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The Immigrant (not simply Spanish) Purview and Poetics of George Santayana

David A. Colón

They have all been uprooted from their several soils and ancestries and plunged together into one vortex, whirling irresistibly in a space otherwise quite empty. To be an American is of itself almost a moral condition, an education, and a career.¹

Historians of philosophy are well aware of George Santayana’s Spanish origin, even if Santayana’s legacy amongst literary historians has dwindled. His father Agustín was a lawyer who served in the Spanish colonial service, becoming governor of the Philippine island of Batang in 1845. When Agustín’s predecessor in this post, José Borrás y Bofarull, died, he left behind a daughter. Josefina first met Agustín ‘when they were the only two Europeans on [this] little island in the Philippines,’² although she would soon leave for Manila. There she would marry the New England merchant George Sturgis, who fathered five children with Josefina before dying suddenly in ‘the midst of a disastrous business venture.’³ Josefina carried through on her promise to her late husband to raise the children in Boston (three survived infancy), but she returned to Spain for holiday where she was reacquainted with Agustín. They married in 1861. Agustín moved with Josefina from Madrid to Ávila, and in 1863, their son Jorge Agustín Nicolás Ruiz de Santayana was born. Six years later, Josefina decided to go back to Massachusetts to raise the Sturgis children in Boston once more, leaving Agustín and Jorge to remain in Spain until the senior Santayana, under professional demands and a tight budget, could no longer attend to the boy’s needs. At the age of eight, Jorge crossed the Atlantic, his name was Anglicised, and he became American – a series of ‘accidents’ that proved to be ‘the necessary background of Santayana’s career.’⁴

We have heard this story before, time and again. Many critics have needed it as premise for making claims about Santayana’s work, characterising the circumstances of his Spanish inheritance with extensive nuance. His condition as a native Spaniard and his accompanying cultural allegiances have been read with consistency across his oeuvre because his many creations, in a wide variety of genres, proved to be remarkably of a piece. Each was a different way of organizing and expressing the same philosophical vision. For him, literature and cultural criticism were philosophy pursued by other means.⁵

While this may be true – that his materialist scepticism pervades all of his writing – Santayana’s Spanish identity is not as consistent and ubiquitous a trait throughout his work. In this essay, I intend to give more focus on the condition of Santayana’s immigrant experience as a category of identity in itself, one that can detach from the umbilical tie to Spain and settle into a sovereign foundation for his ethos as a critic, philosopher, poet, and theorist. It is much more than the ‘in-

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¹ George Santayana, Character and Opinion in the United States (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920) 168.
³ Cowley 88.
⁴ Cowley 90.
betweenness’ that Kryzysztof Piotr Skowroński has suggested elsewhere. Wilfred McClay has deduced that like ‘any immigrant, [Santayana] had a complex perspective on American society, defined by multiple frames of reference,’ a statement that is accurate up to the point where Santayana’s perspective is characterised as multiplicitous and not singular. As Bharati Mukherjee has argued, scholars have not recognised ‘literature of the immigrant experience’ as distinct in its aims, scope, and linguistic dexterity from postcolonial literature, literature of globalization, or diasporic literature, and have misapplied literary theories that are relevant to literatures of colonial damage, nationbuilding, dispersal, exile, voluntary expatriation, and cultural and economic globalization but are inappropriate templates for a literature that centers on the nuanced process of rehousement after the trauma of forced or voluntary unhousement. Santayana’s famous scepticism, his distrust, one could even say (and many have) his heresy routinely have been attributed to the cultural predilections of his Spanish character, but these dominant and consistent traits of his record of thought could be more soundly traced to the premise of his status as an American immigrant.

**An ‘accidental foreignness’**

In Massachusetts, the young Santayana struggled to assimilate into New England society. Once Santayana made the voyage to Boston, his parents separated within months, Agustín finding Boston inhospitable and returning to Ávila for good. ‘For the next decade, he would know his father only through letters.’ Santayana recalled his father as a man who ‘lived when necessary and almost by preference like the poor, without the least comfort, variety, or entertainment. He was bred in poverty, not in the standard poverty, so to speak, of the hereditary working classes, but in the cramped genteel poverty of those who find themselves poorer than they were, or than they have to seem.’ This was the life of an official who needed to be dignified in manner and respected in public but was equally restricted by the modest pay that accompanied a government post in an evanescent empire. Agustín was raised as one of twelve children, certainly in poorer conditions than those of his son, but nevertheless Santayana recalls one of his family’s favourite meals as garlic soup with bread: a broth made of garlic, oil, and water, accompanied by toast, however stale. The move to Boston was a difficult transition for the unadventurous and quiet Santayana, and it took a psychic strain. But learning and improving his English, he believed, was all the more benefited by his being a foreigner, and he was indeed successful in attaining a native comprehension of English, even being commended by teachers on his oratory. Mastering English was a way, perhaps the chief way, for Santayana to find social acceptance as a child.

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7 McClay 52.
9 McClay 52.
In his autobiography, Santayana claims that his foreignness bred a sensitivity to speculations and emotions that sharpened his powers of observation, a response, if not a reflex, to the fact that, as he put it, ‘the world around me was utterly undigestible.’ Santayana describes the memory of his childhood in America, from the years of eight to sixteen, as ‘blank’, with a smattering of ‘stray images’ that had ‘no sense of any consecutive interest, any affections or sorrows.’ He adds, ‘And yet I know that my feelings in those years were intense, that I was solitary and unhappy, out of humour with everything that surrounded me.’ Santayana was a lonely child, in large part because of his ethnic otherness in nineteenth-century America. He was, of course, a native speaker of Spanish and never rescinded his Spanish citizenship; his Spanish nationality escaped neither him nor his critics. In 1935, Q.D. Leavis highlighted ‘the essentially Latin quality of Santayana’s criticism’ as among his finest gifts. Thirty years later, James Ballowe, writing for the American Quarterly, still claimed that Santayana’s view of civilisation was ‘dictated by his allegiance to the Mediterranean-Catholic ethos.’

It would seem that Santayana himself confirmed many of these speculations. He believed, ‘my accidental foreignness favoured my spiritual freedom,’ not only because he was an immigrant to the US but especially because he was Spanish. His essay, ‘The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy’ (1911), his novel, The Last Puritan (1935), and his poetry collection, A Hermit of Carmel (1901), are all widely regarded as the writings of (to borrow the title of one of his poems) ‘Spain in America,’ voicing disillusionment with an inherited Anglo ethos – a dispassionate duty to render static the once fluid dynamics of American social hierarchy – that is wholly counter to the colonial experiment started by Spain in the Americas. For Santayana, his keen philosophical individualism was as much grounded in his heritage as it was in Emerson, Spinoza, or Merleau-Ponty. Of his native culture, Santayana claimed, ‘the Spaniard is an individualist … socially, externally, he distrusts everything and everybody, even his priests and his kings.’ We recognise this persona time and again in Santayana’s work, as in this key passage from Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (1900):

> religious doctrines would do well to withdraw their pretension to be dealing with matters of fact. That pretension is not only the source of the conflicts of religion with science and of the vain and bitter controversies of sects; it is also the cause of the impurity and incoherence of religion in the soul, when it seeks its sanctions in the sphere of reality, and forgets that its proper concern is to express the ideal.

But when attributing identarian traits to Santayana’s brand of scepticism, why do contemporary scholars remain inarticulate on the agency of immigrant discourse (as was Santayana) when we have, in the intervening century, developed a more expansive critical vocabulary to examine immigrant psychology and literature? Cognitive psychologists today understand that immigrants’ ‘choices may be constrained by the orientations of the receiving society,’ and when immigrants value their cultural heritage, the social options are for either separation,

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15 Santayana, Persons and Places 539.
16 Santayana, Persons and Places 145.
19 Santayana, Persons and Places 539.
21 George Santayana, Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (New York: Scribner’s, 1900) v-vi.
integration, or marginalisation, all potential foundations for sceptical thought. Immigrants of any national origin shoulder an array of ‘different types of threat, such as realistic threat, social identity threat, and symbolic threats that lead to defensive behaviours and, by extension, distrustfulness, cynicism, or disapproval. The assertion that ‘he distrusts … his priests and his kings’ is not one than can be proven to be a uniquely Spanish sentiment but does signal an attitude consistent with a prevailing immigrant mindset. Leavis, Ballowe, Irving Singer, and many other scholars have assessed the importance of his Spanishness, granting importance to this side of Santayana in understanding the roots and nuances of his philosophy. However, I argue, it is not simply his Spanishness but his immigrantness that is key to understanding the basis of his philosophical worldview.

It is not his allegiance to one nationality or another that impacted his purview so heavily but rather the cultural trauma of immigration, a stress accompanied by a linguistic disorientation that Santayana transformed into a veritable calling: to ‘say plausibly in English as many un-English things as possible.’ Santayana’s ‘deep-felt detachment from the world,’ ‘his unfailing naturalistic reduction,’ and his ethical relativism are all aspects of a worldview cultivated from the cultural circumstances of his immigration to the US:

Perhaps more than any modern philosopher, one has to account for where Santayana has come from, since he, unlike many philosophers, goes out of his way to tell us that his origins are many, not one. Perhaps, further, if one wanted to indulge in a bit of psycho-biography, one might say that Santayana’s past and the influences on him are so important to him and so evident in his work, because he, in some sense, never had a home, not in Ávila, not in Boston, not in the hotels of Paris and Rome. Hence, it seems significant that he thought of the world as his host, himself a guest in its many possible rooms.

As Christopher Perricone explains, Santayana lived with few encumbrances later in life, especially after his retirement from Harvard in 1912 when he moved to Europe, never to return to the US. His detached worldview in his philosophy is akin to his extraordinary social self-isolation in his maturity – the result of a second migration, to Italy. However, Perricone’s mention of Santayana’s ‘past’ ought to include not only his childhood in Spain, his adulthood in Boston, and his retirement in continental Europe, but also a consideration of his experience as an immigrant. Santayana’s remarkable ‘ability to understand difference without judgment,’ known perhaps as his greatest philosophical skill, was by his own admission a talent coaxed forth from his experience with the cognitive dissonance of immigration.

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23 Berry 619.
29 Perricone 223-4.
‘An echo of crude experience’

In spite of his outsider status, Santayana surely had a leading role to play in the Modernist turn from the decadence of Transcendentalism.31 In 1882, when he began as a freshman a career at Harvard that would last thirty years, the intellectual presence of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who died in April of that year, loomed large in Cambridge and Boston, and Santayana’s philosophy is in many ways defined by its privileging of an Emersonian individualism. It is well-known that Santayana was a philosopher without a creed. He put an almost religious faith in two ideals of being, experience and reason, which, per their unpredictable function, precluded audience with any established philosophical school. His theories on poetry, in their organisation and privileging of ideas, demonstrate ascension, up through the layers of abstraction that inhabit great poetry, reason being the upper crust before the atmosphere of ideals. He classified the elements of poetry as four: sensuousness in utterance and measure; beauty in imagery; intensity and immediacy of experience; and exercise of the rational imagination.32 When writing his own poems, Santayana committed to these principles, as can be seen in these stanzas from ‘Avila’:

What fate has cast me on a tide of time
Careless of joy and covetous of gold,
What force compelled to weave the pensive rhyme
When loves are mean, and faith and honour old,

When riches crown in vain men’s sordid lives,
And learning chokes a mind of base degree?
What wingèd spirit rises from their hives?
What heart, revolting, ventures to be free?33

In these lines, end rhymes are paired with alliterative beginnings, and the dactylic shift in the second line adds cadence to the regular iambic pentameter. Diction is forceful, the nouns consistently weighty, and the composition of interrogatives leads the reader to inquiry. Enriching language within the confines of traditional form, Santayana’s poems always take on the largest of questions, a philosopher’s questions. The end, of course, in Santayana is always the personal faculty of reason; his five-volume masterwork, The Life of Reason (1905-1906), makes this point unequivocally, as once noted by his fellow Spanish-American critic, Ernest Fenollosa:

Professor Santayana of Harvard University has just been writing some strong books about reason in the world, in society and in art. Many people when they hear of reason suppose that you mean reason-ing, that is, disputation and argument; which at best is only reason in our brains, and at worst is reason prostituted to personal pride and whim. People think that there is only rational matter in the world, hard little lumps of stuff that are merely inert. But this is pure error. These little pellets, if they exist at all, are whirling about and shooting bomb-like at each other at inconceivable rates of speed, interlocking into groups for mazy dances more precise than a chronometer, and obeying complex laws of higher mathematics with a much more incredible instinct than a spider in planning the segments

33 George Santayana, A Hermit of Carmel, And Other Poems (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901) 96.
of its web. We are forced to admit that there is reason everywhere in nature; and that is why we are enabled to study her.\textsuperscript{36}

Ernest Fenollosa is astute in noting Santayana’s proposition that ‘there is reason everywhere in nature’; it is central to his philosophy, a conviction endemic to all of his writings across genres. As deep as Santayana’s impact was on philosophy and Modernist poetics, he was a writer of the first order, and his legacy is one of a perfectly rounded intellectual. In fact, it is hard to find another American writer so successful in so many ventures. In 1957, Lionel Trilling judged Santayana’s collected letters to be of ‘classic importance: the best since Keats’s.’\textsuperscript{35} Irving Singer, critiquing Santayana’s literary essays, considered him a ‘rare genius who can combine good philosophy with good literary criticism.’\textsuperscript{36} ‘Reviewing in 1944 the first volume of George Santayana’s autobiography, \textit{Persons and Places}, Edmund Wilson noted that it belongs to a class which includes very few examples. “Few first-rate writers,” he observed, “have done stories of their lives which are among their major productions.”’ Wilson considered its only peers to be those of Yeats, Henry Adams, and Marcel Proust.\textsuperscript{37}

