TEXTUAL TENSIONS:
A DISCOURSE OF DIFFICULTY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

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To Angus

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Introduction

In an essay published in the literary magazine *Lingua Franca*, James Miller asks,

"Is Bad Writing Necessary?" Miller's title-question is itself a response to a recent debate

in the pages of the *London Review of Books* and *The New York Times* about whether or

not difficulty in writing is defensible. This intellectual dispute was not an anomaly in the

otherwise somnolent world of academia, but rather the latest iteration of an age-old

argument pitting "proletarian simplicity" against "elitist difficulty," in which the latter, as

indicated by the title of the *Lingua Franca* article, is often taken to be synonymous with

"bad writing." As Miller points out, the two camps have their twentieth-century

figureheads in George Orwell and Theodor Adorno, writing that "[i]f Orwell perfectly

exemplifies the party of clarity . . . Theodor Adorno has come to represent the party of

opacity" (76). Yet despite the excitement generated by the two sides, Miller notes the

similarities between Orwell and Adorno, observing that "both born in 1903, were early

and outspoken foes of fascism and Stalinism," and, more significantly, that each "saw a

close relation between the corruption of language and the corruption of politics" (78).

Where Miller quotes Orwell as asserting, "orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to

demand a lifeless, imitative style," he cites Adorno in a parallel vein, writing, "Where

there is something that needs to be said, indifference to literary form always indicates

dogmatization of content" (78). The correspondence of the two excerpts, culled from the

pages of Orwell's "Politics and the English Language," and Adorno's "Punctuation

Marks," respectively, despite the authors' antithetical attitudes, invite a consideration of

textual difficulty not as battle between public proletariats and academic elites, but rather a

continuing conversation about the relationship of politics to language.

In his aforementioned 1946 essay, Orwell delivers a diatribe against not only obscure academics with a penchant for ironic obsoletisms ("*we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms*"), but all abusers of the English language, from unnamed Marxists with an overreliance on formulaic jargon to lackluster journalists whose fondness for trite syntax belies an inability to think and write on an individual level (356). His evenhanded critique comprehends multiple corners of the practice of English, defying both the critic's attempt to align Orwell with a particular political faction, and even Orwell's own endeavor to extricate what he identifies as "good English" from "modern English." "Good English" is here understood to be that which is clear, concise, unadorned and straightforward, whereas "modern English," which Orwell alternatively refers to as "bad English" (366), is the language of the learned: overwrought, stuffy, awkward and stupefying. Yet, as Orwell's examples illustrate, modern English is not the exclusive property of academics, but also the resource of political dissidents and conservative moralists alike. Modern English, for Orwell, comprises not only "[*p*]*retentious diction*" (358), but also made-up "words and phrases translated from Russian, German, or French" (259), as well as comforting clichés that one is "used to seeing in print" (365). Modern English is both high and low, complex and simple, coherent only in its opposition to Orwell's proposed "good English"—a style that itself is distinguished not so much by what it consists as by what it does not. Four of Orwell's six rules for good English, outlined so that "one can think more clearly" (355)— "thinking clearly" being the "necessary first step toward political regeneration" (355)— are in the negative. The remaining two, "(iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut

it out" and "(vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous" (366), are likewise critical claims that offer no positive assertion.

The difficulty of Orwell's undertaking is underscored by its failures, evident even in his brief essay. Holding "the decadence of our language [to be] probably curable" (364), Orwell offers two examples to prove that it is possible to shape the development of language by "direct tinkering with words and expressions" (364), and that "Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority" (364). Yet his two examples, which he declares to have been "killed by the jeers of a few journalists" (364), are not extinct antiquisms but rather common phrases still heard and read today: "*explore every avenue*" and "*leave no stone unturned*" (364).[1] The perseverance of these familiar expressions testify to the unruliness of the English language; contrary to Orwell's assertion that it is possible to engineer the evolution of language, these popular phrases bounce back indefatigably from a level of low repute to the pages of highbrow journalism.

Adorno's stylistic stipulations, scattered throughout his essays in *Notes on Literature*, are similarly untenable. Despite asserting in earlier in "Punctuation Marks" that "It starts with the loss of the semicolon; it ends with the ratification of imbecility" (95), Adorno concludes his essay by writing that, regarding punctuation marks, "Today, certainly, one will do best to adhere to the rule 'better too few than too many'" (97). Elsewhere in the essay, Adorno touches on notions of totality, mixing it with not so much literary criticism as ad hominem attack:

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[1] Both idioms appear in recent editions of *The New York Times*, the former in a January 2010 article by Peter S. Goodman, and the latter in a September 2010 editorial by Anne Bagamery.

Literary dilettantes can be recognized by their desire to connect everything. Their products hook sentences together with logical connectives even though the logical relationship asserted by those connectives does not hold. To the person who cannot truly conceive anything as a unity, anything that suggests disintegration or discontinuity is unbearable; only a person who can grasp totality can understand caesuras. (93)

The language of Adorno's critique not only reveals the Marxist bent of his polemic, in which the "products" of the "literary dilettantes" are devalued by way of their association to Capitalist systems of productions, but also its condescension. In placing his comment, "only a person who can grasp totality can understand caesuras," behind a semi-colon—"caesuras" denoting a break or pause in a sentence—Adorno effectively nominates himself as "a person who can grasp totality." Moreover, the relational style that he criticizes, that of the "literary dilettantes" and "their desire to connect everything," is that of modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf. Yet for Woolf, a desire to connect everything and an inability to grasp totality are not points of shame but rather critical components of a modernist aesthetic. Curiously, it is such an aesthetic that Adorno champions in another essay, "The Essay as Form," wherein he questions the presumption "that totality is given" (11), and challenges the author who "acts as though one were in possession of the whole" (11). For, as Adorno asserts, "Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture" (13). This assenting nod to modernism echoes T.S. Eliot's famous remark in "The Metaphysical Poets," that "poets

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in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results" (65). Adorno's modernist statement not only complicates his previous point in "Punctuation Marks," but also his attempt to segregate the lowbrow literary dilettantes from the highbrow professional authors.

Indeed, the terms, "highbrow" and "lowbrow," are important to a discussion of difficult texts. As Perry Meisel notes in *The Myth of Popular Culture*, notions of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" come from nineteenth century phrenology, in which the contours of the skull were taken to be indicative of intellect. As such, a "'high' forehead meant intelligence; a 'low' one meant stupidity" (3). Meisel affirms that the association of "highbrow" elitism with difficult literature becomes evident in a never-sent letter to the *New Statesman*, in which Virginia Woolf responds to a detractor of *The Waves* by cheekily complaining that the "reviewer omitted to use the word Highbrow" in his attack on the novel's difficulty ("Middlebrow" qtd. in Meisel 38). According to Woolf, "a few highbrows from the same profession" include "Shakespeare, Dickens, Byron, Shelley, Keats, [and] Charlotte Bronte," yet these erudite authors, "for some reason or another, are wholly incapable of dealing successfully with what is called real life," whereas their lowly counterpart, the lowbrow, consists of "a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life" ("Middlebrow").

Woolf's sarcastic categorizations of these differently-browed-opponents hint at underlying stereotypes of the two; highbrow difficulty is associated with out-of-touch academic elites, while lowbrow simplicity gets linked to the "real" people whose primary

focus is on the material concerns of everyday life—not on silly stylistic debates, such as that which sets highbrows against lowbrows in the battle for English literature ("Middlebrow"). Yet even in her spoof, Woolf identifies highbrows and lowbrows as more similar than not, their antagonism exacerbated by the insidious "middlebrow" whose incessant screaming, "'Highbrows hate lowbrows! Lowbrows hate highbrows!'" conceals the fact that actually, "highbrows need lowbrows," just as "lowbrows need highbrows" ("Middlebrow"). Though Woolf's letter predates it by several decades, the middlebrow author she identifies could very well be a member of The Movement— including, among others, the poet Philip Larkin. For the middlebrow "curries favor with both sides equally," telling lowbrows that "while he is not quite one of them, he is almost their friend," but then the "[n]ext moment he rings up the highbrows and asks them with equal geniality whether he may not come to tea" ("Middlebrow"). The middlebrow, despite his compromising position, is not a mediator, but an instigator.

In my first chapter, I look at the changing function of difficulty in the revision that Ian McEwan's 2001 novel, *Atonement*, makes of Virginia Woolf's 1926 modernist text, *To the Lighthouse*. Taking Jean-François Lyotard's assertion in his conclusion to *The Postmodern Condition* that a "modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime" (81), I examine permutations of his theory as they appear in the two texts. According to Lyotard, "modernity takes place in the withdrawal of the real and according to the sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable" (79), in which the "sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable" holds that what is conceivable is not necessarily capable of being represented in art. Lyotard holds that the charge of the

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modern artist, then, is to stop attempting to represent reality through Realism, allowing

for the "withdrawal of the real," and to instead devote her "'little technical expertise' . . .

to present the fact that the unpresentable exists. To make visible that there is something

which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible" (78). Since the

sublime cannot be represented, its existence can only be gestured to by its absence,

creating a lack that fractures the unity of the piece—a hole that disrupts the whole. This,

according to Lyotard, is achieved in modernism through the disruption of content, and in

postmodernism, through the disruption of form. Yet a comparison of McEwan's

Atonement with Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* complicates Lyotard's distinction between

postmodernism and modernism. Both novels present their arguments in form *and* in

content, paradoxically testifying to Lyotard's *other* statement that for the modern author,

"the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they

cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to

the text or to the work" (81).

For both *Atonement* and *To the Lighthouse*, are, on some level, books about

writing books, or, more accurately, examinations of the relationship of life to art.

Atonement's protagonist, Briony Tallis, is also the author of its book-within-a-book, an

all-consuming *mise-en-abyme* that is as long as the book itself. Briony's story, like the

novel that frames it, takes its title from the process of revision that Briony undertakes to

make amends toward her sister and her sister's lover, both of whose lives she has ruined

through the fabrication of a story at age thirteen. *To the Lighthouse*, meanwhile, focuses

on the creative frustrations of Lily Briscoe, depicting throughout the narrative her

attempts to capture the landscape of the lawn and lighthouse in a painting, another *mise-*

en-abyme that intermittently occupies the duration of the novel, which concludes with the painting's completion. In both texts, the use of meta-textual devices—the *mise-en-abyme* and the appropriation of, or allusions to, other literary works—facilitates a discussion that interrogates the relationship of art to art, as well as that of art to life.

Continuing my exploration of the connection of difficult art to life, in my second chapter I look at the relationship of poetry to poetics in the careers of both T.S. Eliot and Philip Larkin. Combing their assorted essays for pronouncements of their views on poetry, I then analyze the verse of each in light of their respective ideologies. Eliot and Larkin, often taken as exemplars of High Modernist difficulty and quotidian clarity, respectively, are, like Orwell and Adorno, more alike than different. Both popular English poets—Eliot was granted British citizenship in 1927—each wrote extensively in essay-form, and each was an elitist snob in his own way. In their poetry, both Eliot and Larkin arrive with idiosyncratic views on the English poetic tradition, and an examination of their prose and verse connects their outlooks to specific pedagogical approaches. Yet, while both poets diagnose the ailing state of England, Larkin is comfortable with its infirmity where Eliot is not. A comparison of Eliot's *The Waste Land* with Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings," reveals the differences in the poets' responses to England's ill health, inviting a consideration of both productive and obstructive difficulty. Eliot's anxiety and Larkin's relative ease offer at least two possible paths for the future of English poetry, as well as for its people and the language itself.

My third and final chapter takes the more harmonious relationship of E.M. Forster's *Howards End* to Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, parsing it and Herbert Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Condition* for the ramifications of the application of aesthetic theories to

both art and life. Difficulty here, as Marcuse's "aesthetic of subjectivity" proposes, is again realized as a function of relationships—including that of aesthetics to art, that of aesthetics to life, and that of art to life, among others. Through an analysis of function of relationships within and between the two novels, I argue for the rejection of the consideration of difficulty as an attribute inherent to the text, supporting Diepeveen's assertion that "difficulty . . . is not merely a classifiable set of techniques" but a "recurring *relationship* . . . between . . . works and their audiences" (xi).

