: it taps into a fundamental human impulse to make sense of our position in, and our relationship to the world and all that inhabit it.

Loving Artfully in Ali Smith's *How to be both*

> . . . beauty in its most completeness is never found in a single body but is something shared instead between more than one body.
>
> —Ali Smith, *How to be both*

Ali Smith's novels, including *How to be both* (2014), are more frequently discussed in terms of their queer aesthetic and how they contribute to a conversation on identity politics.[24] Here, in using *How to be both* to draw together the various

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[23] See, for instance, Jordanova's "Portraiture, Beauty, Pain," in which she suggests that portraiture depicting suffering can be considered beautiful because such paintings demonstrate an important aspect of the mode—"that it should grasp all forms of human specificity, however difficult the results may be for the viewers" (204). Jane Macnaughton similarly describes Henry Tonks's wartime drawings of soldiers being treated for facial injuries as beautiful, in part because of their scientific precision but also because they illustrate the stoicism of the human spirit as well as the fragility of mortality (176). This is notwithstanding instances of voyeurism, which is a matter of ethical concern for another paper.

[24] See Sonya Andermahr's "Both/And Aesthetics: Gender, Art, and Language in Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*" and Tory Young's "Invisibility and power in the digital age: issues for feminist and queer narratology."

threads of this thesis, I want to look instead at the "bigger picture" (53), so to speak,[25] and to place the novel within the broader context of an ethical-aesthetic inquiry by examining Smith's exploration of beauty as a meaningful relationship between the self and other. In a world she perceives as being one of divided states,[26] Smith has made the act of making accord her artistic mission: one of her main concerns—in *How to be both*, as well as throughout her oeuvre—is with the transformative potential of the act of "one thing meet[ing] another" (370).[27]

In *Artful*, Smith meditates on edges as that which mark "the difference between one thing and another," or one person and another (126). That "there's an edge in every meeting" is emphasised in her fiction (as in Quin's) by the recurrent introduction of often abrasive and always mysterious strangers in her fiction—Lisa Goliard (*How to be both*), Amber (*The Accidental*), Miles Garth (*There But For The*), etc.—all of whom highlight the menacing aspects of edges: the "keenness," the "irritability, edginess," the potential "wound" (*Artful* 126). Yet, it is in its potential for "magic" (126) that Smith is more properly interested. Like Carson, she reimagines edges as magic because they demarcate the "loaded, framed spaces through which we pass from one state to another" (126-27). Her observation about the significance of the gap between Adam's and God's fingers in Michelangelo's depiction of the creation of man in an interview with Tory Young is made in the same vein and stands as a broader comment on the general latency of in-between space:

> that's where the energy is. . . . The place in between is loaded with power and energy and sheer chance and the notions of both brokenness and contact, something about the fact that contact is about to happen. ("Love and the Imagination" 142)

Something about the fact that contact is about to happen: that meaning might be forged and life given, that a line of beauty might be drawn from one body to another.

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[25] Which is not to diminish the importance of queer readings of the novel; as it is with Francesco del Cossa's art, Smith "makes you look at both—the close-up happenings [the politics of her novel] and the bigger picture [the ethics of her novel]" (*How to be both* 53).

[26] This is an observation Smith makes frequently, and one that is made frequently in relation to her work. See, for instance, her tribute to Muriel Spark, "'Vital, witty, formidably blithe': Ali Smith on Muriel Spark at 100"; and her interview with Olivia Laing, "It's a pivotal moment . . .."

[27] See, for instance, *The Accidental*, which reads like a re-imagination of Quin's *Three*, in which an uninvited guest similarly intrudes upon a family, and violently and definitively disrupts their static bourgeois lives; or *Hotel World*, where a series of disparate characters—the ghost of a chambermaid, a homeless woman, a former receptionist, etc.—collide within the space of the tellingly-named Global Hotel.

How to be both juxtaposes two narratives: that of George, a sixteen-year-old living in contemporary England, and of Francescho del Cossa, a cross-dressing Italian Renaissance painter. Separated temporally, geographically, and ontologically, the relationship between the two characters is one grounded in a principle of difference, but they come together in spirit: literally, since del Cossa haunts George; and figuratively, as George's interest in del Cossa is grounded both in her attempt to come to terms with the recent death of her mother (who introduced del Cossa to her daughter) and in her own growing appreciation of del Cossa's paintings. George's meeting of del Cossa through her paintings opens her eyes to a new way of seeing the world, one that is grounded in spending "proper time" (156) looking, by which Smith refers to the 'quality' of attention rather than 'duration'—that is to say, a way of seeing the way grounded in careful attention, the kind of which has been the focus of this extended discussion.