Even Santayana’s only novel, \textit{The Last Puritan}, was a major success. Like \textit{Persons and Places}, \textit{The Last Puritan} was a Book-of-the-Month Club bestseller, nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Conrad Aiken, writing for the \textit{New Republic}, ranked the book among the novels of Fielding and Richardson, calling Santayana’s achievement ‘the most nearly satisfactory analysis … of the New England character’ in American literature.\textsuperscript{38} This recognition was achieved by Santayana portraying the Puritan character of Oliver through cross-cultural comparison, as lacking the vitality and brio of his Italian-blooded cousin Mario. Santayana believed that ‘Americans are all the better for being a mixture of several nationalities’ because the so-called ‘purer races seem to’ be ‘missing some of the ordinary attributes of humanity.’\textsuperscript{39} A comparable theme runs through Santayana’s novel. Like the dual protagonists, Oliver and Mario, Santayana’s worldview was rooted in two provincial cultures, Boston and Madrid, which he combined into a unique brand of cosmopolitanism.\textsuperscript{40} His story was fresh, his prose sharp, and his sentiment so resonant that at a time when Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Pearl Buck, James Hilton, and John Steinbeck were still living and writing in America, the \textit{New York Herald Tribune} called Santayana ‘the greatest contemporary master of English prose.’\textsuperscript{41}

The Columbia philosopher Corliss Lamont once asserted that Santayana ‘writes philosophy more beautifully than any other thinker since Plato,’\textsuperscript{42} and Ira Cardiff ranks Santayana’s oeuvre among ‘the finer productions of the race.’\textsuperscript{43} Some of Santayana’s keenest moments really are, in a literal sense, breathtaking. As one who maintained that poetry was of divine significance,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Lionel Trilling, \textit{A Gathering of Fugitives} (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957) 153.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Irving Singer, \textit{Essays in Literary Criticism of George Santayana} (New York: Scribner’s, 1956) ix.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Cowley 88, 90.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ellen Glasgow, ‘George Santayana Writes a “Novel,”’ \textit{New York Herald Tribune} (2 February, 1936) 1.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Qtd. in Ira D. Cardiff, introduction to \textit{The Wisdom of George Santayana}, by George Santayana, ed. Ira D. Cardiff (New York: Philosophical Library, 1964) xiv.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Qtd. in Cardiff xiii.
\end{itemize}
Santayana wrote: ‘Primitive thought has the form of poetry and the function of prose’;\textsuperscript{44} ‘The function of history is to lend materials to politics and to poetry’;\textsuperscript{45} ‘Poetry is an attenuation, a rehandling, an echo of crude experience; it is itself a theoretic vision of things at arm’s length.’\textsuperscript{46} Every sentence in Santayana’s philosophy is pithy enough to be the final line of the book, the lyricism of his language is so pervasive. And ever the philosopher with a poet’s spirit,\textsuperscript{47} Santayana was eager to find poetry’s purpose, which he summarised in his \textit{Little Essays} (1924):

\begin{quotation}

The great function of poetry is precisely this: to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. Our descent into the elements of our being is then justified by our subsequent freer ascent toward its goal; we revert to sense only to find food for reason; we destroy conventions only to construct ideals.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quotation}

Every summary for Santayana was a new one; he was a philosopher without a creed, and his conjectures in his prolific writings always read like observations, constantly renewed, and as such always shifting, taking every chance for surprise. Wallace Stevens, a devotee of Santayana’s, was similarly a poet of surprise; his widely anthologised poem ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ (1923) has come to signpost this reputation. But a perhaps even more popular Stevens poem, ‘To An Old Philosopher In Rome’ (1954) – the old philosopher of the poem being Santayana – is well-regarded as a portal into Stevens’ poetic sensibility, the voice of the infinite possibilities that are perpetually missed and lost forever in a human condition bound by what Santayana called ‘animal spirit.’ The poem begins:

\begin{quotation}

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end –\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quotation}

The poem is homage to Santayana, the man he was and his life’s work, spoken in reverent tones and reflecting through Santayana’s dialectical mode of experience and reason. Stevens imagines how, in facing death,

\begin{quotation}

Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile
...
So that we feel, in this illumined large
The veritable small.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{44} George Santayana, \textit{The Life of Reason; Or, The Phases of Human Progress}, 5 volumes (New York: Scribner’s, 1905-6) vol. 1, 49.
\textsuperscript{45} Santayana, \textit{The Life of Reason} vol. 5, 66.
\textsuperscript{48} George Santayana, \textit{Little Essays}, ed. Logan Pearsall Smith (New York: Scriber’s, 1924) 140.
\textsuperscript{50} Stevens 508-509.
The idea is that wisdom is rooted in the intensity of abstraction that the mind can make out of a sober regard of the seamless, unprioritised, unclassified world that the senses apprehend. This is the defining trait of Santayana’s philosophical attitude, as he was foremost a naturalist and a materialist.\textsuperscript{51} It is an idea of renewal, and, moreover, of finding the pleasures of keeping the mind attuned to a register of perpetual renewal, and while one might be inclined to take this as the poet-as-maker, I would argue that it is equally the poet-as-immigrant. The image of ‘men growing small in the distances of space’ toward an ‘[u]nintelligible absolution,’ in the context of a tribute, glosses the foundation of Santayana’s immigrant/philosophical purview. Displaying such a marriage of immigrant ethos and philosophical reflection, Santayana’s essay ‘The Intellectual Temper of the Age’ (1913) describes its era as ‘saturated with the slow upward filtration of a new spirit, of an emancipated, atheistic, international democracy,’ and he projected an attitude deeply shared by Stevens’ poem in suggesting that ‘a philosopher in our day, conscious both of the old life and of the new, might repeat what Goethe said of his successive love affairs – that it is sweet to see the moon rise while the sun is still mildly shining.’\textsuperscript{52}

Santayana’s charm lies between his gravity and his humour, for he was equally serious and optimistic, and his penchant for relating a scene or experience or text to its own primacy – in other words, its goodness and its freedom – had a penetrating allure for many writers besides Stevens. The most famous case is T.S. Eliot. The way Ezra Pound filed Ernest Fenollosa’s ‘ideogram’ into the key trope of his poetic method, so Eliot defined his guiding aesthetic principle as the ‘objective correlative’, the establishment of an effective situation in which particulars can resonate into an emotion: in verse, the objectified image, in a self-contained way, pertains to emotion determined by context, but carries no symbolic weight.\textsuperscript{53} An example can be found in the second stanza from Eliot’s poem ‘A Cooking Egg’:

\begin{quote}
Daguerreotypes and silhouettes,
Her grandfather and great great aunts,
Supported on the mantelpiece,
An Invitation to the Dance.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

The first line presents pictures, copies of people suddenly identified as far older relatives stocked above a fireplace – the pictures are essentially headstones. And in the stanza’s final line, ‘Invitation to the Dance’ not only shapes the rhythm of the line but also makes the phrase specific, and real: a reference to Carl Maria von Weber’s 1819 composition for piano, famous for being the first known concert waltz ever written, and such connotations seep into the nostalgic décor of the scene. Nothing in the stanza is truly symbolic; it is not a symbol of sorrow and loneliness but, through imagery, an experience of sorrow and loneliness: a moment, objectified in a scenario but detached from symbolic prescription, that correlates to an emotion. In his essay ‘Santayana and Eliot’s “Objective Correlative”’ (1957), B.R. McElhenny argues a point that to my knowledge has yet to be discredited: that although the American poet Washington Allston actually coined the same term sometime around 1840, Eliot was unaware of

\textsuperscript{51} Cronan 489, 503.
\textsuperscript{52} George Santayana, \textit{The Winds of Doctrine} (New York: Scribner’s, 1913) 2.
\textsuperscript{53} T. S. Eliot, \textit{Selected Essays} (London: Faber & Faber, 1951) 144-5.
Allston’s usage, and that the provenance of the Eliotic objective correlative principle lies in Santayana’s philosophy.\(^5^5\)

But to what extent was this concept derived from Santayana’s reconciliation of English and Spanish? Julio Marzán, in *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams* (1994), and Jonathan Cohen, in his introduction to Williams’s translations collected in *By Word of Mouth: Poems from the Spanish, 1916-1959* (2011), have both extensively argued that Williams’s reading in Spanish, and his relationships with his Puerto Rican mother and grandmother, deeply motivated his technical innovations of poetry – his Imagism, his Objectivism, the ‘variable foot,’ and specific conceits in verse – in ways that blended English and Spanish modes into new poetics of the first-generation American. In the case of Santayana, who was more proficient in Spanish than Williams ever was, we can observe a similar play. The identified source of Eliot’s objective correlative is Santayana’s essay, ‘The Elements and Function of Poetry,’ first published in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), and in its key passage, we can see two distinctly Spanish aspects rendered into English discourse:

The various forms of love and hate are only possible in society, and to imagine occasions in which these feelings may manifest all their inward vitality is the poet’s function, – one in which he follows the fancy of every child, who puffs himself out in his day-dreams into an endless variety of heroes and lovers. The thrilling adventures which he craves demand an appropriate theatre; the glorious emotions with which he bubbles over must at all hazards find or feign their correlative objects.\(^5^6\)

The first is the quixotic, in the most original sense of the word, characterising the poet’s function in thoroughly Cervantic terms. In short, the poet is an escapist who ‘day-dreams … thrilling adventures’ with the unrelenting imagination of a child. But the second is more subtle and a matter of translation. The Spanish word for ‘correlative’ is a cognate, *correlativo*, which is synonymous with the English in all meanings (corresponding, reciprocal, supplemental) except for one: *correlativo* also can mean ‘consecutive.’ The Spanish term adds a level of coherence to the definition of the term, a sense of sustained spatial-temporal congruity that the English word lacks. To add *consecutiveness* to the range of implications of the term ‘correlative’ expands its potential: it includes the idea of a chain of events to the ideas of context, connectivity, and interrelation that the word denotes in English, thereby allowing for causation but also process. Santayana’s choice of adjective, an English term with a more extensively defined Spanish cognate, expands the connotations of this coinage and its implications in Eliot’s poetics, for we recall that Santayana – ever the immigrant – wished to ‘say plausibly in English as many un-English things as possible.’

‘*La letra con sangre entra*’

As substantial an influence as Santayana had on Stevens and Eliot, he might have had a comparable influence on Pound had Santanyana not been so initially resistant to Pound’s advances. In his article, ‘George Santayana and Ezra Pound’ (1982), John McCormick explains how, ‘As was his habit, Pound took it upon himself to move in on Santanyana, not so frontally as on others, but [still] vigorously.’\(^5^7\) In the late 1930s and into the 1940s, Pound was tracking
Santayana. Whether trying to contact Santayana directly or through his literary executor Daniel Cory,

Pound’s various approaches to Santayana concealed guile. What he was after was Santayana’s collaboration with Eliot and him in a ‘new Paideuma,’ a book in which the three would set about the task of reforming American education. Pound had indeed sold the idea to Eliot, and Eliot had got a sympathetic response from his editorial board at Faber and Faber … Pound tried to convince Santayana of the opportunity before him by saying that the book would be a good place in which to answer critics of his philosophy, and a forum from which to display his philosophy before readers who normally might never encounter it.\(^{58}\)

Santayana’s response was a resounding no. Gawking at the impossible idealism at the heart of such a project, Santayana, the unrelenting critic of sentimental illusions,\(^{59}\) replied: ‘a Spanish proverb says that is impossible without the rod, without blood – *la letra con sangre entra* – and I don’t like blood. And it is so with all Utopias.’\(^{60}\) From the very beginning of Pound’s pursuit of the old philosopher, Santayana unflinchingly kept the iconoclast at arm’s length with unequivocal pronouncements such as, ‘for heaven’s sake, dear Cory, do stop Ezra Pound from sending me his book’ and ‘I abhor all connection with important and distinguished people.’\(^{61}\) In time, Santayana would soften his prickly intolerance of Pound and his incessant social networking by reading, annotating, and responding to some of Pound’s work, but his distrustfulness never totally left his consideration of the poet. As one who found comfort in the Classical mentality of Latin, for ‘Latin was … old Spanish’ and thus its ‘roots were all my roots,’\(^{62}\) Santayana disliked Pound’s pet project of the Chinese ideogram as a medium for poetry. In a letter to Pound from 1940, Santayana offers his impression that Chinese poets are ‘only highly refined prosaic sensualists,’ concluding that ‘I am floundering in your philosophy, badly but not unpleasantly.’\(^{63}\) Dissatisfied with Pound’s Fenollosan approach to new poetry, Santayana could not privilege a poetics of particulars over the nuances of inflection and complexities of abstraction endemic to Classical literature and its Metaphysical and Romantic offshoots. He preferred what was closer to Latin, Spanish, and English, staying true to his own culture – the circumstance of his immigrant experience. While Santayana did share sympathies with Pound over matters concerning ‘the loss of liberal democracies’ rights because of the sudden emergence of the masses in the public sphere,’ their writings seem at odds over what Santayana believed to be ‘the relativity of ethical values.’\(^{64}\) Unlike Pound the bard-cum-encyclopedist who saw the archetype of the ‘factive personality’ in every part of the world where he looked, Santayana had no faith in such coherence of ambition. In discoursing on individualism, Santayana would distinguish the halves of human life as *the spirit* and *the psyche*, or the ‘essence … to think’ and ‘a mode of substance.’\(^{65}\) Their combined aspiration is to live in the

\(^{58}\) McCormick 420.