Indeed, the prevailing argument of this thesis project is for the examination of difficulty not as a particular standard for textual configuration, but a multivalent conversation that comes from the continual renegotiation of preceding literary forms. Ironically, in failing to snuff out one another's opponent in the war between opacity and clarity in literature, both camps succeed in perpetuating the discussion of difficulty, adding nuance to the argument through its rearticulation. Jonathan Franzen, in a 2002 essay, "Mr. Difficult," takes critical aim at the taxing esotericism of William Gaddis, championing instead the "Contract model" for fiction, wherein "the novel represents a compact between the writer and the reader, with the writer providing words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience" (111). In a 2003 response, Ben Marcus shoots back, arguing that "Franzen is not just criticizing a writer when he dismisses Gaddis; he's criticizing an audience, telling them that there's no way they could possibly like what they like because there's no entertainment in it" (52). Marcus's larger point, that in endorsing Realism as the only tenable style, Franzen attempts to inhibit artistic experimentation, is canny, but the subtitle to his essay: "A Correction"—albeit a humorous play on the title of Franzen's 2001 novel—undermines his concluding claim

that "This isn't a manifesto. It's a response" (52). For the conversation between the two authors and their respective camps does not consist of correctional negation, but a productive tension whose product is new text. Franzen and Marcus's essays are themselves brilliant, insightful works of literature. Marcus's self-declared fight for the "very life" (52) of literature is not inimical but complementary to Franzen's argument for literature "where the difficulty is the difficulty of life itself" (111); each adds to the discourse of difficulty.

Mind the Gap: Sublime Aesthetics

in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

The conversation of difficulty continues in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* by way of the novel's revision of an earlier, notoriously difficult text: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. With difficulty itself defined as the perpetual renegotiation of changing form and content—a discourse of innovation—McEwan responds to perceived flaws in Woolf's modernist style through the critical appropriation of her novel's form and content, which he then satirizes and amends. As such, Briony Tallis's titular *Atonement*, involves not only the restitution toward Cecilia and Robbie, but the attempt to heal the weaknesses of Woolf's modernist novel, best exemplified in *Atonement*'s clinical handling of "the leg," a trope transplanted from *To the Lighthouse* that functions in *Atonement* as a synecdoche for the Woolf's stream-of-consciousness style. Yet in discrediting Woolf's novel, McEwan, like Franzen, oversteps the boundaries of difficulty's discourse to make the conservative claim that Realism is the only kind of credible difficulty in literature. *Atonement* criticizes *To the Lighthouse* for being "out of touch," failing to recognize that Woolf's novel is as much the product of literary discourse as itself, that the two novels share a framework of sublime-inspired difficulty that straddles the distinction between modernism and postmodernism.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard writes that modernism's most significant move in art and literature was to replace the aesthetic of the beautiful with the aesthetic of the sublime. Quoting Belgian art theorist Thierry de Duve, Lyotard notes that "the modern aesthetic question is no longer, "'What is beautiful?' but 'What can be said to be art (and literature)?'" (75), adding that "it is in the aesthetic of the

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sublime that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of the avant-gardes finds its axioms" (77). Lyotard's distinction of the sublime from the beautiful borrows from Immanuel Kant's definitions of the two as they appear in the *Critique of Judgment*. For Kant, the sight of the beautiful produces an experience in which there is a "free play" (§26) that occurs between a subject's understanding and imagination, a harmonic agreement between conception and representation. The sublime, though also an internally-located experience, is set apart from the beautiful in that within the experience of the sublime, there is no such correspondence that arises between a subject's understanding and her imagination. Rather, the failure of the subject's imagination to represent her understanding *occasions* the sublime.

Lyotard emphasizes the schism between understanding and imagination, which he interprets as a conflict between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to represent, and ascribes the near-simultaneous feelings of pain and pleasure that constitute the experience of the sublime to this basic disagreement—just as the pleasure that typifies an experience of the beautiful can be traced back to the agreement of conception and representation. Consequently, the sublime challenges us where the beautiful does not, forcing us to realize our limitations in our inability to represent it adequately. This, for Lyotard, is what makes an experience of the sublime revolutionary: its invitation to critical reconsideration facilitates a critique of prevailing social and political norms. This aesthetic of the sublime, which forces an awareness of the unpresentable, is for Lyotard, the only way in which we can "wage a war on totality," activating differences to prevent "the realization of fantasy to seize reality" (82). By rebelling against the pre-established rules that govern literary language and syntax, modernist authors replace structural

complacency with structural resistance, exchanging the aesthetic of the beautiful with the aesthetic of the sublime. For, as Kant writes in his "Analytic of the Sublime," "The mind feels itself *set in motion* in the representation of the sublime in nature; whereas in the aesthetic judgment upon what is beautiful therein it is in *restful* contemplation" (§23, emphasis added). The experience of the sublime enlivens where the beautiful placates.

Yet while modernism and difficulty are often synonymous for Lyotard, an aesthetic of the sublime cannot be simply equated with an "aesthetic of difficulty." The "sublime" is by definition what cannot be represented in art, whereas difficulty can be made present in art, often through fragmented form or impenetrable lexicon. Still, these manifestations of difficulty are also gestures to the sublime, acknowledging the unrepresentability of totality through the absence of complete sentences and paragraphs, or evident meaning. As such, the sublime in art becomes a matter of interpretive difficulty, and it is in this vein that Leonard Diepeveen, in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, defines textual difficulty as "a barrier to what one normally expect[s] to receive from a text, such as its logical meaning, its emotional expression, or its pleasure" (x).

Indeed, Diepeveen draws attention to the connection between Romanticist theories of the sublime and modernist defenses for difficulty. Writing of the intense corporeal relationship between aesthetic complexity and pleasure that D.E. Berlyne's *Aesthetics and Psychobiology* identifies as an effect of artistic difficulty, he observes that "this physiological reaction also has an intellectual heritage, found in romantic conceptions of the sublime" (258). Yet while Diepeveen later qualifies this connection, holding theories of the sublime to be "not as heavily reliant on *resistance* as are most modernist notions of difficulty" (268), his reservation ignores more recent articulations of

sublime aesthetics. For Lyotard, the aesthetic of the sublime resists the status quo, challenging "the general demand for slackening and for appeasement" (82), in a manner analogous to how "the direct and virile, heroic and muscular" attributes of modernist difficulty confront the "weak and passive pleasures" of simpler texts (Diepeveen 146). Taking an aesthetic of the sublime as its galvanizing force of departure from, and resistance to, preceding literary forms, modernist literature can be seen to proceed by way of difficulty.

Ian McEwan's 2001 novel, *Atonement*, though published beyond the chronological confines of Modernism, is in some respects a piece of modernist literature that employs a framework of sublime-inspired difficulty. Part meta-fictive, part historical novel, *Atonement* is a reworking of preceding literary forms, particularly Virginia Woolf's 1926 novel, *To the Lighthouse*, which McEwan arguably revises from an aesthetic of the beautiful into an aesthetic of the sublime. The sublime conflict at the center of *Atonement* is that of the incommensurability of human beings and the author's incapacity to adequately represent or even understand another's consciousness. Briony Tallis, the novel's author and protagonist, fails to recognize her incapacity to represent the unrepresentable, and the results are dire. Confronted with an ambiguous scene—the rape of her cousin, Lola, and a shadowy figure retreating up the hill—Briony interprets it in accordance to her preconceived notions of narration, taking her account as unassailable truth. What the young Briony adheres to, is, in effect, Lyotard's interpretation of an aesthetic of beauty, in which there is a correspondence between conception and representation. Her separate understanding of Robbie Turner as a "maniac" (112) is thus fitted into her representation of him as Lola's rapist. Similarly, Briony's understanding of

herself as both "author" (8) and "heroine" (3), seen in the starring role she writes for herself in *The Trials of Arabella*, is fulfilled in her presentation of testimony: not only does she comfort Lola in the wake of her rape, but she "saves" her sister, Cecilia, from further "attack" (116). Robbie is cast out of society for having been cast in Briony's pre-modernist plot.

An older Briony, one who is "beginning to get the full grasp of what she did and what it has meant" (199), spends the rest of her life attempting to atone for her critical mistake. This atonement gives rise to not only the novel within the novel's title—which, to add to the confusion, is also the title of McEwan's novel— but its very existence. At the end of Part Three, the narrator writes of Briony, "She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin" (330). This comment occurs just above the signature and timestamp that identifies the novel as the work of "BT," or, Briony Tallis. The argument implicit in the text is the exact obverse of that made explicit by young Briony when, frustrated by her play's inability to fulfill her expectations, or, conception of it, she reflects:

> A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself
> and her reader—no intermediaries with their private ambitions or
> incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources. In a story you
> only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the
> world. . . . It seemed so obvious now that it was too late: a story was a
> form of telepathy. By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able
> to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader's…. Reading a

sentence and understanding it were the same thing. . . . There was no gap

during which the symbols were unraveled. (35)

The basic irony of the passage, Briony's claim to being capable of representing the

unrepresentable—the "thoughts and feelings from her mind," directly to her reader's

mind—is emphasized by the narration's double perspective. As indicated several pages

later by the admission that the author "was to concede that she may have attributed more

deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year old self" (38), this passage is a

reflection of the younger Briony as seen through the eyes of the elder Briony. As such,

the explicit message written under an aesthetic of beauty, is reinscribed as its opposite

under an aesthetic of the sublime, in which an appreciation for the temporal and spatial

"gap during which symbols [are] unraveled" is privileged.

The recursive process of replacing an aesthetic of simplicity with an aesthetic of

difficulty occurs on multiple levels in the novel. First, there is the continual revising of

Part One of *Atonement*, which firsts appears as young Briony's testimony against Robbie.

This first narrative, which includes the presentation of Robbie's rather candid letter to

Cecilia and an account of their "struggle" in the library, is then reworked into Briony's

short story, "Two Figures by a Fountain," tapped out during a stay with relatives in

Primrose Hill. This version, a more direct archetype for the book itself, corrects and

rewrites its original iteration in a flagrantly modernist style. According to Briony, who

"no longer really believed in characters" (265), the "pure geometry" and "defining

uncertainty" of the story reflect "a modern sensibility" (265), in which thoughts and

perceptions are privileged over plots, which she equates to "rusted machinery whose

wheels would no longer turn" (265). This stream-of-consciousness style affords her a

capacity to capture the constant state of change and unpredictability that characterizes the experience of "human nature itself" (265).

This reworking of her initial story, glimpsed through Cyril Connolly's letter of rejection, makes considerable amends toward its characters. Briony concedes that her younger self had a "fundamental lack of grasp of the situation" (295), and endows the characters of both Robbie and Cecilia with perspectives of their own—something that her younger self had, in her authorial avarice, denied them. Yet this replacement of an earlier aesthetic with an aesthetic of difficulty, implicit in both the story's adoption of modernist form and its concession to the unrepresentable, is, for McEwan, not quite adequate. Its primary shortcoming, articulated through Connolly's letter to Briony, is its lack of "forward movement" (294), its omission of an underlying, "simple" narrative (295).

Indeed, older Briony heeds Connolly's advice and her narrative is drafted again, finally occurring in its present form as *Atonement*, in which an aesthetic of difficulty produces a contemporary meta-fictive framework that relies on intertextuality and a plurality of form to critique the text's earlier presumptions. As Brian Finney highlights in his astute article, "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," the tripartite-plus structure of *Atonement*, wherein the Part One consists of a multifocal account of the pivotal event, Part Two of Robbie's experience of war, Part Three of Briony's perspective of the same, and the plus as Briony-the-author's afterword, each reflect different, distinct narrative forms. Citing various interviews given by McEwan, Finney finds Part One to be written in a style evocative of an eighteenth or nineteenth century novel, much like the text alluded to at various points in the section, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, with doses of modernist stream-of-consciousness (74).

Part Two, meanwhile, echoes the "choppy" (74) prose of Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and Nathaniel West's quasi-journalistic style, while the novel's coda "employs a contemporary voice, one that is acutely self-conscious and aware of its own act of narration" (74). The effect of the novel's plurality of form, in tandem with its profusion of literary allusions, among them references to E.M. Forster's *Howards End*: "this age of telephones and motorcars" (171), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*: "Lola, who was fifteen" (8), and W.H. Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" (190), is one of (post)modern difficulty that gestures "to something which does not allow itself to be made present" (Lyotard 80) in both content and form. For, allusion, whether explicit or implicit, is, according to Lyotard, "a form of expression indispensible to the works which belong to an aesthetic of the sublime" (80).