Attention, the kind George pays to del Cossa, is a way of drawing lines of meaning and of beauty, of dwelling in (and on) the magical space between the self and other—as we have already seen in the novels of Murdoch, Quin, and Higgins. It is a matter of great urgency to Smith, especially in a distraction-filled, virtual reality-driven society, where the demands made on our attention are manifold and exacting; as George's mother tells her, "Seeing and being seen . . . [are] very rarely simple" (123), and increasingly less so. The connection between George and Francescho is distinctly intimate, even if the former never sees or interacts with the latter, and it is an act of artful direction on Smith's part that their entire relationship is mediated through art, which involves the seeing of things beyond the surface, to paraphrase the words of two characters in Winter (286-87), the seeing of things through to their depth, which amounts to beauty for Smith. "[T]he life of painting and making is a matter of double knowledge," declares del Cossa, "so that your own hands will reveal a world to you which your mind's eye, your conscious eye, is often blind" (Smith, How to be both 313); a kind of seeing blind that constitutes an ethical attention to experience in all its entirety including its mystery—the seeing/blind eyes of St. Lucia, who according to the legends, saw through the surface of things to the depths.

Ethical attention is contrasted in the novel to "*un*caring but nevertheless close" ways of seeing, as Alice Bennett puts it (76),[28] that are yet more pervasive in today's world with its high volume consumption of pop culture and pornography, and its constant state surveillance; it is characteristic of Smith's instinct for life-preservation that she subverts these and rehabilitates them along the lines of attention. Enlightened and trained into attentiveness by del Cossa, George brings that recharged perception to her relationship with Helena: just as how she finds del Cossa's paintings beautiful after devoting time to them (Smith, *How to be both* 156), she discovers that the pop songs that Helena directs her to listen are "pretty good songs" if "you listen properly to them" (169)—and if they are the evidence of someone paying attention to you, as Helena is to George (169).[29] Although pornography does not stand up to George's scrutiny, her repeated viewings of a particular film similarly allow her to enact an act of rescue by attention of the evidently discomfited, possibly drugged, minor in it. She re-watches the film to "remind herself not to forget the thing that had happened to this person," including the inattentive viewings of the film by others, and also as an act of witnessing "by extension, of all the unfair and wrong things that happen to people all the time" (37). As George insists, "my completely different watching of it goes some way to acknowledging . . . this girl" (38). In the same vein, George's mother confesses that she "liked how [Lisa Goliard] paid attention to [her], [her] life" (119), and that being watched by her "makes life very . . .. Pert" (123); later, George herself wonders if "[p]erhaps somewhere in all of this if you look there's a proof of love" (185).

In Smith's world, the act of one thing meeting another in attention is always infused with possibility, always an occasion for "something beyond [the edges of one another" (*Artful* 126), for meaning, for life, for love, for beauty: whether it is the coming together of a young girl living in Cambridge and a long-dead Renaissance

[28] Bennett's reading of Smith's poetics of distraction complements this thesis's studying of blind literature: Bennett suggests that distraction can similarly be seen as an act of resistance as it opposes the "carefully managed economy" of sight (81) that would "focus on some people over others" (81) and endorse "overdetermined mode[s] of experience" (Pettman qtd in Bennett 82). She proposes that distraction is "a way of configuring groups together and imagining possibilities that have not yet quite come into view" (82) and she argues that "[i]n Smith's work, distraction . . . represents a disavowal of the unified self and of the continuity of the social order and political change" (83). See also Nicholas Royle's *Veering*, Ross Chambers's *Loiterature*, and Alexis Grohmann and Caragh Wells's *Digressions in European Literature*.
[29] George and Helena's private language of song titles translated into (imperfect) Latin, which only George speaks (169-70) is reminiscent of Elin and Fitz's lovelanguage in *Bornholm Night-Ferry*. Here, as in Higgins's novel, the negotiation of languages is an act of tenderness that both highlights and attempts to traverse the gulf between the self and other.