\(^{59}\) Cronan 495.

\(^{60}\) Qtd. in McCormick 421.


\(^{62}\) Santayana, *Persons and Places* 156.

\(^{63}\) Qtd. in McCormick 418.

\(^{64}\) Garcia 186, 188.

world. In short, Santayana believed that the philosopher ‘lives by thinking, and his one perpetual emotion is that this world, with himself in it, should be the strange world which it is.’

His ultimate rejection of Poundian poetics, coupled with his measurable influence on Wallace Stevens, situates Santayana more on the Stevens side of the Modernist divide. Marjorie Perloff explains, in her chapter ‘Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?’, that Hugh Kenner and Harold Bloom, both writing in the 1970s, established antithetical perspectives on aesthetics and allegiances (Kenner arguing for Pound, Bloom for Stevens) in the debate over dominant characteristics of Modernist poetry, noting that ‘the split goes deep, and its very existence raises … central questions about the meaning of Modernism – indeed about the meaning of poetry itself in current literary history and theory.’ Comparable to the depth of Fenollosa’s influence on Pound, Santayana’s influence on Stevens – as well as Eliot – covers a large field of Modernist poetics, and in part begins to show a pervasive influence of immigrant experience on the intellectual emergence and development of American Modernist poetry. Santayana’s extreme cynicism and distrust of doctrine was a product of his experience as an immigrant to the US, a set of circumstances that gave birth to a philosophical purview that by extension dictated much of what poets believed in the twentieth century.

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66 George Santayana, Poems (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1923) xiii.
Adolescent Occultism and the Philosophy of Things in Three Novels

Samuel Finegan

The association of adolescence with supernatural belief is not new. Many social research texts position paranormal belief within the liminality of adolescence – something tested and later outgrown. The particularly North American phenomena of ‘legend tripping,’ for instance, where ‘to test [a] legend, legend trippers will often mark their visits [to sites of urban legends] with specific activities designed to invoke supernatural powers,’¹ is practiced primarily by older teens and college-age youths as shown by Donald Holly and Casey Cordy in ‘What’s in a Coin?’ and confirmed by Sylvia Ann Grider in ‘Children’s Ghost Stories’.² Alison Waller’s book Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism similarly attests to the appeal of the supernatural in books written for and about young people. Criticism of these works, however, tends to sideline supernatural content as a site of inquiry and instead ‘prioritise a rational reading of the fantastic focussing on socio-physiological development of adolescents. Magic is explained away as a purely imaginative product of awakened sexuality, and ghosts are read as fabricated alter egos.’³

This paper is not interested in ‘explaining away’ supernatural tropes as projections and psychological safeguards. Rather, through an examination of three novels about adolescent experience and adolescent occultism, Sonya Hartnett’s 2009 Butterfly, Shirley Jackson’s 1962 We Have Always Lived in the Castle and Iain Bank’s 1984 The Wasp Factory, it aims to reveal the philosophical ‘work’ done by the narrators of these pieces of fiction. This essay demonstrates the close parallels between these novels’ fictional accounts of adolescent occultism and the materialist philosophies of Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s theories of Being, being-with, correspondence, and reference provide a structure for the discussion of the power of objects as does Benjamin’s reading of auratic objects, but neither define it. This analysis aims to revivify the potential of occult modes of thought, showing that they constitute in these novels a kind of ‘applied philosophy’ which not only reveals the machinery of memory, history and significance underlying ‘powerful’ objects but flips from a receptive to a productive system of meaning making.

Sonya Hartnett’s 2009 Butterfly, Shirley Jackson’s 1962 We Have Always Lived in the Castle, and Iain Bank’s 1984 The Wasp Factory are diverse in both their publication dates and their settings. The novels are set respectively in 1980s Australian suburbia, a small New England town in the 1960s, and a remote Scottish peninsula in the 1980s. The protagonists of the novels, fifteen year old Plum Coyle, eighteen year old Merrikat Blackwell, and seventeen year old Frank Cauldham deal with a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar problems. Plum, given the suburban setting of Butterfly, is the most conventional and deals primarily with the staples of young adult literature such as peer-group pressure, puberty, and familial troubles. Frank and Merrikat are more extreme examples, growing up in isolation from wider society and without much in the way of parental oversight. That each of these protagonists, written at different times for different

³ Alison Waller, Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism. (New York, Routledge 2009) 19.

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readerships, seeks some measure of control over the world through supernatural means reveals the centrality of a certain occult thought to twentieth-century adolescence in the West. Each protagonist practices their own form of occultism. In each case, these practices are intuitive and idiosyncratic. Despite the diversity of their practices, each is a grounded in familiar logic and in a philosophical appreciation of objects and their immaterial weight.

The occult elements in these novels make classification difficult. The works are clearly not fantasy, being too grounded in a common mimetic reality to support that genre. The novels may better fit the definition of the fantastic, as first described by Tzvetan Todorov. Despite later interventions and innovations in the theory of the fantastic, as mapped by Mark Bould in ‘The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things’, discussion of the fantastic still centres around hesitation. Fantastic novels hesitate between endorsing their protagonists’ supernatural experiences or views and undermining them in favour of mundane explanations. While the three novels examined in this paper share that hesitation, the novels lack many of the recognisable features of other fantastic literature. Whether read as a genre or a mode, the fantastic is most closely associated with nineteenth and early twentieth century writers such as Algernon Blackwood, Guy de Maupassant, and M.R. James. The works of these authors usually focus on adult protagonists fully aware of the challenge their impossible experiences pose to conventional reality. Rosemary Jackson renders this as the fantastic being ‘structured on contradiction and ambivalence’ and trading ‘in that which cannot be said, that which evades articulation or that which is represented as “untrue” and “unreal.”’ As will be shown, the focus on impossibility and on the breakdown of meaning in fantastic texts does not resonate with the worlds experienced in The Wasp Factory, Butterfly, and We Have Always Lived in the Castle. If anything, meaning is over-determinate in these texts – objects overwhelmingly defined by their indexical relationship to experience and history.

It is tempting to follow those critics described by Waller in considering how the supernatural flourishes in these novels as merely the imaginative product of adolescents. It is possible to do so – each of the texts restricts its supernatural elements to the protagonists’ interpretations. There are no fireballs, goblins, or other impossible material eruptions to force the texts out of alignment with mimetic reality. Only partial and potential supernatural foretellings, protections, wards, and curses overlay the novels’ recognisable material realities with occult importance. To surrender these texts wholly to their protagonists’ sole subjectivity, however, would rob the texts of their complexity and deliver them into the ‘embrace of madness, irrationality, or narcissism’ to which some literary critics have previously consigned the fantastic as a whole.

The occult is both of, and not of, the world, and this is significant because it changes the relevance of the supernatural to the text. The actions do take place and the objects do exist in the brute materialism of the texts. The actions of occult practice occur even in a material, rationalist interpretation of the plots where the protagonists are deluded and their actions ineffective. These kinds of actions are part of material reality. Even in ‘rational’ Western nations, magic continues to influence and describe the relations of contemporary peoples. The supernatural has penetrated both cultural text and language – people are still routinely charmed, enchanted, and cursed. This nascent supernaturalism, however, is not well recognised. As Donald Holly and Casey Cordy close their article on legend tripping:

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7 Jackson 172.
While we are quick to acknowledge magic in other societies, we tend to attribute the same in our own society – rabbit’s feet; lucky numbers; four-leaf clovers; things old and new, borrowed and blue – to mere amusement. But what is magic if not a wish made with the toss of a coin into standing water – or over the shoulder in the direction of a vampire’s gravestone?

In the novels to be examined, the occult is not a metaphor. If the occult symbols and actions resonate in such a way, it is in the same manner that the conventional objects and actions of realist drama are read metaphorically. These are mimetic realist texts that depict adolescent consciousnesses that intuitively invest the material world with immaterial significance. The world which the adolescent protagonists seek to control and ward against through occult arrangements of material objects is recognisably the world of the reader. Similarly, the actions they undertake and the objects they collect and use do exist – their subjectivity does not undermine the realism of their setting, but only its potential meanings – that is, whether their actions and their sensitivity corresponds to real events and real knowledge or not. In this sense, the books posit not alternate fictional realities, but a particular philosophy of materiality – a way of reading the material world sympathetic to the projects of Heidegger and Benjamin.

Benjamin has long recognised the fascination children have for things. In his entry Untidy Child from One Way Street, he pictures the child in ways that recall these novel’s protagonists:

Untidy child – Each stone he finds, each flower picked and each butterfly caught is already the start of a collection, every single thing he owns makes up one great collection. In him the passion shows its true face, the stern Indian expression which lingers on, but with a dimmed and manic glow, in antiquarians, researchers, bibliomaniacs ... He hunts the spirits whose trace he scents in things; between spirits and things.

These ‘traces’ are the invisible and immaterial value of things: the scents of meaning above and beyond what is raw and material. In these occult texts, the protagonists go one step further, not only ‘scenting’ the spirit in things, but attempting to wield and use that spirit for their own protection and betterment. The occult, in this sense, is the application rather than mere curation of the trace.

Butterfly is the story of Plum Coyle ‘aged nearly fourteen, waylaid monstrously on the path to being grown.’ Unhappy, struggling with her fractious and often vicious friendship group, and fearing ‘the womanly hurdle that still awaits her, the prospect of which occurrence makes her seize into silence,’ Plum turns to her grown neighbour, but also the solace of things to protect and change her (B 1). Beneath her bed she keeps a briefcase:

She gazes upon the case’s contents with an archaeologist’s eyes: here lies her treasure, her most sacred things. She has lined the suitcase with lavender satin and provided several bags’ worth of cottonball cushioning so that each token sits within its own bulky cloud, untroubled by her manhandling of the case. Plum brushes the items with her palm, incanting as she does

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8 Holly and Cordy 350.
9 Walter Benjamin, ‘One-Way Street,’ One Way Street and Other Writings (London: Verso 1979) 73.
10 Sonya Hartnett, Butterfly (Camberwell: Penguin Group 2009). 2. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked B.
so a string of whispery words. The glass lamb. *I belong*. The Fanta yo-yo. *I fear nothing*. The Abba badge. *You don’t touch me*. The brown coin. *I fear nothing*. The dainty wristwatch. *I am more than you see* (B 13).

Plum, recalling Benjamin’s *Untidy Child*, regards her treasure with an archaeologist’s eye – lit, the reader may imagine, by a manic glow. The objects are a strange assortment of weighted icons and the obviously commercial. The atypical nature of the collection (in *The Wasp Factory* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are far more traditional occult objects) does not reduce its power in Plum’s mind. The objects are not simply repositories for memory, or feeling but active, totemic objects that can be invoked and incited to action. While never directly stating as much, it is clear that Plum sees this collection as the tools of witchcraft:

‘Lovely things, lovely things, I am near; see me, hear me, need me, do as I say.’ If she were in a movie, there would be a pentacle painted on the floor in blood or red paint, a creaky tome opened on a stone altar, and candles burning everywhere. In a movie, her words would cause a gale to blow, send ravens cawing into the sky. All this is lacking, but Plum closes the lid satisfied, and shunts the briefcase under the bed (B 49).

Plum’s appreciation for objects is extreme as is her faith in their power. This object-focus, however, is not alien to the suburbs or to her family. Both of her parents are antiquarian in the traditional sense, attracted to the old and venerable:

The Coyle house is big, and humiliating. The staircase down which Plum runs is gloomy with pastoral paintings, hazardous with piled books. Nothing in the house is new: indeed, the more elderly an object, the more Mums and Fa must possess it. On weekends they trawl antique shops, returning with chairs and statues and complicated wooden boxes (B 3).

Plum herself now has distaste for the house and its old furnishings, it being ‘unfair that she must endure timber and stone, when all her friends know the joy of plastic and smoked glass’ (B 3). Despite this, the novel still establishes a lineage between Plum’s unreasonable occult fascination with trinkets and the broader more respectable affection of adults for objects with history. Objects with history also form the backdrop of the Blackwood family home in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Though now reduced to only Merrikat, her older sister Constance and the disabled Uncle Julian, the house itself is an accretion of family history.

We rarely moved things; the Blackwoods were never much of a family for restlessness and stirring. We dealt with the small surface transient objects, the books and the flowers and the spoons, but underneath we had always a solid foundation of stable possessions. We always put things back where they belonged.11

Merrikat and Constance maintain the house almost religiously, cleaning and washing each room and keeping the house as it was before the family’s death. Merrikat adds to the house environment with her own collection of ‘safeguards’ with which she claims and wards the house and land:

11 Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2009) 1. 2. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked WH.
On Sunday mornings I examined my safeguards, the box of silver dollars I had buried by the creek, and the doll in the long field, and the book nailed to the tree in the pine woods; so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us (WH 41).