Yet *Atonement*'s allusions are not artistic homages but critical invocations that attack earlier narrative forms, particularly the modernist stream-of-consciousness style championed by Virginia Woolf. McEwan's novel works as forward-moving vehicle of redress that focuses particularly on perceived shortcomings of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, communicated by Connolly as a failure to deal with the daily consequences of actions: "*If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults*" (295). Woolf's elevation of the psychological and perceptual, at the cost of the physical, is, for McEwan, too radical, too totalizing.

There are several formal commonalities that connect *Atonement* to its 1926 predecessor, *To the Lighthouse*. Chief among these are the tripartite structure, in which the first part consists of a multifocal account of a family's gathering with select friends at

an estate in the period of a day, the second of war, and the third, of a revisiting of that day, and the changes elapsed since, through the perspectives of various characters, who set out to complete what they attempted to begin in part one. Smaller allusions abound within these parallel scenes, such as the spoiled dinner: the boeuf-en-daube in *To the Lighthouse* and the roast in *Atonement*, or the fixation on island edifices: the temple in McEwan and the lighthouse in Woolf.

However, as previously mentioned, McEwan's use of Woolf's structure and, in Part One of *Atonement*, her style, is not adulation but a critical implementation. His is a reinscription that criticizes and corrects Woolf's story's shortcomings, mirroring and producing Briony's textual "atonement." For the defects of the modernist style are, for McEwan, wrapped up with the defects of Briony's initial, and subsequent narratives, all of which subscribe to an aesthetic of the beautiful, albeit for different reasons. Briony's initial narrative subscribes to an aesthetic of the beautiful because its representation corresponds to her thirteen-year-old understanding of it, a potent, harmonic agreement from which she elicits pleasure. Finding Lola post-rape, young Briony immediately turns the scene into a narrative, noting, of the rapist, "She had no doubt. She could describe him. There was nothing she could not describe" (155). Her second revision, "Two Figures by a Fountain," and, by association, Woolf's modernist style, are linked to an aesthetic of the beautiful though their obfuscation of reality with fantasy and static effect. As Connolly writes to Briony, the technique "*present*[s] *a stylized version of thought processes . . .* [that] *can become precious when there is no sense of forward movement*" (294). The charge here is that the style, while purporting to better approximate the reality of human life, actually moves away from it. The presentation is "stylized," and insofar as

it "permit[s] the vagaries and unpredictability of the private self to be explored and so on" (294), it proceeds at the cost of the physical, of the consequences and, indeed, movement of human action: "*how might this affect the lives of the two adults?*" (295). The "static" quality that Connolly notes in Briony's piece refers back to Kant's distinction of the aesthetic of the beautiful from the aesthetic of the sublime: "The mind feels itself *set in motion* in the representation of the sublime in nature; whereas in the aesthetic judgment upon what is beautiful therein it is in *restful* contemplation" (§23, emphasis added). As such, McEwan's criticism of Woolf's style is that it is not difficult *enough*, it is too "precious" (294), too focused on the pleasure of the beautiful.

McEwan's *Atonement* attempts to amend Woolf's style by not only paring it down, but by also bringing it into contact with physical reality. This occurs most blatantly in Part Two, wherein he revises the corresponding war section of *To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes," by taking the narrative from the deterioration of a house to the battlefield. This move, according to McEwan's logic of reinscription, puts the modernist narrative in contact with the gruesome, physical brutalities of war—which is precisely what such a style avoids in its singular devotion to the psychological. McEwan's aesthetic achievement here is sublime, is difficult, in that he challenges Woolf's interpretation of reality by disrupting both form and content. This sublime reworking of a modernist text, in which the psychological is brought into contact with the physical, is the logic behind the recurring image of the severed leg.

The leg, which first appears to young Briony in the moments leading up to her discovery of Lola's rape, works as a symbol for the shortcomings of Woolf's impressionist style. It lacks a physical body, and as such, is incapable of moving forward.

Briony's initial misreading of her vision of her supine mother's raised leg as "a cylindrical object that seemed to hover" (151) not only anticipates her much more disastrous misreading of Lola's rape, but makes a farce out of modernist technique by emphasizing its detachment from the body in its elevation of the perceptual. The image of the leg returns, more regularly, in Part Two, where the "unexpected detail" (179) of a severed leg in a tree serves as both the section's point of departure and a grotesque reminder of the consequences of war. Unable to stop thinking about it, the "single, haunting detail" (187) of a dead boy's severed leg, is for Robbie a metaphor for the horrors of war, of which "the end result [is] a vanished boy" (190). The "vanished boy" here is not only the former owner of the leg, a casualty of the war, but also Robbie himself—victim to Briony's earlier "modernist" story, which ignores the quotidian consequences of narrative.

The symbol of the lopped-off leg functions as a sublime object, one that gestures to the unrepresentable, including the wide effects of war and the totality of a human being's existence. As Part Two's point of departure, it is also a catalyst for narrative movement. As such, the replacement of the beautiful object, the Ramsay house, with the sublime object, the severed leg, is a synecdoche for the transposition of an aesthetic of the sublime over an aesthetic of the beautiful. In focusing on the grotesque, ghastly leg, McEwan refutes Woolf's assertion that during war, still "loveliness reigned and stillness and together made the shape of loveliness itself" (129). This refutation comes to a head when Briony, having just posted her manuscript to Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*, reflects, "The novel of the future would be unlike anything in the past . . . a great transformation was being worked in human nature itself, and . . . only fiction, a new kind of fiction could

capture the essence of the change. To enter a mind and show it at work . . . would be an artistic triumph" (265). For this kind of thinking, Briony and Woolf are both upbraided by the text, first by the sentence immediately following, which indicates Briony to be "oblivious to the danger she was in, of being discovered standing on one leg by Sister Drummond" (265), and then by the arrival of war-wounded soldiers, in which a senior nurse sends Briony to attend to, of all things, the mutilated leg of a corporal (278).

Through the forced contact of the modernist author, Briony, and text, *To the Lighthouse*, with the physical effects of war, McEwan attempts to heal the weaknesses of the two's modernism through the injection of difficulty. Briony's interaction with the soldier's damaged leg is initially characterized by her inability to support it; the man's stretcher proves too heavy for her, and it slips from her fingers, causing the soldier to blow "through his lips a sound of incredulity, as though he had never guessed that pain could be so vast" (275). As Briony later considers, "The moment the war touched her life, at the first moment of pressure, she had failed" (275). Briony's incapacity and, by association, Woolf's, to support the physical in their psychologically-centric prose is precisely what the passage declares, and then challenges in the introduction of the physically grotesque, difficult element of the leg. For in confronting the solder's wound, Briony's original, modernist perceptual distortion of her mother's leg gets rewritten in a context of war, which reveals that there is more to an object than one's perception of it; the gangrenous black of the soldier's leg, "like an overripe banana" (279), is wiped away to reveal a "swath of white skin" (280). Briony's encounter with the mutilated leg gives her a new perspective: "Everything was different for her now that she had achieved one small thing" (280). The interaction with the corporal's leg, just like that with the French

soldier's half-destroyed head, is a reminder that even the mind, that great center of

consciousness, is a physical entity, one that is still very much subject to the bodily

dangers of war and life.

Yet one of the arguments behind McEwan's reworking of *To the Lighthouse,*

which charges in part that the aesthetic of the 1926 novel is not one of the sublime but

rather one of the beautiful, and attempts to remedy this fault, may commit the error that

Lyotard ascribes to a confusion of "the Kantian sublime with Freudian sublimation" (79).

The ramifications of such a mistake are that contrary to converting to an aesthetic of

difficulty, the aesthetic "remain[s] for him that of the beautiful" (Lyotard 79). Freudian

sublimation, rather than constituting a framework of difficulty, "subordinate[s] thought to

the gaze" (79) by repressing and transmogrifying libidinal desires into artistic

achievement. It is a defense mechanism that protects the subject against his desire by

displacing it into an acceptable, and often productive, form at the cost of the realization

of that desire. This aesthetic of sublimity promotes, rather than contests, what Lyotard

calls "the realization of fantasy to seize reality" (82).

Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, though certainly enamored of the beautiful, does

indeed subscribe to an aesthetic of the Kantian sublime, in which the love of beauty is

questioned and qualified. The symbol of the leg, repeatedly used in *Atonement* to criticize

the modernist stream-of-consciousness style deployed in Woolf's writing, surfaces in *To

the Lighthouse* as James Ramsay's leg, which Mrs. Ramsay uses as a model for the

stocking that she knits throughout part one, "The Window." That Mrs. Ramsay's knitting,

which serves as a metaphor for the weaving processes of storytelling, is measured against

the physicality of James's leg, suggests that Woolf not only brings her story into contact

with the physical, but is also aware of the many imperfections of narrative practice—that it can fall too short, and fail to accommodate the sheer size of the human body and its existence. Indeed, Woolf's inclusion of the physical, as demonstrated both in Mrs. Ramsay's comparison of her unfinished stocking to her son's "bare calf" (31), and in her depiction of war not through description of the battlefield, but in its effects on the declining state of the house, is a (post)modern allusion to the sublime. Aware of her incapacity to represent the unrepresentable, a reality including war, she anticipates Lyotard's definition of postmodern difficulty by not only allowing "the unpresentable to be put forward . . . as the missing contents" (81), thereby exemplifying the style of modernism, but also "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (81). The stream-of-consciousness form so ridiculed by McEwan is, in fact, more subversive than he acknowledges; the holes of Woolf's narrative, which outnumber those of Minta Doyle's stockings (57), are not defects of form, but rather its argument. For, as Lyotard asserts, the works of a postmodernist writer "are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for" (81).

As Leonard Diepeveen notes in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, difficulty is often characterized as "a lack" (57). This "lack" can be, among others, a lack of "clarity," of "sense," or of "context" (57), all of which are primarily accusations launched against difficulty by its detractors. Yet this structure of lack is precisely the aesthetic of the sublime, wherein omission and absence allude to the unrepresentable through an acknowledgement of the incapacity to represent it. Woolf's capitulation to the sublime

through her refusal to go to the battlefield in "Time Passes" does not indicate an avoidance of the physical consequences of life; through parenthetical remarks we learn that the "beautiful" (67) Prue Ramsay died in childbirth while Andrew Ramsay was "blown up in France" (133). Rather it suggests a refusal to cover up reality with the fabric of fantasy, and the ghostly, parenthetical allusions concede to the incommensurability of the unrepresentable reality in such a way that emphasizes its immensity through their own minuteness.

In fact, "Time Passes" is already a sublime reworking of the fiction genre. In her essay on the process of story-writing, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf identifies the house as a both a symbol and convention of the Victorian literature that she labels as "Edwardian," noting that "House property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy" (29). In contrast to the traditional Edwardians, Woolf presents the "Georgians," the emerging group of writers now recognized as Modernists, among them James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Woolf herself. The Georgians, aware that the conventions of the preceding generation are no longer effective but rather "an obstacle and an impediment" (31) to communication, must, according to Woolf, "destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society" (31). The results are varied, but everywhere "Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated" (31).

It is precisely this kind of violent textual revision that Woolf enacts in "Time Passes" when she takes the Edwardian trope of the house and ravages it. What was for Mr. Bennett and his fellow Victorian authors a device from which they "found it easy to proceed to intimacy" (29), becomes a means of literary rebellion in *To the Lighthouse*. The structural disintegration occurs not only on the level of the house, but also on the

level of the text, in which the fragmented narrative of the characters' lives during wartime is enveloped in a fragmented narrative delineating the home's deterioration. The distancing effect that this has on the novel is paradoxically what Woolf calls in her essay a "means of bridging the gulf" (29) between author and reader. Woolf gets "into touch with [her] reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more *difficult* business of intimacy" (29, emphasis added) by presenting him with something familiar, an Edwardian house, which she then proceeds to destroy. In doing so, Woolf enacts the Modernist process of revision, "to go back and back and back; to experiment with one thing and another" (29) in an effort to describe the "unlimited capacity and infinite variety" of "life itself" (33). Imploring in her essay for the reader to "Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure" (33), Woolf offers these challenges through an aesthetic of difficulty in her novel.

McEwan's novel too gives attention to the "gulf" that exists between authors and readers, or what Briony terms the "gap during which the symbols are unraveled" (35). As previously demonstrated, his gap, located between "[r]eading a sentence and understanding it" (35), while flatly denied by the young Briony, is prioritized by the double-perspective of the older Briony through the passage's ironic form. The exercise of *Atonement* is to highlight both the various hazards and opportunities offered by this "liminal" space. Robbie's allusion to Malvolio from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in his repetition of the line, "Nothing that can be can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes" (123) is taken to its tragic conclusion when, of course, both his sexual and social intercourses with Cecilia are terminally interrupted by the thirteen-year-old Briony.