painter; or of two girls on the floor, wrapped in a paper wall and rolling towards each other before inevitably colliding into one another's arms and destroying the wall; or the meeting of eyes over the easel as the lover, Barto, looks at his beloved Francescho, who paints him. (Or, for that matter, in the meeting of two double curves to form an ogee, the encounter between an Irish novelist and a Danish poet, the unsettling advent of an enigmatic stranger, and certainly, in Murdoch's Ultima Thule, a place beyond the borders of the known world where anything can happen, even— especially—beauty.) *How to be both* is a study of things coming together in difference and forming a strange meaning, a strange beauty—it is a study of how to be two.[30] "2 things meet and dimension and perspective happen," notes del Cossa (273). One of the governing images of George's narrative is notably the DNA double helix, the symbol for the idea that, to quote Helena's song, "Life [is] not one strand but two" (95); later, when George is looking at a sculpture of the helix, she imagines it as "a kind of shout" that was "the opposite of history" (172), a shout of life, as it were.

It is to life itself that attention is always directed, to the ordinary form of things: del Cossa points out, matter-of-factly, that holy things might be worldly too and that beauty might be an angel's knee (307-08), that a "delphic tripod" might be made of "a 3-legged stool with a snakeskin draped over it" (298) and that the Graces might be found in the form of pleasure house girls (311; 314). And it is life itself that is the reward for such attention: George's newly sharpened gaze pulls del Cossa back into existence and initiates the telling of her narrative. We might even go a step further and read del Cossa's narrative as George's invention of del Cossa's story as an exercise on empathy for a school project; Smith leaves enough breadcrumbs to allow for the possibility of such a reading. For instance, the variance in the spelling of del Cossa's first name—Francesco in George's narrative and Francescho in del Cossa's— casts at least some doubt on the facticity of the painter's narrative. Christopher Benfey also notes the anachronistic argot in del Cossa's narrative, picking up on George's suggestion to Helena that the girls "imagine him talking like *we* do" (Smith, *How to be both* 138) for the empathy exercise ("'How to be Both,' by Ali Smith"). That said, it is of the least importance to determine the status of del Cossa's narrative within the novel's world; on the contrary, to do so would be to do injustice to Smith's

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[30] The interest that George develops in del Cossa's work is notably grounded in the way that the many unexpected, separate, even contradictory details, all "happen[ing] on their own terms" (53), that yet come together in harmony.

poetics, built on a love of mystery, ambiguity, and play. What matters is that del Cossa is given independent life as Francescho because of George's attentive gaze, and that her narrative is not subjugated under George's: the publication of *How to be both* in two versions, in which the order of the narratives is varied and the titling of each narrative 'one' disabuse any notions of hierarchy.[31]

What lies at the end of the fishhook is always something of a surprise: George reaches into the underworld, Orpheus-like, for her mother and emerges instead with Francescho del Cossa. That said, the lines are always worth the casting because the lines of meaning drawn between the self and the other are the "enchanted" bloodlines of life itself (Smith, *How to be both* 370). "[D]eeper than/ sea should you dare to enter or/ deep as a sky and goes as deep into the/ earth . . ." (370-71), they constitute the rhythm of life: we come to life ourselves because of them and to a life that is entirely ours *but differently possible*.[32] For Smith, as well as Murdoch, Quin, Higgins, and Hollinghurst, art and love are encounters of pure potential: they carry the potential to alter our ways of seeing and the potential to transform our very selves by inviting us into a wholly unexpected relationship with the mystery of the other. (A different way of seeing the world is after all, a different way of being in the world.) As it turns out, a living, present relationship with the other is an act of investment and risk that opens us up to the profundity of experience by placing us in a position to be irrevocably affected and changed in various ways impossible to know beforehand, probably impossible to articulate after. Edges are magic, to recall Smith, because they mark the thresholds of where we *pass from one state to another.*

This potential transformation brought about by an experience of beauty begins with, as shown throughout the course of this discussion, an 'unselfing,' to use Murdoch's term (*Existentialists and Mystics* 369), a "radical decentering" of the self, to use Scarry's (111). This constitutes a fundamental change in consciousness that is valuable in and of itself because it attests to a critical awareness that is an indication

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[31] George's successful act of seeing the other ought to be read in comparison with Charles Arrowby's, Leonard's, and Ruth's failed attempts in *The Sea, The Sea* and *Three*; as well as with Eve's in Smith's *The Accidental*. In the latter, Eve makes a career out of prosopopoeia, specifically continuing in fiction the lives of the war dead: her attempts, portrayed as failures of the imagination and unethical acts of exploitation driven by greed, meet with much objection from the Families Against the Thievery of Relatives' Authenticity group.