Frank in *The Wasp Factory* similarly identifies with explicit supernatural imagery. Castrated by a dog attack as a child and raised in isolation by a demanding father, Frank considers himself a shaman who polices and maintains the security of his home through the manufacture of totems and the performance of elaborate rituals centring on the titular Wasp Factory. The island is warded with Sacrifice Poles:

I had two Poles on the far face of the last dune. One of the Poles held a rat head with two dragonflies, the other a seagull and two mice ... They were my early-warning system and deterrent rolled into one; infected, potent things which looked out from the island, warding off. Those totems were my warning shot; anybody who set foot on the island after seeing them should know what to expect.  

These poles are composed of the bodies of deceased animals, and Frank’s own ‘precious stuff’ – filth harvested from his own body. He also attempts to predict the future, and take advice from the Wasp Factory itself – a death-trap for wasps built from an old clock whose twelve methods of termination communicate the future.

Unlike Plum and Merrikat, Frank’s supernaturalism is in direct opposition to his father and the broader world. His father has no such faith in objects, despite his almost monomaniacal control of the inside of the house. The house is mapped and remapped constantly in brute material terms. The house has been measured and catalogued:

Ever since I can remember there have been little stickers of white paper all over the house with neat black-biro writing on them. Attached to the legs of chains, the edges of rugs, the bottom of jugs, the aerials of radios, the doors of drawers, the headboards of beds, the screens of televisions, the handles of pots and pans, they give the appropriate measurement for the part of the object they’re stuck to (WF 11).

The philosophy of Frank’s father admits no immateriality, and inside the house Frank cannot practice his shamanism. He is able to do so at all only because his father’s reach is limited by a knee injury which demands the use of a cane. The cane is a site of direct contestation, demonstrating the difference between the two men: Frank wonders ‘if my father had a name for that stick of his. I doubted it. He doesn’t attach the same importance to them as I do. I know they are important’ (WF 16).

Not one of the protagonists is educated in the supernatural. Rather, these intuitive systems recall magical practice because of the essential ‘thingliness’ of their practice. Holly and Cordy indicate a similarly intuitive supernaturalism to the practice of legend tripping, where material is taken from graveyards and other significant locations by young trippers:

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12 Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks 1998) 7, 10. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked WF.
Much of this behaviour – whether intentional or not – also conforms to principles of magical practice that are quite widespread. Human bones, hair, fingernails, and other body parts, for instance, are common ingredients in magical rituals, as they are widely believed to contain the essence of the individual from whom they are taken.\textsuperscript{13}

Young, untrained protagonists are approximating traditional magical practices because both practices are grounded in an appreciation for the invisible, immaterial qualities of things. These young adults in their occult systems are offering a philosophy that centres on and emphasises the significance of objects’ correspondences and analogies. In effect, they are embracing what Benjamin describes in ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’ when he writes: ‘clearly the perceptual world \textit{[Merkwelt]} of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples.’\textsuperscript{14} These magical relationships that the protagonists pursue are not radically divergent from pre-existing modes of thought – rather they are a revivification of the ‘minimal residues’ of mainstream culture as even within their own narratives their object fetishism is only a particularly exaggerated version of a mature, adult appreciation for things.

Just as Plum’s parents and the Blackwood ancestors sought to enrich their houses with the gradual accretion of objects, Plum, Frank, and Merrikat attempt to enrich themselves and their surrounds through the collection and dispersal of supernaturally charged objects. Merrikat carries out this action deliberately, burying things throughout her life to increase her connection to the land and to bind it to her:

All our land was enriched with my treasures buried in it, thickly inhabited just below the surface with my marbles and my teeth and my coloured stones, all perhaps turned to jewels by now, held together under the ground in a powerful taut web which was loosened, but held fast to guard us (WH 41).

In the occult system, objects become a way of claiming space. Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey have highlighted the relevance of claimed spaces in mourning and grief related physical culture, demonstrating how certain objects like clothes, toys, and so on become irretrievably linked to the deceased’s self. This, they argue, stems from the fact that ‘social interaction with and through material forms tend to destabilise subject/object boundaries such that material objects can become extensions of the body and therefore personhood.’\textsuperscript{15} This extension differentiates between biological and social death in that: ‘the social lives of persons might persist beyond biological death, in the form of the material objects with which they are metaphorically or metonymically associated in social processes of meaning making.’\textsuperscript{16}

In Heidegger’s philosophical terms, the extension of self recalls a fusion of being-with and totemism. To demonstrate being-with, Heidegger uses the example of a boat, explaining ‘the boat anchored at the shore refers in its being-in-itself to an acquaintance who undertakes his voyages with it, but as a “boat strange to us,” it also points to others.’\textsuperscript{17} The ‘others’ in the

\textsuperscript{13}Holly and Cordy 347.
\textsuperscript{15}Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, \textit{Death, Memory and Material Culture} (Oxford: Berg 2001) 43.
\textsuperscript{16}Hallam and Hockey 43.
\textsuperscript{17}Martin Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit} (New York: State University of New York Press 1996) 111.
example of grief culture are the deceased. The biologically dead are endlessly recalled by the correspondences and references between themselves and the remaining material world. Heidegger argues that in the magic of fetishism in ‘primitive cultures’: ‘the sign is still completely absorbed in the being of what is indicated so that a sign as such cannot be detached at all‘ and that ‘the sign has not yet become free from that for which it is a sign.’ As fetishism acts, in Heidegger’s view, as an absorption of the sign by the signified, in the case of these occult arrangements, the material markers come to be overwhelmed by their correspondence to the protagonists of the fictions.

In the case of We Have Always Lived in the Castle, Butterfly, and The Wasp Factory, the characters consciously ‘farm’ these connections, seeking to extend their social selves through the objects they have assembled. In a sense, they invert Heidegger’s model. Rather than engaging with those ‘strange to us’ through objects, they enter into relation with those objects in the present. They produce a new fetish of which they are the subject and actively claim rather than passively receive as Heidegger and Benjamin do. Unlike either of these philosophers, or the grieving uptake or similar ideas, Frank, Plum and Merrikat’s collections do not speak of the dead and departed of their still living creators and collectors. Frank explicitly relates his occult assemblages to his body: ‘my dead sentries, those extensions of me which came under my power through the simple but ultimate surrender of death, sensed nothing to harm me or the island’ (WF 20). He also mingles the objects of his practice with his own physical material, marking these extensions with toe-jam, ear wax, and dead skin. The extended bodies of Frank and Merrikat are made of ‘simple’ objects that derive their power either from their preciousness (in the case of Merrikat’s silver dollars) or their taboo nature (the animal skulls and ‘precious stuff’ harvested from Frank’s body).

Butterfly’s Plum, both less isolated and more socially engaged than either Merrikat or Frank, does not claim land through the spread of potent objects, but even she fantasises about the growth and power of her collection:

now that Plum thinks on it, there’s no reason why the collection should not grow as large as the briefcase allows, assuming she can find enough suitable objects. She’s stopped going to church, she’s changed her name: maybe the collection should likewise evolve. The idea fills her with a blur of excitement. She imagines the briefcase packed to bursting, glowing like lava or a UFO, emitting a humming tone (B 49).

While less explicit in relating these objects to her body and self than Frank, it is clear that Plum sees her collection as an echo of herself, something that must change as she does. Plum’s collection also differs from those of Merrikat and Frank in that it consists of objects that are, for the most part, neither precious nor taboo.

The occult economy of Butterfly is not one interested in intrinsic properties. Instead, the potent objects of the narrative derive their charge from their connection to memory. Objects have a well-recognised place within memory studies with numerous works relating the function of memory and memorial to both deliberate and accidental material processes. One critic operating in the area, Deborah Lupton, writes in The Emotional Self that:
Personal possessions can act as the repositories of memory, standing as a tangible record of personal achievements, successes, relationships with others. Virtually any object can play this role: photographs, greeting cards, letters, furniture, clothing, jewellery, kitchen utensils and crockery, records and compact discs, scents, theatre programs and books may all be associated with past people or events or places in which each individual has lived or has visited.\(^\text{20}\)

These repositories of memory are those collected and curated by Plum. At the centre of the book, the Coyle family’s contemporary narrative is interrupted by several pages of description which detail the histories of the objects she has collected. Two particular examples, her brown coin and her jade pendant, emphasise the objective worthlessness of the object. Each object is kept based on its sentimental value:

The man in the coin shop said it has no value whatsoever; but it is worth something to her. It was found by her uncle on the day she was born – she doesn’t know what he was doing under the house, but when his kneecap detected something inflexible and, investigating, he excavated a penny which, by coincidence, had been minted exactly fifty years earlier, it seemed as good a gift as any to present to his new niece. History in the shape of a disc. The first time she’d pressed it to her lips, she discovered old metal was warm (B 79).

The coin is bestowed with power because it is, as the narrator notes, ‘history in the shape of a disc.’ It has been enriched by a coincidental, historical link between itself and its recipient. In comparison, the jade pendant has no interesting origin but derives its own charge through its presence during particular events and memories:

It is nothing but a trinket for a tourist lacking taste. But it was her first and only holiday overseas, and she’d worn the necklace throughout the trip – swum with it, sunbaked with it, hiked a volcano while wearing it, so it slithered across her sternum slick with sweat – and it has value beyond its worth, because of these memories (B 78).

What becomes apparent is that the occult is not fundamentally a different type of thought or a radically different philosophy of matter; rather, it is that which governs other forms of real-world object engagement. In these cases, it is precisely the objects’ indexical relationships with certain events that qualifies them for fetishism.

The heart of The Wasp Factory’s occult arrangements is an altar where the ‘precious substance’ of the narrator’s body is intermingled with objects that similarly derive their charge not from intrinsic properties, but from an indexical relationship to historical events:

I set the jar on the altar, which was decorated with various powerful things; the skull of the snake which killed Blyth ..., a fragment of the bomb which had destroyed Paul ... a piece of tent fabric from the kite which had elevated Esmeralda ... and a little dish containing some of the yellow, worn teeth of Old Saul (WF 119-120).

History is maintained and called forward by the presence of these ‘powerful’ things. Frank’s collection is deliberately narcissistic, composed of objects of personal relevance. The altar is

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fringed by objects which have either harmed Frank (in the case of Old Saul’s teeth) or which have been instruments of harm. As with Plum, Frank has collected items which derive their power not from some pre-existing essence but from their relationship (that is, their references and correspondences) with past events.

Merrikat also reveals her supernatural system to have similar complexity. One safeguard in particular reveals a similar appreciation for the individualism of objects. Amongst the silver-dollars and blue marbles that have been buried, one of the wards is a book nailed to a tree. This book is described in terms which explicitly link its nature to its use:

My book nailed to a tree in the pine woods had fallen down. I decided that the nail had rusted away and the book – it was a little notebook of our father’s, where he used to record the names of people who owed him money, and people who ought, he thought, to do favours for him – was useless now as protection. I had wrapped it very thoroughly in heavy paper before nailing it to the tree, but the nail had rusted and it had fallen. I had better destroy it, in case it was now actively bad, and bring something else out to the tree, perhaps a scarf of my mother’s, or a glove (WH 53-54).

The book is useable as a ward because it corresponds to debts and favours owed. Its history of use directly influences its supernatural capacity. Rather than a purely symbolic gesture such as the hanging of a horse shoe or four-leaf clover, Merrikat’s use of the book is based on a philosophy that privileges the individualism and ontological history of the object.

Each of these potted histories recalls Benjamin’s object-centred writing throughout One Way Street and the rest of his oeuvre. These passages are devoted to the fascination of objects and the world of immaterial meaning held beneath the skin of raw presence. The young adult protagonists of We Have Always Lived in the Castle, Butterfly, and The Wasp Factory are both untidy children and redeemers of objects. Writing on Benjamin, Esther Leslie argues in ‘Souvenirs and Forgetting’ that ‘the redeemer of objects strips them of their commodity character by possessing them and removing them from the normal circuits of exchange and use.’21 The sorcerous intent with which Plum, Frank, and Merrikat assemble their collections is nothing less than their recognition of the object as more than commodity. Leslie explicitly calls up the language of magic when she describes Benjamin’s collector, writing ‘the collector, caressing his objects … is like a sorcerer who squints though them into a distance, called history.’22

For the objects to be used sorcerously, however, they cannot be only subjective reservoirs of memory. These objects cannot be significant only to their possessors if they are to gesture outwards. That is, as in Heidegger’s theory of being-with or mitda-sein, its references and correspondences must exist independently of any singular mind. This is particularly true in the case of Plum Coyle’s collection. It is revealed late in the story that not one of these objects is originally Plum’s. The coin, yo-yo, badge, glass lamb, watch, and pendant which are joined over the course of the story with a charm bracelet have all been pilfered. The histories to which readers are treated are not histories in which Plum was an active participant. She has stolen each of these objects from her friends – the immaterial qualities, to her mind, being likewise transferable. When this theft is revealed on her fourteenth birthday her friends have a similarly

22 Leslie 119.
intuitive response to the object’s theft. Plum attempts to excuse her theft, saying “‘It’s just junk’” and “‘You didn’t need it,’” but the other girls are no less sensitive to the power of things saying “‘You stole a bit of each of us’” (B 149).

In each of these texts, the power of objects, if not objective, is at least intersubjective. If it were not, the characters curation would only be narcissistic. As it is, the objects yield their immaterial aspects to their possessors. It is useful to think here of Heidegger’s 1950 essay ‘The Origin of Work of Art’. Heidegger dwells on a pair of peasant’s shoes. These, he argues are: ‘pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menaces of death.’ In art, these immaterial qualities pervade the image of the object. Without ever experiencing the narratives which form the power of the peasant’s shoes, audiences are nevertheless susceptible to it. Benjamin similarly depicts the power of indexical relationships. Here, Benjamin writes of photography rather than art – the index of the image shored up by the literal impression of light:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully poised his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.