Similarly, Briony's failure to see the gap between her understanding of events and her representation of them has grave effects on multiple lives. Yet, that same space can present a subject with an opportunity to create, as evinced in the very form of *Atonement*. For the book is proof of what the elder Briony has done with the intervening space afforded her by the deaths of Cecilia and Robbie. Their interrupted lives offer Briony an opportunity of atonement, which she attempts through the form of the novel.

Indeed, the book's simultaneous celebration and condemnation of Woolf's style reflects its ambivalent attitude toward the space left by the unrepresentable—the space that acknowledges the sublime. It is, after all, through this particular style that eighteen-year-old Briony begins her atonement, correcting her earlier assumptions in her concession to the unrepresentable—her omission of the aftermath in "Two Figures by a Fountain." But this omission, this allusion to the sublime, is not only explicitly critiqued in Cyril Connolly's letter, but is nearly effaced in Briony's revision of the story, wherein Robbie and Cecilia are given a hopeful reunion. In this move, Briony-as-author nearly succumbs to the "absolute power of deciding" that makes a novelist "God" (350), and almost stops up that sublime space with fantasy in a manner akin to what the new proprietors of the Tallis estate do to the lake that separated the temple on the island. Briony, or rather, McEwan, saves her[self] from doing so with a final interruption: that of the afterword, in which the space between Briony's fiction and Briony's reality is reestablished as we learn that contrary to the story told in Part Three, Robbie and Cecilia died in separate war-related incidents, and never saw each other again after that one, half-hour long meeting (350).

This final interruption, that effectively rewrites the entire book, is a critical

component of McEwan's aesthetic of difficulty. For not only does it highlight gaps in the

novel's narrative, but identifies McEwan's aesthetic of difficulty as dependent on such

formal interruptions. Each interruption opens up a space for the sublime—an allusion to

the unrepresentable—so that McEwan's novel becomes one of both modernist and

postmodernist difficulty, as determined by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. For

these interruptions allow him to have it both ways. The multiple, recognizable forms of

the novel "offer to the reader matter for solace or pleasure" (81), as typifies a modernist

text in which the sublime is "put forward only as the missing content" (81), yet these very

forms are interrupted by one another and fashioned into a formal collage, as characterizes

a postmodernist text in which the unrepresentable is put forward in its form (81). This

ambivalent formal attitude, in which both "a nostalgia of the whole and one, for the

reconciliation of the concept and the sensible" (81-2)—a nostalgia for an aesthetic of the

beautiful—and an enthusiasm for "new presentations" that would "impart a stronger

sense of the unpresentable" (81)—a full-bodied adherence to an aesthetic of the

sublime—makes it impossible to align *Atonement* totally with either modernism or

postmodernism. It contains attributes of both.

McEwan's novel, though less transgressive, does indeed share many

commonalities with its archetype, *To the Lighthouse*, for Woolf's novel too is a rule-

seeking commentary on the making of fiction. Considered through the dual metaphors of

both Mrs. Ramsay's sock-knitting and Lily Briscoe's landscape-painting, the creation of

Woolf's novel is seen as an inherently subjective process, one that can, and does, fall

short, "ever much so short" (28) of depicting life, as Mrs. Ramsay feels her stocking is

destined to do. As Lily Briscoe observes at her easel, however, it is the process of creation that not only makes her hand tremble "in a painful but exciting ecstasy" (157), but also reminds her of how "she was such and such a person, [and] had such and such relations to people" (157). The process of creation, just like Briony's attempt at atonement, is, itself, sublime. Fated to fail due to the incapacity of the subject to adequately represent the unrepresentable, the artistic exercise provides her with just a taste of what Briony identifies as the God-like power of the novelist, without actually making her God. Rather, as Lily notes, the sublime resituates the subject in the context of her relations, by offering her a refreshed perspective in reference to the sublime's own infinitude.

In the concluding chapter to his treatise, Lyotard includes a sentence-long paragraph in which he asserts: "It seems to me that the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern, while the fragment (*The Athaeneum)* is modern" (81). This statement is at the crux of both Woolf and McEwan's similar but distinct aesthetics of difficulty, for it supports the contention of each that it is the effort, *l'essai*, the process of creation that matters, and not its final product. For while Woolf's novel may conclude with Lily's proclamation: "I have had my vision" (209), it is the process leading up to it, and not its finished iteration, that the novel depicts. Briony, in her afterword, states that it is impossible for a novelist to achieve atonement, when, "In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. . . . It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all" (350-1). For these two texts, an aesthetic of difficulty is critical to underlying arguments regarding the incommensurability of art in life, for each is designed to fail, to fall short.

Mrs. Ramsay leaves *To the Lighthouse* without ever finishing her stocking, but that is exactly the point.

An Unhealthy Obsession: Fertility and Failure

in the Prose and Poetry of T.S. Eliot and Philip Larkin

For two twentieth-century British poets, T.S. Eliot and Philip Larkin, the essay becomes an effective means of expressing poetics, capable of communicating not only the views of each on the purpose of poetry, but also their opinions on poetry's place in English tradition and contemporary culture. Of course, with this increase in communication comes greater opportunity for the detection of failure; Eliot and Larkin's critical essays offer self-set standards against which their poetry can be measured. The "sublime failure" of *Atonement* and *To the Lighthouse* gets reexamined in the relationships of Eliot and Larkin's poetics to their poetry, and difficulty emerges in part as a function of these relationships, working for Eliot as a source of anxiety while serving for Larkin as a site for potential.

In his 1921 essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot turns what is ostensibly a book-review into a series of epigrams about the recent history of British poetry, including the famous declaration: "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*" (65). This dictum, splashed liberally across the pages of many of difficulty's theorizations—Diepeveen mentions it no fewer than seven times in *The Difficulties of Modernism*—reflects a far more conservative stance than is often attributed to it. What Eliot is arguing for is a return to the tradition of the metaphysical poets; a return to the "unification" (65) of language and feeling that results in the "formation of new wholes" (64). As indicated in both Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and Virginia Woolf's "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," the relationship of modernist difficulty to the conception of "unities" and "wholes" is one of discord, if not downright

antagonism. Frequently denounced for its "unwholesome" qualities—perhaps most famously in the censure that greeted the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Diepeveen 77)—modernist difficulty presents itself in fragmented form, producing texts in which "Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated" (Woolf 31). As such, Eliot's professed desire for the restoration of the poets whose minds "are always forming new wholes" (64), epitomizes the "nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and sensible" (81) that Lyotard not only derides, but identifies as *the* source of "terror" (81) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Eliot's conservatism is reiterated in his less frequently quoted, though perhaps more grandiose contention that "Those who object to the 'artificiality' of Milton or Dryden sometimes tell us to 'look into our hearts and write,' But that is not looking deep enough; Racine or Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts" (66). Here too is a rather orthodox claim wrapped in graphic imagery: an appeal to physical empiricism to flush out the bile of "crude" feeling that Eliot finds in Tennyson and Browning. Their poetry is unwholesome; not only does it lack the ability to amalgamate "disparate experience . . . [into] new wholes" (64) but, lacking refinement, it fails to meet "our fastidious demands" (64) that it be "simple and pure" (62). [2]

Robert Conquest repeats this rhetoric of the body in his introduction to the 1956 poetry anthology, *New Lines*, wherein he writes that while a poem "needs an intellectual backbone…an intellectual skeleton is not worth much unless it is given the flesh of humanity, irony, passion, or sanity" (xvi-xvii). The work he resolutely praises as "a

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[2] Eliot's conspicuous use of the first-person plural here is perhaps more in line with the majestic plural than the proletarian.

genuine and healthy poetry of the new period" (xi), however, is decidedly not that of the

metaphysical tradition, but rather that set against it: the kind consisting of "rational

structure and comprehensible language" (xv) and is "empirical in its attitude to all that

comes" (xv). It is curious, then, that both he and Eliot should focus on the idea of "whole-

formation," with Eliot relating it to the necessary poetic mindset—the artist who is

capable of uniting language and sensibility—and Conquest finding in the nine poets

featured, among them Philip Larkin, a progression from "different viewpoints to a certain

unity of approach, a new and *healthy* standpoint" (xiv, emphasis added).

The idea of a "healthy standpoint," or, a healthy "body" (xviii) of poetry, is

important to an understanding of the essays of T.S. Eliot, for the etymology of the word

"healthy," a derivative of "health," comes from Old English for "whole," "*hǽlþ*"

("health, n."), and it is a preoccupation with "wholes"—specifically the reproduction

thereof—that forms a connecting thread through both "Tradition and the Individual

Talent" and "The Metaphysical Poets." If in the latter Eliot relies on physical language

for the expression of his desire for lost unities, then he takes it to the next level in

"Tradition" through his analogy of the artist's mind as a piece of filigreed platinum in a

"chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide" (40), which he compares to "emotions

and feelings" (41). The metaphor of the experiment for the process of poetry reflects not

only a dubious attempt to unite the metaphysical with the empirical, which he repeats in

"The Metaphysical Poets," but an obsession with whole-formation that compels Eliot to

suggest "the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been

written" (40).

In his 1922 magnum opus, *The Waste Land*, Eliot attempts to "provide the whole within the bounds of the poem" by introducing a plurality of voices and references to signify both the "mind of Europe," and its cultural tradition. Yet its plethora of speaking subjects and literary allusions do not restore the English poem to health. The spate of images of sterility that give the poem its arid undercurrent, among them the title-reference to the infertile Fisher King whose kingdom in Arthurian legend consequently becomes a wasteland, the "Old man with wrinkled female breasts" (64), and the "dry sterile thunder" (342), indicate an incurable infertility that culminates in the image of a speaker "fishing, with the arid plain behind [him]" (424). Health and wholeness do not prevail, rather Prince Aquitaine, whose "*tour abolie*" (429) [demolished tower] can be read as a destroyed phallus, is left declaring: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (430). Indeed, the "fragments" of *The Waste Land*'s conclusion are by no means its only fractures; the very form of the poem is presented in pieces, often combining multiple voices, locations, and time periods into a single stanza.

Other than the interpretative challenges that its fragmentary form poses, the poem's difficulty lies largely in its superabundance of allusions—a technique that Lyotard commends as "a form of expression indispensable to the works which belong to an aesthetic of the sublime" (80). Yet as Lyotard indicates in his analysis of Proust, "the price to pay for this allusion is the identity of consciousness" (80). The absence of an "identity of consciousness" is a desirable outcome for Proust, insofar as it permits him to gesture to the reality of the sublime (80). However, such a loss is inimical to Eliot, who, in his self-declared endeavor to channel "the mind of Europe" (*SP* 39), of "England" (*SP* 64), and unite the "consciousness of the past" (*SP* 40) with that of the present, employs a

plurality of voices to the detriment of that consciousness. Eliot's project of whole-restoration and nation-formation, as announced in his essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," is thereby trumped by his attempt to incorporate "infinitude within the poem's finitude" (Adorno 42). His nostalgia for wholes is at odds with his aesthetic of the sublime, an untenable contrast, the product of which is arid, difficult sterility.

Correlative to the poem's excess of allusions is its extreme length—at 433 lines, with the added annotations provided by Eliot himself, the poem is published as a book, not as a piece in a collection. In *The Difficulties of Modernism*, Leonard Diepeveen notes that *The Waste Land* is, for literary critic F.L. Lucas, an example of "Alexandrianism": an erudite style that is characterized as being "Disconnected and ill-knit, loaded with echo and allusion, fantastic and crude, obscure and obscurantist" (Lucas, qtd. in Diepeveen 22), what Diepeveen identifies as a description of modernist "difficulty" (22). Significant to Lucas's condemnation of Eliot's Alexandrianist poem is the descriptive term he uses: "gloomy pedantry" (Lucas, qtd. in Diepeveen 22), which, according to Lucas, not only epitomizes Eliot's project, but also his intent. By making his work "so obscure," Eliot creates a text by which he and "other learned authors could make their fortunes by explaining what it meant" (Lucas 195, qtd. in Diepeveen 22). Eliot's supplementary notes to *The Waste Land* are "critical" in at least two ways: not only are they essential to the critical interpretation of the poem, but they also are what enabled him to publish it as an independent book, thereby increasing financial profit (*The Annotated Waste Land* 24-5).