[32] Here I appropriate for Smith herself the words she applies to John Berger: "A few minutes with Berger and a better world, a better outcome, wasn't fantasy or imaginary, it was impetus—possible, feasible, urgent and clear. It wasn't that another world was possible; it was that this world, if we looked different, and responded different, as differently possible" ("John Berger remembered").

of us fully and presently inhabiting the world, and that translates into the enlarging of our sphere of experience, of possible experience, and of meaningful experience. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed similarly argues that because how we orient ourselves has implications on the way we inhabit the world as gendered, social, and political beings, "[m]oments of disorientation are vital" (157) as they carry the potential of "new patterns and new ways of making sense" (171).[33] Like the rings that widen and travel through the water when something, a seed, disturbs its surface: "See how far your eye can go," says del Cossa's mother, and further still, beyond the edge of the world (Smith, *How to be both* 205). Off-centred so, our lines of vision extended so, we are (as Murdoch, Scarry, and Nussbaum argue), placed in a position to extend kindness and care to the other; Murdoch suggests that beauty is worth the effort (of contemplation, of pursuit) because it is "the most accessible [place of moral change]" (*Existentialists and Mystics* 370).

Like Saint Vincent Ferrer in del Cossa's painting, through whom the eye passes from a state of brokenness to one of wholeness (Smith, *How to be both* 158)— or wholeness to brokenness, depending on how one sees it[34]—del Cossa guides George, however indirectly, through her experience of "real mournings and real melancholies" (83), from which she emerges with, as previously stated, an openness to the other, symbolised by Helena. Del Cossa's saint is notably "always looking off to the side": "It's good, to be seen past, as if you're not the only one, as if everything isn't happening just to you," thinks George, "Because you're not. And it isn't" (158); in the same vein, her mother declares it a "friendly" and "generous" work of art (54). This openness is also an acceptance of the unexpected, the profound, and the mysterious.[35] Replacing her monitoring eyes on the enigmatic Lisa Goliard

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[33] Ahmed's study, which puts queer theory in dialogue with phenomenology to explore the implications of orientation, demonstrates the relevance of queer theory to an ethics of blindness.

[34] Here, it seems quite clear that Smith is not attaching any value judgments to the states of brokenness or wholeness: George points out that both are beautiful (158); and as the ending of the novel shows, the movement from wholeness to brokenness can be a prerequisite that allows for further changes in consciousness. One thinks here of the eggs, literal but also metaphorical, that del Cossa notes must be broken to create art (212, 245; Smith also has a joke about eggs as oracles, 331-32). This is, of course, a governing principle in Christianity (i.e., the Fall), and a notion that Quin gestures to in *Three*. That said, it can also be the case that an experience of beauty leaves us poorer for it as Plato feared, but this often has more to do with our own failure to encounter the beautiful object or person on its own terms, or in the instance of 'bad art,' as Murdoch refers to it.

[35] Del Cossa's frescos are notably housed in the Palazzo Schifanoia, or the "palace of not being bored" (197); refer to Chapter 2 for an argument on the relationship between boredom (considered in the form of habit) and mystery.

(reimagined by George as the heart of and the solution to the 'mystery' of her mother's death) with the unseeing painted eyes on the wall, she enacts the original meaning of mystery, revealed to her earlier by Mrs Rock: "The word mystery originally meant a closing, of the mouth or the eyes. It meant an agreement or an understanding that something would not be disclosed" (72). This act significantly also brings del Cossa's narrative to a close, suggesting the 'completion' of George's exercise in empathy.