The long forgotten moment is what animates the occult economies of the three novels discussed here. The reality of objects and their histories outstrip their symbolic function. The objects are chosen not because of what they represent, but because of the correspondences and references they have picked up by existing within the world.

It would be a mistake to consider Benjamin and Heidegger primary and these novels as secondary. While both philosopher’s attempt to lay out categories in which to philosophise the value of material, ontological presence, arguably they do not capture the power of things, except when they recreate novelistic techniques. Neither Benjamin nor Heidegger fully acknowledge their role, or for that matter the role of the antiquarian, archiver, or ragpicker, in the creation of auralic objects. Leslie detects this in Benjamin in particular, arguing that:

The materials and images presented by Benjamin (the arcades, the interieur, the flâneur, the ragpicker, the collector, the gambler) remain opaque and impenetrable if they are not mediated, i.e. accompanied by a theory that would break the spell of their mere immediacy.

For Leslie, this mediation comes in the form of memoir. Within the three novels, the adolescent protagonists create what memoir captures. They produce in their occult assemblages a way of articulating and reading out those encoded histories. These fictional stories use their narrators to ‘break the spell’ and communicate the worth of objects in occult terms. While Heidegger can outline in general terms the kinds of relationships that underlie this thinking in order to

25 Leslie 187.
communicate anything specific, he relies on the same narrative structures and techniques as these novels as can be seen in his attempt to communicate the value of the peasant’s shoes. Though he constructs himself only as a stand-in for any audience, it is only in the specificity of his writing that the representation of the object (its description within his work) can partake in the qualities of the object itself. These communications then can only ever be fractious, multiple, and incomplete. Each ‘system’ modelled in these tales of adolescent occultism adds to and augments a body of literature that is intuitively philosophical – demonstrating, if perhaps in an extreme form, the continued relevance of materiality and ontology to contemporary thought and philosophy. While Heidegger has offered a rationale through which to read these connections – as extensions of reference and correspondence for example – their power is realised only in the idiosyncrasies of particular representations.

*Butterfly, We Have Always Lived in the Castle,* and *The Wasp Factory* are not unthoughtful endorsements of occultism. Rather, these texts model a particular mode of thought – keeping in mind the potential missteps and dangers of this kind of object focussed philosophy. Neither Merrikat nor Frank are role models, and Plum is ultimately betrayed by her collection – its discovery marking the destruction of her friendship group:

> Later she will be struck by how meagre the objects had looked, lying there in their beds of silk and cottonball. Such gewgaws could never have given her what she needs, she should have known they would leave her falling with nothing to break her fall (B 148-149).

Despite the death of her personal faith in objects and their power, this kind of material thinking lives on within memory and grief culture. Where these texts differ is in their uptake of the occult as the application of this philosophy, *Butterfly, We Have Always Lived in the Castle,* and *The Wasp Factory* feature not only a sensitivity to trace and immateriality but the deliberate use of those traces and immaterial qualities in service of the protagonists’ needs. While readers may doubt whether the totems, wards and gewgaws of the text actually work and see the texts as implicitly cautioning against this kind of extreme involvement, its adolescent protagonists and their occult systems draw awareness to the power of things within even conventional thought.

In this kind of narrative, the spell of immediacy is broken and the connections, correspondences, and references which render an object potent revealed to witnesses. Novels of the occult challenge readers by drawing on existing modes of thought in order to confront readers with a reality in which these connections and correspondences become potentially charged with supernatural effect becoming powerful influences, at the least, on the lives of the young men and women who curate and desire them.

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Performance and Philosophy Now

Tasoula Kallenou

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the potential of performance and philosophy as interconnected disciplines. Performance and philosophy can collaborate in effectively communicating the ideas and concepts used in philosophy to a wide range of audiences, with the aim of providing ethical training. This practice can be seen in both the Hellenistic and Roman schools of thought, including the Stoics, the Sceptics and the Epicureans.

Performance practices and philosophy can influence individuals in understanding the importance of practising philosophy. The dramatization of philosophical figures through performance could potentially bring to life and make relevant philosophical ideas in contemporary times, as well as initiate an awareness of the importance of living a good (moral) life. The theatre practitioner can deliver a performance with the intent of representing a specific type of a character, using both their physique and emotions. Similarly, a philosopher may also deliver a kind of performance. This can be seen if we consider the example of Socrates, who used dramatic storytelling in his search for truth.

There is a contemporary literary shift, which relates philosophy to performance practices and literary disciplines. Examples of such works include How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer by Sarah Bakewell,\(^1\) The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault by Alexander Nehamas,\(^2\) How Proust Can Change Your Life by Alain De Botton\(^3\) and Martin Puchner’s The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy.\(^4\) I shall examine both contemporary theories and performance practices in relation to philosophy. I will look at how this relationship is understood by contemporary philosophers and theatre practitioners such as Edward Spence, Freddie Rokem and Martin Puchner.

Plato uses an innovative dramatic formula in specific philosophical writings such as The Symposium,\(^5\) the Phaedo\(^6\) and the Apology.\(^7\) This formula can be seen as the precursor of the modern collaboration between performance and philosophy. Through the character of Socrates, Plato incorporates both characterisation and dramatisation in his writings; writings which were intended to communicate philosophical ideas about how to practise philosophy in everyday life. Socrates tactfully presents philosophy through dramatic storytelling, thereby implementing a creative and interactive process by making his audience think.

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\(^1\) Sarah Bakewell, How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer (UK: Random House, 2010).
\(^6\) Christopher J. Rowe, Plato: Phaedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
The dramatic concept developed by Plato in his writings is that of performing philosophy. Socrates, as a character in Plato’s writings, wandered the streets of Athens, provoking the people he met to question what they knew about love, morals, the arts and the importance of living in a good city. Plato introduces various abstract and philosophical ideas through the use of dramatic personas. Specific examples can be seen not only in his Symposium, where Diotima is the dramatic embodiment of divine love, but also in his Phaedo, where Socrates is the dramatic embodiment (again) of the immortal soul.

Plato can be seen as a philosophical dramatist who is experimenting with the idea of dramatising philosophy through characterisation. It can be argued that, in Plato’s writings, Socrates is giving a kind of philosophical performance with the aim of effectively communicating philosophical ideas to audiences. Plato’s writings are, in this sense, a pioneering attempt at dramatising philosophy through a philosophical character, triggering and challenging responses from secondary characters – i.e. supposed experts in the topic being examined. Furthermore, other dramatic devices, such as myths (Myth of Er) and allegories (Allegory of the Cave), are also employed in the Republic.

Socrates, as he appears in the Republic, Ion and the Phaedrus, targets the power of performance and its effect on the spectator. However, he considers Athenian theatre and performers as negative contributors to the ideal state, precisely because they use dramatic performance to manipulate and misrepresent moral ideals to the public.

The Greek word ‘thea’ (θέα) is the derivative for the word ‘theatre’, which is a place of seeing, and for the word ‘theory’ (θεωρία), which is the codification of an idea. Arguably, Socrates presents philosophy through philosophical contemplation and ‘seeing’, through theory and practice. Consequently, he communicates philosophy to his audience through dramatic storytelling and performance.

The Socratic performance can be seen as a device that dramatically examines various ideas through a plurality of characters in order to facilitate an understanding of moral actions and life. Plato embodies abstract philosophical ideas through a dramatic character, whereas classical Athenian theatre presents dramatic characters with philosophical overtones. The audience did not always understand this distinction, and this explains why Socrates was critical of the moral and philosophical teachings of Athenian theatre.

Plato’s philosophical intent is to enlighten people on how to live a moral life, an idea that is appropriated in classical Athenian theatre. Plato opposes the Attic dramatist’s ideas, where living a good life involves the praising of mythical gods and accepting fate. By contrast, Plato proposes a dramatic alternative that could assist in acquiring ethical understanding.

Plato acknowledges the effective and communicative power of theatre. In Ion, Plato evaluates the Homeric poetic tradition and the power that performance possesses, by differentiating true

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13 Puchner 6.
knowledge and wisdom from emotional persuasion. He finds the ethical and religious manifestations of Attic theatre problematic. Attic dramatists and performers had an immense influence on the public and more specifically on youth. Plato creates a philosophical dramatic structure, a hybrid of performance and philosophy, which comprises the following: the dramatic embodiment of Socrates, the testing of ideas and beliefs, and ethical awareness.

According to Carroll and Banes, philosophy assists in clarifying significant concepts that define all disciplines. Not only does philosophy clarify concepts, but it can also communicate abstract concepts through performance and characterisation, thus delivering an experience that is both logical and emotional. Plato’s influence can be seen in contemporary theatre which incorporates philosophy with performance.

The Target Margin Theatre in 2007 presented *The Dinner Party*, as an adaptation of Plato’s *Symposium*. It was directed by David Herskovits and featured an African American actress, Stephanie Weeks, as Socrates. The performance took place at The Kitchen, a performance venue in Chelsea, New York, which supports experimental art and theatre. The play’s dramaturge Kathleen Kennedy Tobin and director David Herskovits encouraged the actors to study several modern translations of the *Symposium* in order to have a clear understanding of the core ideas of love, beyond erotic human relationship.

Elaborating on Carroll, Banes and Puchner, I argue that Plato’s writings could be seen as influential works for performance theorists and practitioners. Plato was the first to record the importance of practising/performing and dramatising philosophy. Performance and philosophy could work together to effectively communicate philosophical ideas and to portray moral exemplars. This idea did not, however, survive in the intervening centuries.

Plato’s Socrates is an acknowledged influential figure for western philosophy. However, it is only recently that contemporary philosophers and theatre practitioners such as Spence, Blondell, Tarrant, Kaiser and Rokem have acknowledged him as a visionary, and perhaps, a silent pioneer who poses a conceptual challenge to the performing arts. I aim to show that Socrates was at the frontier of incorporating performance and philosophy. My research will highlight the importance of establishing a model relying on both performance and philosophy as a means to effectively communicate philosophical concepts.

2. How can we understand performance and philosophy now?

In this section, I will investigate the polarity of performance and philosophy. Both disciplines are on a quest to explore and present aspects of everyday life. It is popular appeal and truth in delivery, rather than truth in ideas, which bind performance, whereas Hellenistic and Roman philosophy is bound by the discovery of truth in living a good life. Conceived as ‘*biou techne*’, the art of living, philosophy was seen by the Greek and Roman philosophers as a way to live the

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14 Plato, *Ion*, section 533d.

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good life (in other words, a life worth living) and pursue its practical realisation for the attainment of ‘eudaimonia’, human flourishing. This was particularly the case for the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Sceptics.

Philosophy and theatre are often considered to be polar disciplines. Although both theatre and philosophy come in textual form, we normally associate theatre with performance. Why perform theatre when it can be read? We often perform theatre to portray life and characters with the purpose of connecting with, and impacting on, our audience. Correspondingly, why perform philosophy when it can be read? Philosophy is closer to its purpose when it is practised and performed as part of our daily routine. It can be transformative, as seen in the practices of the Hellenistic and Roman schools of thought, and in turn it can provide the foundations for actively pursuing a good life.

It could be argued that some elements of performance and philosophy emerged with the Hellenistic and Roman philosophers as well as with the Attic dramatists. Plato’s Socrates may have pioneered a form of performed philosophy to communicate philosophical ideas effectively and show what practicing philosophy amounts to. This later flourished in the Hellenistic and Roman philosophical schools. The emergence of performance and philosophy as two collaborative fields in the twenty-first century can be seen as a continuation of Socrates’s investigation of performance and philosophy. The following sections: ‘Philosophy in a theatrical performance’, ‘Philosophy as a dramatic Socratic performance’, and ‘Philosophy as a life performance’, will investigate the ways in which performance and philosophy have engaged thinkers and audiences in the past as well as in the present.

2.1 Philosophy in a theatrical performance

This section on philosophy in a theatrical performance will examine specifically theatrical performance that embeds philosophical themes on the stage. The focus will be on the Attic dramatists tackled by Socrates as to how they presented philosophical themes within the context of their tragedies. I will look at how dramatic characters were presented as wise in theatrical performances, with a particular reference to tragedy and how those characters differ from the wisdom as seen through Socrates and philosophy. In Oedipus the King, there is a particular reference to the mythical gods as wise because they understand human actions and Oedipus as a wise man able to solve the Sphinx’s riddle:

Apollo and Zeus are truly wise –
they understand what humans do.
But there is no sure way to ascertain
if human prophets grasp things any more
than I do, although in wisdom one man
may leave another far behind.
But until I see the words confirmed,
I will not approve of any man
who censures Oedipus, for it was clear
when that winged Sphinx went after him
he was a wise man then. (508-608)

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22 Sophocles, Oedipus the King, Vancouver Island University. 2010. 11 September 2015 <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/oedipustheking.htm>.
Further examination will be undertaken in order to address how philosophers as well as dramatists examined human behaviour, based on moral conflicts, individual choices and consequences of actions. Philosophers aimed to present character virtues, whereas Attic dramatists aimed to present character flaws and weaknesses.