Beyond any additional monetary gain, the Alexandrianism of *The Waste Land* foregrounds the importance of Eliot's pedagogical program to both carry out and communicate the English poetic tradition. Calling to mind the "Hellenism and Hebraism"

of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Eliot's Alexandrianism consists of a didactic presentation of selected texts in an effort to revive both the English poetic tradition and the post-war English Empire through a careful curation of culture. Writing in the preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold asserts:

> The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out
> of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by
> means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the
> best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this
> knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock
> notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically. . . .
> (viii)

Eliot's argument, as articulated in both "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "The Metaphysical Poets," and enacted in *The Waste Land*, borrows much from Arnold's essay. Eliot attempts to entice into *The Waste Land* just such a "stream of fresh and free thought" through his diverse cultural invocations and unusual, lengthy verse, yet his efforts are hindered by its erudition. Despite claiming in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" to be "alive to a usual objection of what is clearly part of [his] programme for the *métier* of poetry . . . that the doctrine requires a ridiculous amount of erudition (pedantry)" (40), Eliot goes ahead and makes these exact demands in *The Waste Land*, failing to heed his own injunction that "much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility" (40).

Although Eliot's poem contains a wealth of multicultural references, foremost to his pedagogic "programme for the *métier* of poetry" is a resolve to communicate and

perpetuate the English tradition. Significantly, Eliot writes in the preface to *The Waste Land*'s notes that "Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* . . . will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do" (71). Weston's book is not merely an explication of the Grail legend, but a genealogical tracing of the legend to the King Arthur stories, connecting classic Christian lore to the British cultural canon. In citing Weston's book as the preeminent guide to his own poem, Eliot emphasizes the importance of the English tradition, further following Arnold's itinerary in *Culture and Anarchy* to resuscitate contemporary generations by indoctrinating them in English culture. What Eliot does in *The Waste Land* is to widen the English canon, weaving traditional cultural texts with more disparate sources in the body of his poem. For Eliot, Arnold's "present difficulties" (viii) are to be met with difficulty itself, challenging English poetic convention through the introduction of new references and forms, as expressed in his dictum: "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*" (65). Yet his solution is too cumbersome; his superabundance of allusions does not resuscitate but "deadens . . . his poetic sensibility" (*SP* 40).

Similarly sickly is the poetry of Philip Larkin, whom James Fenton describes as practicing "a critical scorched earth policy," in which "[e]verything that is good is either dying or doomed" (59). Yet if Eliot's response to "present difficulties" is to attempt to restore the English poetic tradition, Larkin's is to dig, and then dance upon, its grave. Despite being selected by Conquest as a representative of the "genuine and healthy" (xi) poetry of 1950s Britain, Larkin shares no such predilection for wholes or health. Indeed, in his essay, "The Pleasure Principle," Larkin makes a point of criticizing the "new kind of bad poetry" (*RW* 80), the aim of which he finds to be "not pleasure but self-

improvement" (*RW* 81). This, according to Larkin, is the product of a new academic order in which the author is simultaneously poet, critic, and professor, vertically integrating three levels of production into one whole system that self-perpetuates and operates independently of the general public. Here, Larkin lampoons the kind of self-serving professionalism that F.L. Lucas attributes to Eliot in his essay on "Alexandrianism."

Admitting a nostalgia for a bygone era, Larkin's reminiscence in "The Pleasure Principle" is not for the seventeenth century's unification of emotion and language, as is the case in Eliot's "The Metaphysical Poets," but for "the days when poetry was condemned as sinful" (*RW* 82). In his argument for the restoration of the "id" in poetry, Larkin aligns himself with a pleasure-seeking public—what he calls "the only audience worth having" (*RW* 82). He repeats the move over and over in interviews and essays, professing his distaste for "casual allusions" (*RW* 79) and blithely asserting: "I should never call myself a book-lover" (*RW* 85). In doing so, he positions himself diametrically opposite to Eliot, especially when he states that he possesses "no belief in 'tradition'" (*RW* 79) and "never think[s] of poetry or the poetry scene, only separate poems written by individuals" (*FR* 38).

Larkin's anti-Eliot stance comes to a head when, in an interview with John Haffenden, he states:

> Poems don't come from other poems, they come from being oneself, in
> life. Every man is an island, entire of himself, as Donne said. This
> American idea—it is American, isn't it? Started with Pound and Eliot?—

that somehow every new poem has to be the sum of all old poems. . . .

Makes sense and so on: only it's not how poetry works. (*FR* 54)

In response to Haffenden's charge that, by refusing to read literature in foreign languages, Larkin "*might be courting a social, personal or national security, an insularity*" (*FR* 54), the answer Larkin gives demonstrates a sort of hammy theatricality behind his stance. Larkin pokes fun at both Eliot and interviewer, first by flatly denying Eliot his much-loved British citizenship, and second, as John Osborne notes in *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, by misquoting Donne: the correct quotation is not "Every man is an island, entire of itself, "but rather, "No man is an island entire of itself" (54). Such deliberate distortion not only shows Larkin sticking to his "Pleasure Principle" in other realms of life, but also delivering an artistic defense through irony. The misquote lets Larkin to imply the opposite of what he says, conveying a conviction that of course, no poet operates outside of the sphere of influence—a conviction emphasized through his citation (albeit mangled) of Donne.

This sort of cultural defacing provides the undercurrent for many of Larkin's poems—an ironic, subversive substructure that coincides with popular or "lowbrow" opinion only as far as its irreverence toward artistic figureheads of difficulty. Larkin's irreverence spreads much further. In the title poem of his 1964 collection, *The Whitsun Weddings*, it is not only Eliot that Larkin picks apart, but the people of England—his very audience. Notions of national identity, which for Eliot are what is at stake in his essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," are, for Larkin, objects of ridicule. The poem takes two supposedly nation-building exercises: weddings and English landscape poetry—poetry that is both pastoral and metropolitan—and subverts them through a clinical treatment of

English society and culture. If Larkin expresses disdain for much elitist art in his personal essays, then "The Whitsun Weddings" reveals his antipathy toward popular practices.

The poem, narrated from the perspective of the poet looking out the window of the train, traverses the landscape of England, originating in the north—Hull—and moving southward toward London.   Along the way the poet glimpses a variety of scenes—from the pastoral to the industrial—but what strikes him is the repetition of wedding processions that greet him at each passing station. This bizarre rash of nuptials, which are themselves metaphors for nation generation, were actually part of a common national practice of marrying on Whitsunday for tax-breaks. As such, the girls Larkin disparagingly describes as dressed "In parodies of fashion" (114), the mothers "loud and fat" (115), and the fathers with "seamy foreheads" (115), are the English citizenry that he first defines in order to reject like the stop-and-go motion of the train: "each face seemed to define / Just what it saw departing" (115).

In the process of diagnosis and dismissal, Larkin effectively separates himself from the putatively nauseating masses, first from the families docked at the platforms in perms, then from the "Fresh couples" (115), who, unlike the poet, never think "of the others they would never meet / Or how their lives would all contain this hour" (116). Larkin's disaffiliation with the English crowd is emphasized by his ironic play on first person singular and plural pronouns. The last stanza, in which the poet notes that all train-passengers exist in a "frail / Travelling coincidence" (116) groups the poet with his co-commuters through a series of "we"s, but the sense of unity is undercut by the qualification that the "Travelling coincidence; and what it held / Stood ready to be loosed" (116). The concluding image of a falling "arrow-shower" (116) indicates a

disintegration of parts, and the narrator's description of the arrows' terminal location(s) as being "out of sight" (116) emphasizes a separation of poet and people.

Moreover, Larkin's tactical move of first aligning himself with the people of England in order to distinguish himself is supported in the poem's manipulation of form. As John Reibetanz notes in his essay, "'The Whitsun Weddings:' Larkin's Reinterpretation of Time and Form in Keats," the poem borrows its form from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (532). Composed in stanzas with an *ababcdecde* rhyme scheme, Larkin's poem takes a romantic, lyric ode from a specifically English poet as its prototype, and proceeds to attack it. His verse spills over the traditional form where Keats's remains contained, refusing to fit neatly into its ten-lined compartments, "mark[ing] off the girls unreally from the rest" (115) by way of an enjambment between stanzas.

Like Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "The Whitsun Weddings" focuses on a metaphysical object, in its case, a train, but the train is not, as Reibetanz would have it, a metaphor for time, but a metaphor for the poem itself. Larkin once wrote that for him, poetry is a "device" (*RW* 80) that transmits an "emotional concept" (*RW* 80) from poet to readers by reproducing it in them. The "train" of "The Whitsun Weddings" is such a device, one through which the poet offers to the reader his window-perspective of England. Elements noted through the train-window are enacted by the text itself, so that the "slow and stopping curve" (114) is enacted in the succession of ten-line stanzas, and the phenomenon of various wedding "annexes" appear in the profusion of hyphenated words, before coming to an end with a period: "And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed / Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days / Were coming to an end." (115). The

"frail / Travelling coincidence" (116) by which Larkin illustrates the train, is also a description of the poem and its linguistic passengers; coming to the conclusion of the verse, the manipulated words contained therein have attained a certain "power / That being changed can give" and are "ready to be loosed" (116) upon the reader. The final image of "an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain" (116), transfers the metaphoric momentum from the train to a precipitation of arrows. The poem, having arrived at its destination, its conclusion, is now beyond the power and sight of the conductor.

That a playful type of self-reflexivity appears in the phrase, "porters larking" (114)—evoking the name Philip Larkin—further suggests that this is a work about itself. Beyond containing a metafictive conceit for the process of poetry, the poem actually incorporates its author by name in an ironic jest. Not only is Larkin not the poem's "porter," but rather its conductor, but his "larking" mocks both the efforts of his serious reader and the English poetic tradition he succeeds. Larkin's misquotation of Donne is ironic in both available senses: it admits to the influence of other poets *while* tendentiously purporting to a sort of self-sufficiency. The name inscribed at the center of the poem superimposes the island of Larkin over the island of England. Such a subversion of poetic tradition is what James Fenton, in his essay, "Philip Larkin: Wounded by Unshrapnel," calls a "beautiful stunt" (46), a Larkin signature whose label, "stunt," alludes to the mischief of the move. Lines such as: "Yes, from cafés" (115), have the effect of "talking back." Larkin is more than just his "larking porter;" he is actively talking back to poetic tradition.

In adopting a form specific to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Larkin affiliates himself with England and the English poetic tradition, but he does so only to disaffiliate himself. Like Keats's poem, Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" takes art as a subject, but unlike its archetype, the art does not focus on the beautiful but on the repulsive; Keats's "Fair youth, beneath trees" (15) turn into "pomaded . . . girls / In parodies of fashion" (114), and as such, there is no unifying proclamation of "beauty is truth, truth beauty" (49), as in Keats, but a falling apart of people and arrows. Larkin disrupts Keats's self-contained chiasmus, emphasizing not a correspondence between beauty and truth, but rather Keats's unintentional image of an "art desolate" (40) (Keats's full line reads: "Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (50)), through an incisive illustration of an English "Cold pastoral" (45). Keats's lament for his incapacity to unite art with life is Larkin's point of departure; he places the poet—and his poem—at a distance from the repugnant public, mocking not only the English poetic tradition but also the English landscape and English marriage.

In his essay "Lyric Poetry and Society," Theodor Adorno praises the lyric poem for its paradoxical capacity for crystalizing the truth of an alienated society in an inherently personal form, a process that he defines as producing "a subjectivity that turns into objectivity" (43). Yet this property is inextricably linked to Adorno's conception of the "perfect lyric poem" as a form that "must possess totality or universality, must provide the whole within the bounds of the poem and the infinite within the poem's finitude" (42). While Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" may capture the alienation of a poet from society, it does not purport to speak on a universal level. Just as the "sun destroys / The interest of what's happening in the shade" (114), a desire for the epic is

inimical to the detail-oriented lyric. Rather, it is T.S. Eliot with his belief that the great

English poet must channel the "mind of Europe—the mind of his country" (*SP* 39),

which involves containing the entire English literary tradition within him, who shares

Adorno's worship of "wholes."