Del Cossa's most significant relationship in the novel, like George's, is with the other of art: from the moment she decides to become a painter, her entire life direction as a girl in the Renaissance period is altered and she becomes other to herself, the one who "exceed[s] expectations" (284). Just as George's new state allows her to be open and attentive to the possibilities of love and beauty embodied in Helena, del Cossa's new state allows her to be open and attentive to the same possibilities around her, in the pleasure house girls and in the 'infidel worker.' A painting, del Cossa points out, has the power to "[unchain] the eyes and the lives of those who see it and gives them a moment of freedom, from its world and from their world both" (308). A moment of freedom that might well extend past the parameters of the moment, into the rest of our lives: the drawings she makes of the pleasure house girls inspires some of them to "decide to choose a different life" (275); while her painting of the worker, "the seeing and liking so much of which [George's] mother literally stopped being sad" (47), sets off the chain of events by which del Cossa is given new albeit temporary life by George.

This is what we mean when we say that we are struck by beauty, or love: it appears to us quite apparently that the course of our lives are about to change (in a big way or in a small way, for better or for worse, are judgements that only come later)—as it appears to George: "like something blurred and moving glimpsed through a partition whose glass is clouded, both that love was coming for her and the nothing she could do about it" (172). Or to Rainer Maria Rilke, whose "Archaic Torso of Apollo" Smith discusses in *Artful*: in Rilke's case, the experience of art and its beauty goes one step further and "results in the pure urgency for transformation: 'you must change your life.'" (27). It is the possibility of experience that we are struck by, that we might be, in the most extreme/superlative cases, unmade and made anew. The beautiful object resides on a threshold, divides our lives into before/after.

"[I]n mystery there is always hope," declares del Cossa (Smith, *How to be both* 227). In her testing of the limits of the relationship between the self and the other, Smith meets Murdoch, Higgins, Hollinghurst, even Quin[36] in hope—hope that despite everything, our lives might change in the direction of the other and that we might find our various ways to meaning and to love and to beauty; and from there on, to 'goodness,' 'kindness,' and 'compassion.' Hope that, in times of difficulty, at the very least, we might say, "Let's see," as Wittgenstein was said to do, an expression Murdoch describes as being one of an "absolutely truthful and selfless direction of attention" (*From a Tiny Corner* 7). Let's see carefully, precisely, faithfully. Let's see in other ways. Let's see about the other. Let's see about the others.

As the epigraph from Paul Valéry to Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* reads, "Une difficulté est une lumière. Une difficulté insurmontable est un soleil." A difficulty is a light, an insurmountable difficulty is a sun (Murdoch's translation, 283). When something or someone stumps us, catches us off guard, and throws us off course, it is an occasion for seeing in another kind of light. This is the 'insight' that novels such as those examined in this thesis 'impart' through their respective reckonings of the self's relation with the other; and that is of paramount importance in a time when we are faced with a 'naked and unthinkable futurity,' when the respecting of difference might prove more instructive than the honouring of the familiar. Murdoch's, Quin's, Higgins's, Hollinghurst's, and Smith's novels point out our folly thus far in assuming the world would cede itself to the models according to which society organises itself; and situate us as always already, as we go about our daily lives, on the brink of the unknown and the unknowable, whether we acknowledge it or not. The risk is substantial but what potentially awaits us, the novels suggest, if we *do* acknowledge our position on the threshold of things and attend to our lives as such—and what potentially awaits us if we do not take on this risk—must give us pause.

I have attempted here in these pages, to appropriate Martin Heidegger's words, "a poetic outline of . . . being, drawn from its extreme possibilities and limits" ("The Ode on Man" 155), where by 'being' I mean the state of co-existence. The line between the self and other is a magic line. It divides, to be sure, but in dividing,

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[36] One thinks of the act of slash-and-burn, the razing of land and then letting it lie in a period of fallow: whether Leonard and Ruth ultimately come back together, at least they are seeing each other at the end of *Three* in a different, truer light.

renounces the paltry concept of transaction, and rewrites (repeatedly) the terms of our relations and our way of being in the world. In the spirit of this thesis's commitment to ethical attention, to the profound mystery of experience and the other, to the possibilities of aesthetic endeavour and of ethical encounter—and in the spirit of Nussbaum's comment in *Love's Knowledge* that criticism must be "willing to assume a posture of sufficient humility" (161)—I will let Smith (and literature) have the last words on what it might mean if we open ourselves up to the mysterious possibilities of the other and fully embrace the act of meeting and seeing another, lovingly and artfully—words which are, in any case, the better words:

> hello all the new bones
> hello all the old
> hello all the everything
> to be
> made and
> unmade
> both (Smith, *How to be both* 370-72)

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