2.1.1 Historical overview

Athenian theatrical performance began as a cultural activity that was associated with the worship of the god Dionysus. According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, theatre evolved through the human need to play, to explore, to imitate and to interpret life. Tragedy evolved from dithyrambic ritualistic presentations in Dionysian festivities and required the involvement of Athenian citizens to create performances. Lyrical, orchestral and spoken sections with mimetic attributes were incorporated into performances in order to reflect the dramatic events of life on stage.

This complex and refined form of performance developed from ritualistic celebrations to become representative of the artistic Athenian life. It was a sign of the creative reformation of Greek culture that it was able to simulate real-life drama as well as deliver this drama artistically through the medium of theatre, while incorporating the experimentation of an innate need to perform theatre with an innate need to explore philosophical ideas. The Greeks aimed to deliver the best possible theatre, which imitated the Athenian city and its citizens. Greek theatre explored themes related to the externally derived anxieties and moral dilemmas of some of the important figures of Athenian life. Tragedy was considered to be a powerful and impactful form of educating citizens. This is evidenced in Aristophanes’s *Frogs* in the dialogue between Aeschylus and Euripides:

*Aeschylus:* I am indignant at this encounter, and it gripes my guts, if I have to argue against this fellow – but so that he can’t say I was helpless, – Answer me, why should one admire a poet?  
*Euripides:* For cleverness, and giving good advice, since we improve the people in the cities. (1009-1014)

According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, tragedy is an imitative art form that requires action. Therefore the spectator could learn and understand human life through mimesis, as presented on stage.

And then there is the enjoyment people always get from representations. What happens in actual experience proves this, for we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, obscene beasts, for instance, and corpses. The reason is this: Learning things gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but also in the same way to all other men, though they share this pleasure only to a small degree. The reason why we enjoy seeing likenesses is that, as we look, we learn and infer what each is, for instance, ‘that is so and so.’ (1448b)

Plato, on the contrary, was concerned about the pedagogical aspect of tragedy as gods and characters were presented with ethical flaws and emotional weaknesses. Because of this, he does

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not consider the contribution of theatre to be beneficial for the city. An example can be seen in the *Republic*, Book X:

I think you know that the very best of us, when we hear Homer or some other of the makers of tragedy imitating one of the heroes who is in grief, and is delivering a long tirade in his lamentations or chanting and beating his breast, feel pleasure, and abandon ourselves and accompany the representation with sympathy and eagerness, and we praise as an excellent poet the one who most strongly affects us in this way. (605)

In the *Republic*, Book X, Plato states that this kind of poetry encourages ignorance and infects the spectator’s soul, evoking harmful emotions, and preventing pure reasoning. Scäfer, a German dramatist, argues these myths were developed in order to facilitate the understanding of the world through art. Scäfer raises the idea that both philosophers and thespians are embarked on a journey of understanding of and communicating with the world.27

Contemporary performance scholars such as Rokem28 and Allan29 also support the claim that reference to mythology was a storytelling mechanism employed by both Athenian dramatists and philosophers. The difference lies in the fact that the dramatists employed myths to portray complex characters, whereas philosophers employed myths to portray complex ideas.

In the following section, I will focus my attention on specific examples such as *Oedipus*,30 *Iphigenia*31 and *Antiopi*.32 The Attic dramatist’s understanding of philosophy in theatrical performance can be shown using examples from Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*. The mythical character is presented as having the qualities of moral goodness and philosophical insight, which are necessary to solve the Sphinx’s riddle. The answer to the riddle reflects the transformation of human life, the physicality of the body as a metaphor to communicate the individual’s universal identity and transformative nature. The riddle’s philosophical subtext is what structures the narrative of the tragedy, intensifying Oedipus’s inability to recognise his identity. The driving force of the tragedy is in the riddle that provokes the character to seek constant transformation.33

Sophocles’s *Oedipus* is the stereotypical ‘good’ character represented with philosophical aspirations by solving the riddle, but he does not have the necessary insight to do what is right; hence he kills his father and sleeps with his mother. In essence, he is driven by emotions instead of rationality. In other words, this is an example of the tragedian’s dramatisation of character weaknesses instead of character virtues. This is in contrast to Plato’s own philosophical dramatisation, where Socrates is incapable of such uncontrollable emotions and acts always as a moral exemplar.

Euripides’s *Iphigenia* represents the sacrifice of a young and pure soul for the sake of the state and its people. Iphigenia acquiesces to her death, because she accepts that it is the god’s wish. Plato’s *Apology* presents a different kind of willing sacrifice to that of Iphigenia. Socrates does not want to break the laws of the city, but also he does not accept the rationality of the

28 Rokem 52-3.
33 Rokem 52-3.

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The difference between the Attic character and the philosopher’s is that the first is based on irrational thought and the latter on rational thought. Moreover, the Attic dramatist portrays the irrational act, the sacrifice of a young girl, as a justified act because the sacrifice is needed for the good of the city and its people. The presentation of the moral act in Greek tragedy conflicts with the idea of the moral act as investigated in philosophy.

Euripides’s *Antiope* is the dramatist’s attempt to be considered both as a thespian and as a philosopher. *Antiope* represents an intellectual ‘agona’ (competition) between two brothers, Amphion and Zethus. The tragedy deals with their personal life choices, prior to their attempt to find their lost mother. Amphion supports the life of the contemplative artist and philosopher. However, it is through Amphion that Euripides combines creative practices and philosophy, and possibly gets to use theatre as a medium to communicate the collaborative importance of creative practices with philosophy for a prosperous life.

The thematic references of philosophy in the Attic tradition are pioneering attempts from dramatists to combine philosophy with theatrical performance. Nonetheless, I contend that the majority of Athenian tragedians understanding and dramatisation of wise character does not reflect wisdom as seen by philosophical characters such as Socrates. This led to the creation of a conceptual dichotomy between the two disciplines. Tragedies portray human weaknesses and errors in judgment, which are followed by godly punishment. Characters, who are presented with moral conflicts, act maliciously and uncontrollably. Hence Socrates’s critique of tragedians: ‘The tragic poets being wise men will forgive us … if we do not receive them into our State, because they are the eulogists of Tyranny’.

### 2.2 Philosophy as a dramatic Socratic performance

This section will present Socrates as the embodiment of performance philosophy. It is through the dramatic Socratic performance that Plato presents philosophy. Plato’s dramatic writings depict how ideas were communicated and tested by the philosophical character of Socrates and his interlocutors. Plato’s dramatic model is about investigating complex philosophical ideas. It presents philosophy as it was taught and practised by Socrates, and this way of teaching and practising philosophy later influenced and shaped both the Hellenistic and Roman schools of thought.

#### 2.2.1 Historical overview

Plato’s writings present philosophy through character and drama. Socrates as a character embodies the current ethical flaws of the Attic drama, but by using such drama, he also acknowledges its communicative power. The difference between Plato and the Athenian dramatists lay in how they presented life. In Attic drama, Athenian life was driven by godly forces and fate. This marked the character’s inability to deal with personal issues. In Plato’s writings, specifically in *Phaedo* and *Apology*, the philosopher is confronted with a moral conflict. The difference is that Socrates is able to maintain control of his emotions and desires and does what is best for him and for others, as well as for the city.

Could it then be argued that Plato attempted to enhance the Athenian theatre scene with his concept of dramatic writing? I will refer to this model as ‘Philosophy as a dramatic Socratic performance’. Plato’s dramatic interests are evidenced in the writings of Diogenes Laertius.

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34 Nightingale 126.
Plato wrote dithyrambs, poetry and tragedies. He was the first to introduce in Athens the mimes of the writer Sophron of Syracuse, which later evolved into the dramatic process of characterisation.  

Plato’s Attic theatre career was transformed and influenced by Socrates’s philosophical teachings. He dramatically expressed his new position towards theatre by burning his tragedy at the steps of the great Dionysian theatre in Athens. This action can be seen as Plato’s dramatic statement regarding classical theatre performance.

In Plato’s writings, philosophy is presented through public performances, and is predominantly driven by the philosophical character of Socrates and his dialectic method of investigating ideas. This encourages the practice of philosophy as a means of attaining knowledge. Socrates acknowledged tragedy’s rhetorical powers and was distressed by its didactic outcomes. These dramatic works evoked vengeful thoughts and actions, poisoning youth’s rationality and purpose. Athenian education relied predominantly on oral performances when presenting poetical, political and philosophical ideas. Greek myths, which incorporate historical references, were appropriated for theatre and they were also included in philosophical dialogues as a means to make ideas accessible and understandable.

The ‘polis’ (city) and the people are reflected through dramatic performance, both in philosophy and theatre. According to Meiers, ‘the city’s appropriation of universal Greek myth, through its home-grown literary vehicle, allowed its citizens to think through how to run their democracy and how to control their empire’. However, the way, in which the city was reflected in theatre was based on incorrect moral foundations, according to Socrates: he was quite vocal about social and political truths as they were presented through the medium of theatre.

In Phaedrus and Ion, we can find an investigation of the Athenian dramatists’ power relating to performance, interpretation and rhetoric persuasion. Socrates criticises the power of rhetoric in Phaedrus, stating that the truth in rhetoric can only be possible when dialectic devices are implemented. Similar ideas are also discussed in Ion, challenging specifically the actor’s performance, the dramatist’s intent and the audience’s interpretation of moral character.

There was intellectual competition among the Attic dramatists and the philosophers and this can be clearly seen in the Symposium. In the Symposium, Aristophanes’s and Agathon’s speeches are disregarded because it is claimed that their artistic voices are incapable of communicating knowledge.

Plato’s dramatic writings capture the Socratic process of thinking, which consists in interweaving knowledge and opinion. Socrates’s dialectic system requires conversational engagement, which provides different points of view on a single subject. Socrates uses a philosophical as well as a dramatic method to cross-examine the views of his interlocutors. Plato’s dialectic method is also part of his storytelling technique. His philosophical ideas are evoked through rational argumentation and are driven by Socrates’s search for truth. A given hypothesis is presented, discussions about it lead to a contradiction, while the characters

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36 Tarrant 82-89.  
37 Puchner 3.  
38 Kaufmann 6.  
40 Bakewell, Tragedy 258-67.  
41 Kaufmann 2-6.  
involved are forced to investigate and provide a synthesis of the various accounts, thereby gaining knowledge. Socrates’s dialectic method evokes a dramatic presentation of his ideas.

Socrates was targeting specific artistic and social groups in order to emphasise the level of ignorance in what they perceived as their area of expertise. He encouraged and provoked conversation to collect ideas, which thus came from public examination. Plato’s writings present Socrates, a dramatic character, who is able to tactfully challenge his interlocutors’ false beliefs.

The philosophical character of Socrates has an insignificant social status. He is described as an old, weathered individual, poorly dressed, barefooted, with an ugly physique, wandering the streets of Athens. This reflects the fact that he is detached from the bodily needs and social conventions of his time. Socrates is actually a razor-sharp critic who challenges the socio-political and religious beliefs of Athenian society.

2.3 Philosophy as a dramatic Socratic performance: Phaedo, Republic VII

In my opinion, Plato presents a new kind of dramatic performance that is based on philosophy and the philosophical biographical character. Blondell similarly defines Plato’s work as a hybridisation of philosophical content and poetry, aiming to investigate philosophical concerns through a moral character.

The *Phaedo* can be referred to as the perfect philosophical drama. In a philosophical context, the *Phaedo* presents the immortality of the soul, and, in a dramatic context, the death of the moral exemplar that is Socrates. In it, Plato depicts Socrates’s final hours after being sentenced to death. There is a deliberately slow pace in the scene, emphasising the detail of Socrates’s final thoughts. Socrates’s followers, Plato’s secondary characters, are trying to reason with his decision to terminate his life. Suspense culminates when Socrates insists that his death-sentence is also his personal liberation. There is a better life ready to be explored, detached from any material needs and physical pain. The guard representing the city is the antagonist delivering the lethal hemlock.

The suspense intensifies and Plato adds to this intensification by depicting Socrates drinking the poison earlier than the scheduled time, disregarding any objections from his visitors. The temporal pace of the piece is slow, addressing in detail the physical numbness of the body as it reacts to the poison and death itself. The tone is tragi-comic, as the secondary characters are portrayed as both upset and liberated, sad as well as happy, which is exactly the emotional response that Socrates had discussed.

Plato attempts to deliver philosophical drama by diminishing the value of physical suffering and by trying to convince the audience that death is just a natural process, which is not to be feared. In Socrates’s final moments, we can notice a theatrical reference to tragedy. Socrates is ‘being called’, as a tragedian would put it, by ‘fate’. However, the purpose of the dialogue is to instruct the audience that the events taking place are to the results of Socrates’s choices, and not of fate, as often seen in tragedies. This creates an anti-tragic response with regards to the immortality of the soul. Socrates embarks again on philosophical conversations, trying to

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44 Yamagata 111-29.
45 Puchner 3-15.
46 Blondell 3-11.
47 Puchner 11.
communicate the light that he sees to his followers, who unfortunately have a restricted vision and are unable to comprehend his world of Ideas/Forms.