That Larkin, with his use of Keatsian form and his decidedly English subject

matter, ends up advancing Eliot's goals—the *channeling* of English tradition, and the

amalgamation of emotion and experience—could be related to what John Osborne sees as

a dialogue between Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" and Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

According to Osborne, the two poems trace parallel trajectories, beginning with Eliot's "I

read, much of the night, and go south in winter" (19) and Larkin's "slow and stopping

curve southward" (114), to their descriptions of industrial landscapes, Eliot's "I was

fishing in a dull canal" (189) and Larkin's "Canals with floatings of industrial froth"

(114), to their "prospect of sexual regeneration" (60) in their association of water with

fertility, Eliot's "damp gust / Bringing rain" (393-4) and Larkin's "arrow-shower / Sent

out of sight, somewhere becoming rain" (116). Indeed, the connections between the two

do not end there: Eliot's "staring forms / Leaned out" (105-6) are repeated in Larkin's

"Struck, I leant / More promptly out" (115), with both referring to the passing of an

"event," (Eliot 298, Larkin 115). Osborne interprets Larkin's "engagement" (63) with

Eliot's poem as "the secularizing and sexualizing of Eliot's religious discourse" (63). Yet

that is not all; Larkin effectively beats Eliot at his own game, inheriting the "tradition" of

the metaphysical poets by way of his reworking of Keats. Larkin's conceit of a train as a

metaphor for the "device" of poetry is sustained not in spite but because of his refusal to

encompass "infinitude within finitude." "The Whitsun Weddings," though "fragile," does

not collapse under the weight of its literary and cultural allusions. Larkin's rejection of wholesomeness, both religious and sexual, is what allows the poem its concluding fertility; both working-class England and poetry will survive, each with the cessation of the poem, "Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain" (116).

In admitting a lack of control—through the image of both the poem and its contents moving beyond the sight of the poet—Larkin allows the exact inverse of what Eliot announces in the penultimate line to *The Waste Land*: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." (432), the footnote of which translates it as: "Give, sympathise, *control*" (*TAWL* 74, emphasis added). The preceding line's reference to *The Spanish Tragedy*, in which Hieronymo seeks revenge for the murder of his son through the writing of a play (*TAWL* 124), links art and artistic creation to the grumble of the thunder: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." Eliot's channeling of Hieronymo's voice: "Why then Ile fit you" (431), indicates an attempt to repair the "arid plain" (424) through poetry, an attempt to organize chaos through the exercise of will. Yet his remedial endeavor to use art to "set [his] lands in order" (425) is bound to fail; as Briony so disastrously discovers in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, an artist cannot neatly fit the world into a schema. Briony, in her original version of the story—that given to the constable—fails to recognize that the whole cannot be encapsulated in a narrative, to the detriment of the lives of her sister, Cecilia, and Robbie. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, neither realizes this nor stops trying. His belief in the power of [his] poetry to do so—a power that is the product of what he calls "the mind of the mature poet" (*SP* 40)—is what paradoxically leads to its self-defeat. The "order" that Eliot's ideal poet composes—an "order" of "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country" (*SP*

38)—compromises the order that he is to impose upon words—the forcing of "language into his meaning" (*SP* 45). The plethora of literary allusions, spectral voices, and poetic forms in Eliot's *The Waste Land* resist such organization. Contrary to a contemporary reading of Hieronymo's declaration, they will not be fitted.

Difficulty, then, is for Eliot a product of failure: failure to unite emotion with language, failure to restore order, failure to *heal* the wasteland into a former state of wholeness. The "fragments" shored against the ruins further implicate Eliot in their etymology: "fragment," "a part broken off or otherwise detached from a whole," comes from Latin "frangĕre," for "to break" ("fragment, n."). Eliot's idealization of wholes is what compels him to try to reconstruct them from their fragments—an attempt to succeed the English literary tradition by reconstituting it from as many of its parts as possible. However, the result is a difficult, sterile behemoth that calls to mind the creation of Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein. Difficulty, as exhibited by Eliot, is not fruitful, but rather a cause and consequence of failure, of cultural and formal illness.

Yet while failure for Eliot signifies the poet's inability to fulfill his role as a synthesizer of "new wholes" (*SP* 64), it is not so pejorative for Larkin. In his essay, "Writing Poems," Larkin muses on his craft, noting, "If something must be said, it should be about the poems one writes not necessarily being the poems one wants to write" (*RW* 83). For Larkin, failure is an inherent part of the artistic process, but the relinquishment of complete authorial control allows the artist not to see failure as a terminus, as Eliot does, but as a point of departure. Taking failure as a point of departure is precisely what Larkin does in his rewrites of both *The Waste Land* and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," wherein the shortcomings of previous pieces become sources of opportunity. Indeed, Larkin's

invocation of Keats, who, as Perry Meisel notes in *The Myth of Popular Culture*, is *the*

poet for whom failure is both catalyst and subject (27), appears to be rather deliberate.

Eliot's fault lies in his attempt to reject such "failed" works—"The Metaphysical Poets"

effectively casts Keats out of the English canon for his shortcomings—in an effort to

produce only unblemished poems of perfect unities.

The imperfect relationships of both Eliot and Larkin's poems to their poetics

underscore the impossibility of flawless wholes in modernist and postmodernist poetry.

That both a pioneer of high modernism—Eliot—and a primary detractor of difficulty—

Robert Conquest—rely on a terminology of "health" to justify their claims only serves to

weaken the arguments of each. As Lyotard writes, "it must be recalled that science and

industry are no more free of the suspicion which concerns reality than are art and

writing" (76). Eliot's analogy of the experiment with gases and platinum and Conquest's

claim that good modern poetry "is empirical in its attitude to all that comes" (xv) are not

proofs of infallibility, but rather indications of anxiety regarding illness. As *The*

Wasteland and "The Whitsun Weddings" illustrate, illness—the etymology of which

derives from Old Norse for "difficult" —is ingrained in the landscape ("illness, n."). It is

to Larkin's advantage, then, that he revels in the "sinful" (*RW* 82) pleasures of poetry and

to Eliot's injury that he subscribes to the wholesomeness of tradition. For failure, which

is the aesthetic of the sublime, becomes for Larkin a source of fertility, while remaining

for Eliot the cause of sterility.

Tomato, Tomato: Subversive Subjectivity

in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*

Writing in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, Diepeveen argues that "[s]ubjectivity . . . is central to discussions of difficulty" (63), for difficulty can best be understood as "a relationship between a person and a thing" (62), a person and a text. Difficulty, he continues, is not a property inherent to a text or to the abilities of a reader but rather to "the failure of the two to correspond with each other" (62), a function of the subjective relationship between reader and text. For two novels with a relationship of their own, E.M. Forster's *Howards End* and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty,* the latter of which is loosely based on Forster's 1910 text, subjectivity emerges as both a subject of inquiry and an aesthetic. Defined earlier as the perpetual renegotiation of previous forms, difficulty, for the two novels, is a function of daily negotiations between ideology and life, life and art, and art and ideology. Subjectivity in these relationships is not grounds for solipsistic confinement but rather the occasion for supple interpretation that is the alert and nuanced product of continual discourse.

Broadly put, *Howards End* examines the resonance of aesthetic theories in the lives of two families: the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. The turbulent relationship of the two families is as much a clash between the private and the public realms of life as it is a conflict between an aesthetic of artistic difficulty and an aesthetic of simplified clarity. The Schlegels, descended from a German father who was a cosmopolitan "countryman of Hegel and Kant" (21), share an ideology with their namesake, Friedrich Schlegel, who, as

a leader of the German Romanticist movement, led what Elizabeth J. Hodge deems "an attack . . . against every aspect of [empiricist] philosophy, from its materialism to its skepticism" (34). In Forster's novel, the Schlegels' private, inner focus that prizes the inner life of "Literature and Art" (5), corresponds to an aesthetic of subjectivity that celebrates individual expression. In this aesthetic, differences in opinion are appreciated, nuances of argument are attended, and complexity and chaos are taken as a part of everyday life. The outer, public focus of the Wilcoxes, meanwhile, whose Capitalist views equate love with "marriage settlements, death, death duties" (20), does not allow for such individual interpretations. This empiricist attitude, summed up by Margaret as consisting of "telegrams and anger" (20), correlates to an aesthetic of objectivity, wherein life can be reduced to the lines of an accountant's ledger, noting only its profits and losses.

The perpetual weaving together and unweaving of the two families, through Paul and Helen's brief romance and subsequent repulsion, through Henry and Margaret's marriage, fight, and ambiguous reunion, testifies to the inextricability of the two aesthetics. Ruth Wilcox, despite her role as the spectral matriarch of the Wilcox clan, subscribes more to the social and artistic sympathies of the Schlegels than to the capitalist principles of her own family. Confessing herself to be "apt to brood" (62)—indicating an ability for introspection that escapes her kin—Ruth represents, in a manner quite unlike the industrial modernism of either Eliot or Larkin, the feudalism of England's past, with its intricate, symbiotic social relationships and provinciality. That both sides, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, are members of the elite middle class, underscores the commingling of the two aesthetics while complicating claims that attach difficulty to

privilege and simplicity to the deprived. Indeed, the enterprising Wilcoxes are, if anything, better off financially than the Schlegel sisters, whose property consists of a dwindling inheritance from their father.

This complex confusion of characters, ideologies, and cultures is a part of Forster's own unique aesthetic of difficulty. As Zadie Smith notes in her essay "Love, Actually," "Forster's folk are famously always in a muddle: they don't know what they want or how to get it." Smith connects this to a "deliberate ethical strategy," which takes people as irrational, intricate beings and presents them as such not only in character, but also in an "impulsive, meandering" narrative structure, the faults of which—"mawkishness and melodrama"—mirror those of its protagonists. The ethical thrust of Forster's text, then, is that it invites the reader to consider multiple perspectives and systems of belief, or, in the words of Martha Nussbaum as Smith quotes them, the novel "show[s] us the worth and richness of plural qualitative thinking and engender[s] in [its] readers a richly qualitative way of seeing" ("Love, actually"). "Qualitative" is presented here in opposition to "quantitative," emphasizing not empirical analysis but an attention to nuance and variation.

Indeed, Forster's emphasis on plurality is not part of an impartial, empirical evaluation of conflicting ideologies but rather a component of his difficult, qualitative aesthetic. His sympathies are manifestly aligned with those of the Schlegel sisters, and manifest themselves in narrative extrapolations such as one that appears at the end of chapter twelve, after the Schlegels learn of Mrs. Wilcox's death and Charles's marriage:

> Looking back on the past six months, Margaret realized the chaotic nature
> of our daily life, and its difference from the orderly sequence that has been

fabricated by historians. Actual life is full of false clues and sign-posts that lead nowhere. . . . Life is indeed dangerous, but not in the way morality would have us believe. It is indeed unmanageable, but the essence of it is not a battle. It is unmanageable because it is a romance, and its essence is romantic beauty. (83-4)

Here, through an expansion upon Margaret's thoughts, Forster not only announces his aesthetic of romantic chaos, but also his project of unearthing the personal histories that lie underneath the veneer of linearity. For the single, "orderly sequence . . . fabricated by historians" conceals the discursive and chaotic histories of individuals. Margaret's reflections, channeled through the narrator, articulate the underlying formal and thematic arguments of the text in which narrative and historiographical an conventions are challenged. The narrator's unnervingly casual opening sentence: "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister" (1), defies traditional narrative practices by underscoring the subjectivity inherent to any narrative choice, while his refusal to describe Ruth Wilcox's death resists the historian's impulse to record life through births and deaths.[3]

These aesthetic complications are not arbitrary exercises of innovation but rather critical components of the novel's philosophy of subjectivity, which holds an incredulity toward objective accounts of history. As Herbert Marcuse writes in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, "subjectivity" is often interpreted as a "'bourgeois' notion" (4). According to Marcuse, however, this is a misconception, for not only is an "insistence on the truth and right of inwardness . . . not really a bourgeois value" (4) but subjectivity works to devalue bourgeois values "by shifting the locus of the individual's realization from the domain of

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[3] The narrator identifies himself as male in chapter XXVIII, when he writes: "when men like us…" (192)

the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, [and] conscience" (4-5). In a philosophy of subjectivity, the individual's status as an individual is defined not by his objective market value, but by his subjective, decidedly human, desires and ideologies. The "domain of the performance principle and the profit motive," otherwise known as the "the network of exchange relationships and exchange values" (4) that constitute the Capitalist market, is itself exchanged for a network of personal relationships and personal values. For Marcuse, difficult aesthetics that depart from the linearity of Realism can, in fact, come closer to representing reality: "The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality. . . . In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality" (9). An aesthetic that privileges subjectivity, is, for Marcuse, far more revolutionary than that one that preaches objectivity, for in rising above "the reified objectivity of established social relations" (7), the subjective aesthetic empowers the individual through affirmation of her or his subjectivity to critique the conventional practices that often obfuscate reality.

If we transpose Marcuse's arguments onto the narrative of *Howards End*, the novel's emphasis on idiosyncratic narrative choices works to destabilize the Wilcox principles of profit and outer appearances. Indeed, the novel presses its own subjectivity through its very form. The eccentric narrator, whose presence is announced before the story even begins, repeatedly calls attention to the subjectivity inherent to any process of story-telling by interjecting his opinions into the narrative. His comment that "the world would be a grey, bloodless place were it entirely composed of Miss Schlegels" (21), coming after a discussion of the Schlegel sisters' own subjective views of history and

politics, is at once an explicit statement of one of the various personal beliefs that are involved in the shaping of a story, a critique of the Schlegel sisters that distinguishes him from them, despite their similar attitudes, and a call for plurality. The world *would* be a grey, bloodless place, were it entirely composed of the Schlegel sisters, for there would be no such thing as subjectivity, no divergent ways of seeing. The narrator's omissions, such as Ruth's death and, more glaringly, the parts of Helen's letters to Margaret that are replaced by the bracketed word, "[omission]" (2), are further declarations of subjectivity. As Francis Gillen writes in his essay, "*Howards End* and the Neglected Narrator," these edits are the product of a narrator "who obviously considers such *realistic* detail[s] irrelevant" (142, emphasis added). Indeed, the narrator's flight from reality is, as Marcuse asserts, a revolutionary act that paradoxically comes closer to reality through the privileging of the subjective. For while "love and hate, joy and sorrow, hope and despair . . . may not be 'forces of production,'" they are what "constitute[s] reality" (5-6) for each individual. The bracketed omissions are the marks that the narrator imposes upon the story of *Howards End* made visible, informing the reader of his overhanging presence by way of what he leaves out, a sublime gesture.

Forster's project of excavating, but not extricating, chaotic, personal histories from underneath the façade of ordered, objective History, is synonymous with a criticism of the Wilcox's aesthetic of ordered, objective simplicity. The Wilcoxes, as best exemplified by their patriarch, Henry, prioritize the "outer life of telegrams and anger" (137) over the inner life of "personal relations" (137) and emotions. Faced with what the narrator deems as a choice to see "modern life steadily [or] see it whole" (127), Henry chooses to see it steadily—a word that for him "include[s] all praise" (70)—"never

bother[ing] over the mysterious or the private" (127). Henry's faith in objectivity is such that "he was so sure that it was a very pleasant world" (127), one in which he need never consider that "the chauffeur might conceal all passion and philosophy beneath his unhealthy skin" (127). Yet despite Henry's external semblance of order and denial of even possessing an internal subjectivity, Margaret notes that "Henry's inner life had long laid open to her—his intellectual confusion, his obtuseness to personal influence, his strong but furtive passions" (191). In its tracing of personal histories, *Howards End* ruptures pretensions to an aesthetic of objectivity by revealing its contradictions: in its claim to clarity, such an aesthetic is often more obfuscatory than its counterpart, the purportedly complex aesthetic of subjectivity. Henry's neat and uneventful past is unveiled to be otherwise; the arrival of the Basts brings to light his monstrous affair with Jacky Bast. This secret history, what Margaret calls a glimpse of "life's seamy side" (183) is precisely the kind of history that is excised in an objective philosophy that records only "marriage settlements, death, death duties" (20). Forster's insistence on subjectivity is based not only on its power to liberate these backstories, but to liberate humanity from the capitalist imperatives of order and steadiness.

Yet, as indicated in the narrator's comments regarding the Schlegel sisters, Forster's privileging of an aesthetic of the subjective in the novel does not detain him from noting the aesthetic's flaws or criticizing its overuse. To the contrary, the narrative finds an object of ridicule in Tibby Schlegel, who adopts the aesthetic of the inner-life to the extreme. Of him the narrator quips: "Little need be premised about Tibby. He was now an intelligent man of sixteen, but dyspeptic and difficile" (24). And indeed, he comes to represent all of the pitfalls typically associated with an outlook that favors the

individual over the masses. Tibby is overtly lazy, selfish, egotistical, and his worldview,

"civilization without activity" (87), epitomizes the bourgeois attitude that many Marxist

critics link to subjectivity. However, as Marcuse states in response to these critics, an

aesthetic of subjectivity is, by definition, not related to a specific class but to individuals.

As the inwardly-reflecting individual "withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society,

and enters another dimension of existence" (4), he liberates his "particular history" (5).

Leonard Bast, despite being a member of the lower-class, pores over the prose of

John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, whose emphases on the interrelation of aesthetics

and morality, and the superiority of the artisanal—art produced by the individual—over

the mechanized—art produced by masses—are similar to those of *Howards End*.

Leonard's earnest study of Ruskin is done in the hopes that "he would one day push his

head out of the grey waters and see the universe" (38), and rise above "all that was actual

and insistent in Leonard's life" (38)—dirt and hunger. Here, as with Tibby, the narrator

performs a sort of messy critique; Leonard's needs are too heavy for the art through

which he tries to fulfill them. His belief is of "sudden conversion" (38), which the

narrator sees as "a belief which may be right, but which is peculiarly attractive to the

half-baked mind . . . that hope[s] to come to Culture suddenly, much as the Revivalist

hopes to come to Jesus" (38). In his desperation to transcend his immediate material

conditions, Leonard does not understand that "Culture" cannot be attained so quickly; "of

a heritage that may expand gradually, he had no conception" (39). Implicit in the

narrator's admonishment is a recognition of the inability of art to immediately rectify all

the wrongs of the current world. This is what the Schlegel sisters fail to realize when, in

their attempt to assist the Basts out of their meager circumstances, they actually inflict more injury.

Rather, the more immediate power of art that prizes subjectivity—which is to say the aesthetic of the subjective—lies in its capacity to provoke critical thinking. This capability is exactly what Marcuse calls attention to when he writes that "aesthetic sublimation," the stylization of content into an aesthetic form:

> makes for the affirmative, reconciling component of art, though it is at the
> same time a vehicle for the critical, negating function. The transcendence
> of immediate reality shatters the reified objectivity of established social
> relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the
> rebellious subjectivity. (7)

Howards End exercises this "critical, negating function" in its very depiction of the Schlegels, Wilcoxes, and Basts. Like Marcuse, the narrator of the novel is careful to detach the idea of the subjective from the merely psychological. In a passage following the Schlegel sisters' realization the damage they have brought upon Leonard by advising him to quit his job—itself the counsel of Henry—the narrator chastises Margaret for being "over-interested in the subconscious self" (152). Speaking of humanity "as puppets whom an invisible showman twitches into love and war" (152), Helen is told by Margaret that if she continues in this vein she, like Henry, will "eliminate the personal" (152). The charge is that Helen, like Tibby and Leonard Bast, is taking her practice too far, and as such, tries to make an aesthetic of the subjective an objective procedure. The narrator notes that for Margaret, "[a]ll vistas close in on the unseen—no one doubts it—but Helen closed them rather too quickly for her taste" (153). In her condemnation of Henry, Helen

fails to cast a critical eye on other aspects of the situation, including herself. Margaret's rebuke suggests that not only would Helen do well to stop and consider her own ideology, but also Helen's own involvement in Leonard's plight.

However, criticism of the subjective aesthetic, as delivered in comments made by both the novel's narrator and its characters, is woven into an overarching affirmation of the aesthetic, as manifest in the novel's form. These alternately supporting and negating strands are precisely what Marcuse identifies as the primary components of a subjective aesthetic, of which "[t]he interplay between the affirmation and indictment of that which is, between ideology and truth, pertains to the very structure of art" (10). Sigmund Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, identifies such a play of affirmation and negation as a "Fort/Da" game, basing it on his observations of a child who threw his toys away from him, making them "go away" (12) (*fort*), so that he could have the pleasure of making them appear again, (*da*) (12). For Freud, the self-deprivation is a necessary component of the game's pleasure. Examining the role of repetition in this and other children's games, Freud connects it to a "death-drive," in which the conservative instinct for repetition impels the being "*towards the reinstatement of an earlier condition*," (44): non-existence, which, for a living organism, would mean death. Yet, as Freud notes, this death-drive is in continual conflict with the life-drive, the sexual drive, which also tries to return to an earlier state, but this state is a state of primal desire, not lifelessness.

Using "Eros" to signify the life-drive, and "Thanatos" to denote the death-drive, Marcuse evokes Freud when he writes that an aesthetic of the subjective is an embracement of "[t]he inexorable entanglement of joy and sorrow, celebration and despair, [and] Eros and Thanatos" (16). The complex intermingling of seemingly hostile

forces is, for Marcuse, what makes it impossible to reduce difficult art into rigidly defined "problems of class struggle" (16). The subjective experiences that constitute an individual's reality cannot be tacked down into an objective framework. Life, as the narrator of *Howards End* repeatedly asserts, is in a state of "continual flux" (84).

The model of the Fort/Da game goes a long way to explain why Helen, despite subscribing wholeheartedly to the subjective world of art, literature, and music, relishes giving in to the Wilcoxes to be told that "Equality [is] nonsense, Votes for Women nonsense, Socialism nonsense, Art and Literature, except when conducive to strengthening the character, nonsense" (17). Her willingness to withstand, and even enjoy, sharp criticism of her systems of belief, contrasts distinctly with Henry Wilcox's refusal to even see the critique Margaret makes of him. This critique, which comes after Henry denounces Helen for her affair with Leonard Bast, is a criticism of Henry's failure to understand the connection between Helen and Leonard's relationship and his own unscrupulous liaison with Jacky Bast. The Schlegel ideology of subjectivity, with its fusion of negation with affirmation, can allow for such criticism where the Wilcox philosophy of objectivity does not.

That successful difficulty often evokes in its readers an interplay of pleasure and pain, a give and take that Leonard Diepeveen characterizes as "the pleasure of vigorous exercise, with bracing whiffs of danger and moral rectitude" (163), is no coincidence. For readers, difficult texts, with their exacting demands, whether for indefatigable attention through incomprehensible passages, or for the letting go of notions of wholeness through fragmented narratives, alternate such negation with affirmation, whether through the provocation of insight, or the fruitful completion of the text itself. As previously

mentioned, subjectivity, as Diepeveen argues, " is central to discussions of difficulty"

(63), for difficulty can best be understood as "a relationship between a person and a

thing" (62), a person and a text. The aesthetic of difficulty, then, is subjective not only

because it refuses the clarified objectivity purported by Realism, but also because it is

foregrounded in relationships. Forster's epigraph to *Howards End*, "Only connect. . . ."

which he later expands to: "Only connect the prose in us with the passion" (147), is the

announcement of his aesthetic. This aesthetic of subjectivity could be seen as an anti-

aesthetic, insofar as it rejects definitive principles and categorical guidelines.

It is in an exploration of the relationship between aesthetic philosophies and life

that Zadie Smith takes *Howards End* for a prototype in her novel, *On Beauty*. This

connection is announced in the book's first line, "One may as well begin with Jerome's e-

mails to his father" (3), which not only mimics the syntax of Forster's, but also the

sentiment: Subjectivity is to be attended. This is reinforced in an early scene wherein the

Belsey family attends a rendition of Mozart's Requiem on Boston Common, an echo of a

similar scene in *Howards End* in which the Schlegels attend Beethoven's Fifth

Symphony. In Smith's version, the wild discrepancy between each of the Belseys'

reactions to the music foregrounds the text's investment in subjectivity. Kiki, the mother

of the family, sees a dynamic debate between "apes and mermaids" (70) in the *Kyrie*—a

struggle between forces of life and death—despite the notations of the programme,

according to which the *Kyrie* "features no such action, even in the metaphorical sense"

(69). In contrast, Zora, the daughter, relies on a "recording of the voice of Professor

N.R.A. Gould" (70) to help her digest the movement, while Jerome, her older brother, sits

"crying" (70) in the open. However, Howard, the patriarch of the family and self-

professed opponent of representational art, seems to not be affected at all by the music, and breezily quips, "I liked it fine . . . it was fine. I just prefer music which isn't trying to fake me into some metaphysical idea by the back door" (72).