According to Blondell, ‘Plato viewed his dialogues ... as a kind of literary cosmos held together by a variety of dramatic and thematic devices’.48 Plato’s philosophical creativity is also evident in other works such as the Republic VII.49 The parable of the cave is an allegory. It tends to be conceived as Plato’s attempt to communicate that life is nothing more than an elaborate spectacle of a false world.50 The parable of the cave can be seen as presenting a world of illusions, similar to that of theatre, where theatrical devices are employed to deliver dramatic visuals, guiding the audience’s perceptions. Here, the prisoners are the spectators, secluded in the cave. They have no understanding of the dramatist’s power of influencing their judgment. The audience’s reality is based on shadows: a spectacle created through fire and light. The low ceilings in the cave assist in concealing the assistants, which in the theatre world are plausibly the actors. In this case, the actors are the ones creating the shadows by holding different objects. The prisoner’s head is restricted as well as his vision. The prisoners can be thought of as the theatre spectators, who lack knowledge and are incapable of identifying the truth when it is presented.

The dramatic climax commences when the prisoner escapes and realises that he was part of a perceptual experiment controlled by a creative individual or dramatist and his assistants and actors. While bound, he is unable to distinguish the world of illusion from reality. His exit from the cave is transformational. He experiences the sun, for example, as a much stronger source of heat and vibrancy than the perception of the average human. When returning to the cave, he is confronted with the challenge to communicate his new perspective to his fellow inmates. He no longer shares the same views as the inmates who have never left the cave, as he has experienced a different world, which the inmates are unable to comprehend. Finally, Plato’s parable of the cave could be seen as an example of his philosophical creativity: he is trying to explain his world of Forms by creating a theatrical setting and dramatic storytelling.

It may not be inappropriate to call Plato a ‘philosophical dramatist’. The embodiment and investigation of complex ideas through philosophy and dramatic storytelling signifies the importance of practising philosophy in living a good life. Plato’s philosophical and biographical dramatisation of Socrates is very helpful when presenting philosophy as a practice. Plato was able to present Socrates as a dramatic moral exemplar, who later shaped Hellenistic and Roman thought. He saw philosophy as the Socratic life and used dramatisation as a vehicle to communicate philosophy to his audience.

2.4 Philosophy as a life performance

This section examines how philosophers have investigated Plato’s recollections of Socratic thought and how these philosophers were then motivated to practise philosophy as a way of living. The thread begins with the Attic dramatists’ understanding of the moral exemplar and it continues through to Plato’s Socrates, also manifesting itself in the Hellenistic and Roman schools of thought.

48 Blondell 6.
49 Plato, Republic, Book 7, section 514a. 2009, 2 September 2015
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D7%3Asection%3 D514a>
50 Puchner 49.
Philosophy as a life performance could be the primary example of performing philosophy as manifested in the Hellenistic and Roman schools of thought. Socrates understood the performance of philosophy as investigating ideas, seeking knowledge and understanding the concept of a virtuous life.

Plato’s dramatic work was seminal to the Hellenistic and Roman schools of thought. The Socratic life is the philosophical prototype for practising and performing philosophy in everyday life for the attainment of ‘eudaimonia’. The philosophical and biographical dramatisation of Socrates by Plato, however, marked a turning point in seeing philosophy as a way of thinking (contemplative) as well as a way of living (practical). I refer to this as ‘philosophy as a life performance’.

People show an interest in philosophy partly because they value what it offers (i.e. a guide to living well, a guide to reaching full human potential and to finding truthful answers). The Stoics, the Epicureans and the Sceptics elaborated on these principles. They refer to philosophy as an act of living (i.e. practising philosophy in real life settings through intellectual, emotional and physical exercises in order to live a good life). The philosophical way of life as seen by these philosophers is not a theoretical, but a practical endeavour, which involves practising logic (thinking and speaking well), physics (contemplating the cosmos) and ethics (acting correctly and justly).

Hellenistic philosophers recommended certain practical exercises for overcoming character weakness, for controlling harmful emotions, and for promoting self-esteem through critical thinking and correct judgment. According to Epicurus, you can be happy when:

- You have love and respect from your friends;
- you are economically self-sufficient and non-reliant on the commercial world;
- you are uninterested in economic and political life;
- you are able to analyse personal anxieties such as death, money, illness and the supernatural;
- you are able to identify the natural necessary, natural unnecessary and the unnatural unnecessary desires in order to be happy.

The Stoics, as seen in Epictetus’s Discourses, represent a fusion of philosophy and pedagogy. This is achieved through satire, exhortation and dialogue. According to Epictetus, what exists can ‘act’ or ‘be acted upon’. He believes that the individual is born with all the capacities necessary to understand the world. In order to live a good life, one has to be self-disciplined and continuously apply the Stoic principles in everyday living.

The Stoics developed thought-experiments, which transposed real life dilemmas and arguments into dramatic scenes acted out with props and characters in real settings. This sort of activity helps to develop emotional perseverance in order to overcome mild and extreme situations. For instance, Seneca wrote about a wealthy individual named Pacuvius, who, in order

51 Nehamas 1-4.
52 Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault (Malden: Blackwell, 1995) 266.
53 Nehamas 1.
to come to terms with his death, rehearsed, directed and performed his funeral. Pacuvius wanted to be remembered celebrating life, so, at his funeral, in the final scene, he decides to have a feast with servants and guests chanting, ‘he has lived his life’.\(^{57}\)

Ancient Scepticism was concerned with correct judgment, focusing on the problem that the nature of things cannot be known. Pyrrho and the philosophical Sceptics argued that nothing can be known.\(^{58}\) The Sceptics encouraged suspension of belief when doubt was in place, which made the idea of a happy life possible.\(^{59}\) Scepticism equipped the individual with intellectual caution. It can be said that the purpose of philosophy for Hellenistic philosophers was to overcome personal anxieties through the attainment of ‘ataraxia’ (peace of mind), ‘autarkeia’ (contentment) and cosmic consciousness.\(^{60}\)

3. Conclusion

Both Hellenistic and Roman schools of thought succeeded where dramatists failed in addressing the pursuit of truth and the importance of living a good life. Plato accused the dramatists of developing characters who were affected by external influences such as irrational forces (gods), or chance, as well as internal influences such as character weaknesses and emotions. Plato then introduced the philosophical drama, which can be helpful when informing the individual of how to live a good life (based on Socrates’s philosophical model of rational thought and the pursuit of truth).

Plato makes use of the philosophical character, a moral exemplar, which is recognised as such by his practice of philosophy. It was Plato’s dramatic writings that supported the flourishing of the Hellenistic and Roman schools of thought. These schools of thought were the prototypical examples of ‘Philosophy as life performance’ (as defined in section 2.4), where philosophy becomes an integral part of the nature of day-to-day life.

Philosophy is gradually becoming a theoretical discipline in the twenty-first century. What is the power of philosophy when it is not practised? Why perform philosophy? It is the creative collaboration of performance practitioners with those philosophers who attempt to bring philosophy back to its practical mode. I believe there is a need for performing philosophy. Its purpose is to transform philosophy from a theoretical discipline to a practical one, and performance from a creative discipline to a therapeutic one. Contemporary performance and philosophy hybrids are emerging in various ways. These include: ‘Socrates Cafés’, which encourage philosophical conversations, Spence’s ‘Philosophy Plays’, which experiment with philosophical dramatic texts,\(^{61}\) and ‘Performance Philosophy’ conferences, which incorporate a philosophical analysis of performance pieces.

These hybrids are implemented to encourage collaborative and creative responses with regards to philosophical ideas, by moving away from the literary form of philosophy to a publicly performed philosophy. Undoubtedly, we have a long way to go before we achieve the level of performance philosophy as practised by the Hellenistic and Roman schools. This is the focal point of my research. It aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses in Performance Philosophy applications and to contemplate a new model, namely Philosophy as Performance, which encompasses both the dynamics of performance and philosophy as practised by Socrates.

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\(^{57}\) Bakewell 110-11.

\(^{58}\) Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy (Psychology Press, 1946) 232-3.

\(^{59}\) Bakewell 125-7.

\(^{60}\) Hadot 265.

and the Hellenistic and Roman schools. This model will effectively communicate the practical aspects of philosophy through the use of moral exemplars, and encourage individuals to seek personal transformation through incorporating philosophy into their daily life.

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The Secret of the World Remains Hidden: Roberto Bolaño as an Antiliterary Author

Mark Piccini

The celebrated image of the Chilean author Roberto Bolaño is that of an ‘urgent’ writer. The prose fiction for which Bolaño is best known was written and released at an astounding rate in the decade before the author’s death in 2003. Because English translations continue to emerge with rapid-fire consistency, Bolaño seems to have an uncanny excess of life. His prolificacy, and the often frenetic pace of his novels, suggests that there is a truth for which Bolaño sought expression, which remains hidden because his ambitious literary project was interrupted – Bolaño’s magnum opus, 2666 (2004), was unfinished at the time of his death. Alternatively, Bolaño’s novels can be considered postmodern explorations of multiplicity that disengage from the quest for truth in favour of somewhat cynical literary experimentation. This article explores how certain truths do find successful expression in Bolaño’s literary form, and how these are missed when his oeuvre is considered either an unfinished quest for philosophical truth, or a postmodern critique of the concept of truth. It will address how truth is the cause, not the product, of Bolaño’s writing by discussing what I will call his ‘antiliterature’. Bolaño’s writing sheds light on existence while reflecting a suspicion that literature and philosophy conceal the contingent truths that coordinate their meaningfulness.

The Bolaño who was marketed to Western audiences with the release of Natasha Wimmer’s translation of The Savage Detectives in 2007 was the Bolaño who lived fast and died young. The slew of favourable reviews of the novel stressed its autobiographical nature. A blurb for The Savage Detectives in the New York Times describes ‘a craftily autobiographical novel about a band of literary guerrillas’.¹ In the New Yorker, Daniel Zalewski says Bolaño’s fiction is largely ‘an ironic mythologization of his personal history, and The Savage Detectives hews closest to what Latin-American writers call the Bolaño legend’.² In no uncertain terms, Zalewski pinpoints Bolaño’s alter ego in The Savage Detectives, suggesting the author ‘could have titled [his] novel “Self-Portrait in Fifty-three Convex Mirrors”’.³ Benjamin Kunkel, writing for the London Review of Books, also identifies Bolaño’s alter ego, and suggests ‘Bolaño’s desperado image is a large part of his appeal’.⁴ In her article ‘Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño’s The Savage Detectives in the United States’, Sarah Pollack describes how an exotic reading of Latin America, buoyed by the figure of Bolaño as a drug-taking bohemian-cum-literary Che Guevara, emerged to replace the equally reductive translation of Latin America as the ontologically wonderful setting of magical realist novels like Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude (1970). Pollack writes:

Never mind that The Savage Detectives and all his major prose works were written when Bolaño was a sober family man, during the intensive seven-year comedown to his

³ Zalewski.

impending death. In effect, Bolaño becomes ... a cross between the beats and Arthur Rimbaud ... , his life already the stuff of legend.5

Indeed, the sobriety of Bolaño’s writing is sacrificed when the one confuses Bolaño the author with his characters, especially the hopelessly romantic experimental poets and avant-gardists.

If one reads The Savage Detectives as autobiographical, the implication is that Bolaño’s prose is a response to the youthful exuberance and ultimate failure of his poetry to express his philosophy. Reviews of the book inevitably connect Bolaño’s narration of the destruction of ‘visceral realism’ with ‘[Bolaño’s] formation in Mexico City of the infrarealist poetry “movement”’.6 In The Savage Detectives, there are no examples of visceral realist poetry, just as in 2666 there are no examples of the work of Benno von Archimboldi, the German writer who fascinates the young literary critics whose story the first part of the novel narrates. Hermann Herlinghaus writes that these omissions ‘[are] not a kind of creative “mistreatment” of artistic matter by a self-conscious writer (which is fairly common in modern and postmodern prose)’; rather, ‘Bolaño is skeptical about a presumed transcendence of literary representation.’7 Herlinghaus’s Narcoepics (2013) and Peter Boxall’s Twenty-First-Century Fiction (2013) argue against reading Bolaño as a postmodern writer. Boxall writes that ‘with the new century, we have seen a large scale waning of the explanatory power of postmodern critical languages, a thoroughly dismantling of the postmodern architecture.’8 Emerging instead are ‘new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world.’9 Boxall includes Bolaño in the ranks of those with a decidedly un-postmodern ‘commitment to the materiality of history, a fresh awareness of the reality of the past, and of our ethical obligation to bear witness to it’.10 Bolaño’s aim, however, is not to return to an all-encompassing philosophy or literary form, but to acknowledge the inaccessible truth that assures the failure of philosophy and literature through the formal mechanism of antiliterature.

Works by Bolaño and other contemporary writers of world fictions ‘exhibit at once a tendency towards complete seeing, towards an expanded form in which we might see the world whole, and an opposite tendency towards fragmentation, towards a kind of broken failure of collective sight.’11 Bolaño errs on the side of the latter tendency; Boxall’s utopian assertion that the fragmentation reflects our inability ‘to imagine democratic freedom under contemporary conditions’ is valuable, although I am inclined to see it, in Bolaño’s case, as an unwillingness to offer a worldview.12 Bolaño’s elliptical narratives reflect an immediate concern: ‘Any literary universe with the powers to satisfy an inherent craving, or even hunger for gratification in the reader and, in the given case, the scholar, can turn, under circumstances, into a “placebo text,” working as a drug.’13 This fear of a placebo text, inherent in Bolaño’s antiliterature, can be seen

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6 Pollack 357-8.
9 Boxall 10.
10 Boxall 12.
11 Boxall 191.
12 Boxall 191.
13 Herlinghaus 183.
in the same light as Jacques Lacan’s term ‘antiphilosophy,’ describing the French psychoanalyst’s position against his twentieth-century understanding of philosophy.