Yet the concert scene does more than just announce *On Beauty's* high regard for subjectivity. The passage, through its contrast between articulated ideologies of art— Kiki's programme notes, Zora's audio guide, and Howard's anti–metaphysical convictions—and individual experiences of art. Kiki's visions of dueling apes and mermaids defy the instructive script of her programme, while Harold's glib assessment of the concert reflects not his aesthetic experience but his philosophy of art—that "Art is the Western myth" (155)—when, in fact, he had slept through the entire concert (71). Zora's overreliance on academic theories physically obstructs her aesthetic experience; instead of listening to the concert, she is drip-fed scholarly commentary on the concert through a portable disc-player. Seeing this, Kiki is reminded of a family trip to Paris, in which Zora had been so buried in her guidebook "that she walked directly into an altar, cutting her forehead open" (70). Indeed, Zora's name is itself a direct nod to the early 20th century American author, Zora Neale Hurston, whose observational fiction was very much influenced by her training as an anthropologist (Hurston 235). The Zora of *On Beauty* reflects her literary namesake through her own anthropological gaze, which takes in society and the cultural mores of those around her in an almost clinical appraisal.

That Zora is actually physically harmed by her overdependence on academic texts and theories—cracking her skull on the altar—not only reflects McEwan's repudiation of Woolf's psychological emphasis, but also anticipates several of the major developments of the book. The sometimes disastrous, contradictory incompatibility of such dogmatic

ideologies to life is, for example, underscored in the incongruences between Monty Kipps's public life, where he preaches his conservative, homophobic beliefs and his private practice, in which his best friend, "The Reverend James Delafield" (177) is homosexual. When Carlene Kipps chides him by saying, "my dear, life must come first over the Book" (178), he, "outraged," responds, "It is for *us* to conform to the Book" (178). Although Monty's "Book" is likely to be the Bible, it underscores one of the many similarities he shares with his supposed arch-nemesis: Harold Belsey. Not only do both men study Rembrandt, but each pads their dependency on theoretical categorization by conducting hypocritical extra-marital affairs. Monty Kipps, who publicly crusades against affirmative action—deeming it "the work of the devil" (121) —strikes up a sexual relationship with Chantelle, an underprivileged student, just as Harold, whose career consists of denying the existence of beauty, conducts trysts with not only his colleague, Claire Malcolm, but also Monty Kipps's daughter, Vee. It is in this second affair that all that Howard can struggle to whisper, in response to Vee's demands to talk dirty to her, is: "you're so very . . . beautiful" (317), in flagrant opposition to his own ideology. Here, as with Henry in *Howards End*, these men's public politics are at odds with their private practices.

Smith's argument in *On Beauty* is sympathetic to Carlene Kipps's utterance that "life must come first over the Book" (317), though it differs insofar as it values both. That Smith's novel takes E.M. Forster's *Howards End* as a prototype testifies to her appreciation of literature, yet that it does not correspond neatly to its model acknowledges that such an appreciation need not be dogmatic. Monty Kipps may be a Henry Wilcox-like figure, but so is his ideological opponent, Howard Belsey. Levi may

be the younger brother of the family, but he is no Tibby Schlegel, just as Vee is neither a

Jacky Bast nor an Evie Wilcox. Both Kiki and Carlene Kipps share some attributes with

Ruth Wilcox, but Kiki is a decidedly corporeal, not ethereal, presence, while Carlene is a

much more vocal apologist for her husband, where Mrs. Wilcox remains silent. Smith's

balancing of life with aesthetics is evident even in her replacement of Forster's epigraph,

"Only connect. . . ." with a dedication: "For my dear Laird." Indeed, the poetry that

appears throughout the novel, often as the fictitious work of Claire Malcolm, is the actual

work of Smith's husband, the poet Nick Laird. The line that Carlene recites from memory

to Kiki during their first encounter, "*There is such a shelter in each other*" (93), is taken

from Laird's poem, "Pedigree." Similarly, the poem that crops up in the middle of the

novel, identically entitled, "On Beauty," is a pantoum by Laird that examines the

relationship of beauty to surface appearances and ideologies. The line, "speech is

beautifully useless" (153) echoes notions of the inadequacy of doctrines as forwarded by

Smith. Yet because the poem is a pantoum, this line is repeated twice, its signification

changing with the different contexts of each utterance. This particular style allows for

multiple permutations of a single argument, actively reinforcing the novel's high regard

for subjectivity and flexibility in its form. Laird's claim that "The beautiful don't lack the

wound" (153) is an assertion that chips away at ideologies that do not allow for flaws or

mutability. The poem's final line, "No, we could not itemize the list" (153), affirms this.

In incorporating aspects of her own life—Nick Laird's poetry—into her novel, Smith

carries out in form the argument of Margaret Schlegel's maxim: "Only connect the prose

and the passion."

The concluding scene to *On Beauty* acknowledges the difficulty of connection when Howard Belsey, delivering a career-deciding lecture, is rendered mute by the painting magnified on the wall behind him: Rembrandt's *Hendrickje Bathing* (1654). The enlarged painting showcases the "fleshiness" (443) of a "pretty, blousy Dutch woman" (442)—Rembrandt's wife—emphasizing the painting's artistry: "her skin had been expertly rendered in all its variety—chalky whites and lively pinks, the underlying blue of her veins and the ever present human hint of yellow" (443). Speechless when confronted by the painting's complexity, Howard's interpretive apparatuses fail him as he recognizes nuances in the portrait that do not correspond to his theories about art. Rembrandt's painting of his wife is contrasted with Howard's perception of Kiki: as Hendrickje is described as "look[ing] away, coyly, into the water" (442), so Kiki is depicted as "smiling into her lap" (442). The ambiguity of Hendrickje's water, of which "a cautious bather could not be certain of what lurked beneath" (442), reflects the uncertainty of Kiki's physical presence in the audience. Despite the fact that "In Wellington terms" Howard is "a dead man walking . . . surely heading for a messy divorce" (441), his wife shows up to support him, looking at Howard in a manner "not, he thought, unkindly" (442). Yet it is these "Wellington terms"—these objective hermeneutics—that both the scene and the book destroy. The complexity of both art and life is such that they are irreducible to theoretical categorization, defying interpretive articulation as evinced by a dumbstruck Howard. Continuing to zoom-in on the painting, allowing "The woman's fleshiness [to fill] the wall" (143), Howard, at last lets art speak on its own terms, opening it, and himself, up to subjectivity.

As both *Howards End* and *On Beauty* so penetratingly observe, there is no such thing as an aesthetic of simplicity. What may, like Henry Wilcox, Monty Kipps, or Howard Belsey, appear to be externally coherent, is often internally more complex and chaotic than that which openly embraces contradiction, failure, and confusion. The repressed hypocrisies of a conservative aesthetic that privileges clarity are akin to those that Marcuse attributes to Realism in *The Aesthetic Dimension*: they conceal the fact that, as Margaret reflects in *Howards End*, "life and death [are] anything and everything, except this ordered insanity" (260). Contradictions are to be accepted, not concealed, for they are the conditions of reality (Marcuse 10). The paradox of Forster and Smith's aesthetic is that it is an aesthetic that refuses to adhere to a single aesthetic. Forster preaches this in *Howards End* through an emphasis on "proportion," a balance of a variety of beliefs that is grounded in their *relations* to one another. Yet, as Ruth Wilcox says to Margaret, one cannot intentionally "*begin* with proportion," but rather "[l]et proportion come" (57). Life and art, contrary to Monty Kipps's claims in *On Beauty*, are not to conform to ideology, but rather ideology to life and art. Such an anti-philosophy philosophy, however, as Harold belatedly finds, might be the most difficult aesthetic of all.

Conclusion

In the preface to *The Myth of Popular Culture*, Perry Meisel announces that his book "rebuts the durable belief that, in Adorno's words (1962), 'high' culture is 'dialectical' and 'pop' is not by showing that 'pop' is also 'dialectical'" (ix). "Dialectical" is taken here with its connotations of a "dialogue," in which the contrasting strands of history are understood to constitute the subject's formation. That popular culture, according to Adorno, is not dialectical, further imputes it as the product of mechanized methods of production. For in Adorno's view, in contrast to high culture, pop does not create a "'tension'. . . between what is already known and what is newly presented" (45) but rather is characterized by "repetition" (45), which Adorno links to the "'standardization' that 'mass production' presumably introduces into modern life" (45). Although Adorno's claims, as cited by Meisel, specifically concern jazz, they are, in many respects, representative of his larger views on popular culture. Writing in his essay, "Left-Wing Elitism: Adorno on Popular Culture," Bruce Baugh notes that for Adorno, "[t]he problem with the popular art produced for the masses is that it tends to mask [their] alienation by providing diversion and pleasure" (67). The alienation here is the alienation of the subject from not only his own "creative, productive capacities," but also from his own "needs, drives and, imagination" (66-7). The solution that Adorno proposes to end such alienation is, of course, difficult art that produces in the subject a "painful psychic dissonance through which the individual can be made aware of [his] alienation" (67).

Here, as with the arguments of Adorno's fellow Frankfurt School member, Herbert Marcuse, difficulty is valued for its critical capabilities. Like Marcuse's "aesthetic of subjectivity," or Lyotard's philosophy of the sublime, Adorno's privileging of difficult, emancipatory art reflects a belief in the ability of such art to communicate deep truths about the reality of human existence. This is often depicted in terms of the paradox that, by leaving behind popular Realism—allowing for what Lyotard terms "the withdrawal of the real" (79)—art comes closer to capturing reality. Yet, as Meisel demonstrates, Adorno's denial of the dialectical nature of popular culture problematizes the very claim he uses it to support: that only high culture is of any artistic value. Adorno denigrates the lowbrow so that he may elevate the highbrow, but in claiming that the highbrow is dialectical, he inadvertently states the case for the lowbrow. As Virginia Woolf cannily observes in her never-posted letter, "Middlebrow," "highbrows need lowbrows," just as "lowbrows need highbrows"—for "they cannot exist apart, when one is the complement and the other side of the other!" ("Middlebrow). In defining high culture as "dialectical," Adorno implicitly posits low culture as part of its dialectic; taking "dialectic" to be the continual synthesis of a thesis and its antithesis, high culture is revealed to be the product of a sustained dialogue between itself and its antithesis—low culture. As such, Adorno nullifies not only his own demarcation of "high" art from "low" art, but also their correlatives of "difficulty" and "simplicity." Difficulty in texts is not separate from, but rather interwoven with, simplicity, and its plurality of form attests to the ongoing nature of the dialectic.

Furthermore, the shortcomings of Adorno's aesthetic theories reflect flaws not only in the theories themselves, but also in the application of such interpretative

ideologies to life and art. As Smith's depiction of the private lives of professional

theorists in *On Beauty* suggests, theories cannot explain all. This is affirmed in the

contradictory relationship of personal poetics to poetry in both T.S. Eliot and Philip

Larkin, as well as in the inability of Leonard Bast to bring himself out of poverty by

reading Ruskin in *Howards End*. This is also the charge that Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

makes against Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, when *Atonement* rewrites "Time

Passes," replacing Woolf's reflection of war in the description of a house with a depiction

of battle itself. Yet Woolf's understanding of aesthetics is greater than for what McEwan

gives her credit. The cyclical structure of *To the Lighthouse*—the novel both begins and

ends with a "Yes" statement—complicates Lily Briscoe's concluding declaration: "Yes . .

. I have had my vision" (209) by undermining its finality, bringing it back to the

beginning. As such, Woolf's novel seems to follow the prescriptions of her essay, "Mr.

Bennett and Mrs. Brown"; it compels not only the author and artist "to go back and back

and back to experiment with one thing and another; to try this sentence and that, referring

each word to [her] vision, matching it as exactly as possible" (29-30), but invites her

readers to do the same. The cyclical structure of creation is, for Woolf, the product of

continuous dialectical relationships between art and life, art and artist, artist and

audience. In her assertion that "Never was there a more fatal mistake" than for readers to

"assume that writers are different blood and bone from [themselves]" ("Mr. Bennett" 32-

3), Woolf foregrounds the importance of dialectics to a conception of art. Leonard

Diepeveen's assertion in the preface to *The Difficulties of Modernism*, that "To discuss

difficulty solely as the property of texts is to impoverish it," and his subsequent

argument, "Difficulty . . . is that recurring *relationship* that came into being between

modernist works and their audiences" (xi), supports such an argument for the

consideration of difficulty as a dialectic. Yet in keeping with its dialectical qualities,

difficulty is not to be understood as terminating with the demise of modernist literature—

a death itself debatable— but rather as a continuing, inextricable component of

contemporary culture.

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