Lacan’s antiphilosophy is a notoriously ambiguous concept and Lacan has come to be ‘thought of as a kind of “slant” philosopher developing a paraphilosophy’ by Adrian Johnston, who has written about the ways antiphilosophy has been used by more recent theorists influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan’s antiphilosophy and philosophy is not that there is no truth, which would suggest listening to or reading his esoteric seminars as an exorbitant, postmodern deferral of meaning in the same way that Bolaño’s novels have been read. Slavoj Žižek describes the postmodern “anti-essentialist” refusal of universal Foundation, the dissolving of “Truth” into an effect of plural language-games’ and argues that ‘Lacan accepts the “deconstructionist” motif of radical contingency, but turns this motif against itself, using it to assert his commitment to Truth as contingent.’

Johnston paraphrases Alain Badiou to contrast psychoanalytic and philosophical truth, writing that ‘the analytic concept of truth-as-cause [is] situated as the originary catalyst of the subject’s trajectory in analysis, [while] the philosophical idea of truth-as-end [is] situated as the ultimate telos of the inquirer’s quest.’ The Real is the foundation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, though the practice does not deal directly with it; instead, analysis incorporates the truths that refer contingently to the register of the Real, which inaugurates subjectivity and the field of intersubjective relations – the Imaginary and Symbolic orders – while guaranteeing their (traumatic) inconsistency. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens write about the procedure of the Lacanian clinic, ‘It is in … distortions and exaggerations, in the contingencies and inadequacies of expression, that the truth is to be found and relayed. In a sense these distortions are the truth.’

Analysis deals with the effects of the Real; neither literature nor philosophy can capture and represent the Real, save perhaps as a void or a space awaiting fulfilment.

Johnston writes that ‘philosophy errs in that it seeks to stabilize this groundless ground of contingency by slipping under it the imagined depth of a supposedly solid bedrock of final, irreducible meaning/sense.’ Any such ‘imagined depth’ is indicative of a placebo text, which Žižek describes in The Metastases of Enjoyment (1994):

Suffice it to recall the rhetorical figures that abound in theoretical texts: ‘The constraints of the present book do not allow for a more detailed account …’; ‘Here, we can only delineate the contours of what must be fully substantiated in a more thorough conceptual development …’; and so on – in all such cases one can rest assured that this reference to external, empirical limitations is an excuse concealing the inherent impossibility: the ‘more detailed account’ is a priori impossible.

Bolaño and Lacan make no excuses for their abstention from the search for some final meaning. Far from receiving a placebo, the subject of psychoanalysis shares in the knowledge, or at least

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15 Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 4, quoted in Johnston 155; italics in original.
16 Johnston 148; italics in original.
18 Johnston 147.
the recognition, of truth-as-cause, ostensibly relieved of waiting for the more detailed account, or
the metaphysical truth, to emerge. Žižek writes that ‘the subject has … to recognize success in
what appears to be his failure.’20 The same aversion to excusing the failure of epistemology is
evident in the new realism that has emerged, into which category Boxall and Herlinghaus have
placed Bolaño’s writing. This aversion, however, is manifested in more than postmodern
language-games. A commitment to the Lacanian real, to which I would argue Boxall is referring
when he describes ‘the material substrate of our being in the world’,21 saves new realism from
the abyss of cynicism. The rest of this paper will discuss how Bolaño’s antiliterature developed
with the publication of Between Parentheses (2012) – a collection of his articles, various
prefaces, and the transcripts of talks or speeches he gave – and how 2666 subverts literary
genres, chiefly crime fiction, to critique what often amounts to literary placebo texts.

A clearer image of Bolaño the author emerged when, in Between Parentheses, he cultivated a
contentious (and contradictory) anti-literary approach, believing that literature conceals the fear
and self-interest that coordinates its meaningfulness. Bolaño writes, ‘Prizes, seats (in the
Academy), tables, beds, even golden chamber pots belong, of course, to those who are
successful or to those who play the part of loyal and obedient clerks’ (BP 112)22. This statement
has to be read not only as an attack on a handful of Bolaño’s literary adversaries (which it is as
well) but as an allusion to Bolaño’s antiliterature. The above quote is an attack on the cultural
establishment and its literati, but even writers who might more appropriately be described as
countercultural can be accused of literary obedience. For the latter writers, the dream of
literature is ‘a nightmare that’s often honest, loyal, brave, a nightmare that operates without a
safety net, but a nightmare in the end’ (BP 21). However, Bolaño goes on to write that ‘with the
passage of years it’s fair to ask whether the nightmare, or the skin of the nightmare, is really as
dramatic as its proponents exclaimed’ (BP 21). Bolaño responds cynically to the belief that the
discourse of either literature or philosophy is truly revolutionary and not a regressive attempt to
return to, or reimpose, some form of mastery.

Bolaño raised concerns about how radical contemporary Argentine literature (the
contemporary Argentine literary nightmare) really was, just as Lacan questioned whether the
May 1968 uprising in Paris was really as radical as its proponents exclaimed. Although Lacan
was generally left-leaning, anti-capitalist or at least anti-authoritarian, he criticised the students
protesting in Paris for being ‘structured’; that is, bound to cycle through the same four discourses
that he introduced in Seminar XVIII, presented 1969-70. Lacan’s four discourses are the
discourse of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst. It is beyond the scope of this
article to develop each in great detail, suffice it to say that ‘they are a way of understanding
major social and political phenomena: educating in the case of the university; governing in the
case of the master; protesting in the case of the hysteric; and revolutionizing in the case of the
analyst.’23 Saul Newman undertakes the difficult task of attributing a certain revolutionary
potential to Lacan in spite of what appears to be the interminable cynicism of antiphilosophy that
focuses on the contingent resonances of an a priori impossibility – the non-ontological but
nonetheless ‘essential’ Real. Before collapsing psychoanalysis and the political, Newman
describes analysis:

20 Žižek, Metastases of Enjoyment 167.
21 Boxall 10.
112.
Briefly, the role of analysis is to allow the subject to own his or her alienation and desire, by confronting him with his own unconscious fantasy – producing a gap between the subject and the ego ideal – and to accept that the other, which supports this fantasy structure, is itself deficient, lacking and ungrounded.24

There is evidence of Bolaño producing the same gap in his novels: a gap between mimetic realism and surrealism or magical realism, sustained by the fact that Bolaño cannot be said to commit to the latter two fantasy structures.

Traditional realism fits the mould of philosophical enquiry described above: truth is its end; its progress is conditional on there being a ground from which to represent the way things really are. There is a euphoria associated with approaching, even claiming to occupy, this ground that matches the Lacanian suspicion that ‘philosophy … remains completely wedded to its archaic roots in a pre-modern ethos concerned with the enrichment of the soul … through the acquisition of meaningful wisdom.’25 Avoiding the starchiness of traditional realism is a fixture of the postmodern landscape. ‘When introductory textbooks on postmodernism do allude specifically to realism they tend to impugn the concept for both its ingenuousness and for its disingenuousness.’26 The realist author is both ‘simple-minded’, attempting to render reality truthfully, and ‘duplicitous’ for even suggesting the possibility of such total representation.27 Instead, the assertion that there is no truth is implied by the proliferation of postmodern language-games. Short-circuiting this representational deadlock is the antiphilosophical assertion that the non-ontological Real cannot be represented, though its contingent effects should be addressed as truths. Žižek, apropos of this short-circuit, describes the form new realism should take with an assertion that cannot but corroborate the commitment Boxall has found in the work of Bolaño and others. Žižek writes, ‘The horror of the Holocaust cannot be represented; but this excess of represented content over its aesthetic representation has to infect the aesthetic form itself. What cannot be described should be inscribed into the artistic form as its uncanny distortion.’28 The newer genocide at the heart of 2666 is an unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt and the mutilated bodies of its victims are exposed fragments of the Real. Scholars have sought to explain this genocide, but Bolaño never describes it.

2666 is a nonlinear, discontinuous narrative divided into parts. The bulk of it takes place during the mid to late nineties, in and around the U.S.-Mexico border city Santa Teresa, Bolaño’s fictionalised stand-in for Ciudad Juárez, the largest city in the State of Chihuahua. Europe lies at either end of the Mexican odyssey, and the fifth and final part of the novel occurs during the Second World War, across much of the Eastern Front. The fourth part of Bolaño’s novel is ‘The Part about the Crimes’. The eponymous crimes are the killings of women in Santa Teresa, Bolaño’s unambiguous reference to an actual phenomenon now called ‘femicide’: the 494 women and girls killed in Ciudad Juárez between 1993 and 2007. In 2666, the femicide is catalogued in sections that hew closely to the police procedural subgenre of detective fiction. Readers follow the Santa Teresa police as they discover the bodies of women and girls, registering particulars like the condition of the victim’s clothing, the presence of ligature marks.

24 Newman 307.
25 Johnston 143.
27 Beaumont 4.
and/or various signs of torture, and details from autopsy reports. The visceral quality of the text is striking; its effect is described by Tram Nguyen:

> The scope and range of these femicides are mind-numbing. They pummel the reader. They suck all the air out of her. Told in the cold, detached tone of a forensics report, these reports commit a form of violence that is slow and accretive. They steadily gain power and horror with accumulation and repeating, reminding us of the pervasiveness and ubiquity of violence against the female sex.  

The reader is willing to be pummelled because they expect the pieces to fit together and the noose to tighten around a neck or necks. However, with all that is collected, the truth of 2666 recedes against what seemed like the promise of certitude.

This promise is all but made by the protagonist of the third part of 2666, who remembers discussing the killings in Santa Teresa and hearing that ‘the secret of the world is hidden in them’ – a cause for anticipation located only one page away from the beginning of ‘The Part about the Crimes’ (2666 348). Moreover, it is a promise implicit in the form of the detective story. In Marx and Freud in Latin America, Bruno Bosteels describes two ‘principles that underpin the structural possibility of the detective story’. The first principal is that the detective story ‘recall[s] the alleged origins of the social contract’. Bosteels writes, ‘The detective’s genre obeys a properly metaphysical … principle according to which, even before the creation of the world itself, there exists an insurmountable share of criminal evil.’ This a priori evil is evident in 2666: the femicide in Santa Teresa is followed by the liquidation of a trainload of Greek Jews during the Second World War in the last part of the novel. In the first part of 2666, two literary critics beat a Pakistani taxi driver so badly that they check the next day’s newspaper for the report of a homicide. Immediately after the act, however, the critics both feel as though they had reached climax in a ménage à trois. There is no connection between these and other violent acts in the novel save for that violence which is the mainspring of the social contract.

Bosteels writes, ‘At the origins of society, a crime has always already happened. Violence is the repressed but originary truth of every social bond.’ Keeping this in mind, Bosteels writes that each detective story is principled on ‘pointing to its hoped-for ends’. With this gesture, the detective story reveals its philosophical bent. Indeed, Bosteels writes that ‘the detective genre has often come to rival the high discourse of philosophy.’ Bosteels suggests, in ways Bolaño seems to have been aware of, that even in radical iterations of the genre – those books in which the society depicted is barely able to contain the nightmare of ubiquitous violence, and where protagonists can and should debase themselves and partake in the atavistic rituals of crime – some semblance of order must prevail. For this to occur, the first principle must be contradicted: the writer has to stabilise the groundless ground of the social contract by imagining that a crime is solved, suggesting the possibility of resolving the a priori antagonistic contradiction, and

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32 Bosteels 263.
33 Bosteels 263.
34 Bosteels 263-264.
35 Bosteels 263.
36 Bosteels 263.
engendering ‘the enrichment of the soul … through the acquisition of meaningful wisdom.’

The details of each woman’s or girl’s body discovered in and around Santa Teresa point to the Real in its capacity as the domain beyond (beneath) the social bond, but the hoped-for end never eventuates.

The structure of the detective story is short-circuited by acknowledging the first principle – the way that contingent social contracts conceal their berth in antagonism and, as such, await transgression – but rejecting the second, cathartic principle. Such a gesture is accomplished, Bosteels argues, by ‘turn[ing] this originary violence into the abyssal foundation of a whole new cosmology, of which the best-known variant can be found in one of the great antiphilosophers of our time, Slavoj Žižek’.

A variant of this violent cosmology can also be found in Bolaño’s antiliterature. 2666 collects information and relays it in ways that range from artless testimony to sequences that flow through dreamlike, psychosomatic states. An extraordinarily descriptive sequence from the second section of 2666, ‘The Part about Amalfitano’, conjures a violent, atavistic perspective that seems to bring forth the image of a victim only to obfuscate the crime, to relegate it to another dimension. The character Oscar Amalfitano, losing his mind, is addressed by the voice of an ancestor, which recedes with this warning about Santa Teresa:

The voice said: be careful, but it said it as if it were very far away, at the bottom of a ravine revealing glimpses of volcanic rock, rhyolites, andesites, streaks of silver and gold, petrified puddles covered with tiny little eggs, white red-tailed hawks soared above in the sky, which was purple like the skin of an Indian woman beaten to death. (2666 210)

This passage suggests the abyssal foundation of violence. The Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez femicide – otherwise contextualised as genocide ‘that is in the making (in Central America)’, an unfolding ‘neoliberal holocaust’ – is interleaved with the abyssal image of primordial Earth: lava flows and the obscene evolutionary struggle of the planet’s earliest arthropods.

Bolaño’s concern that the nightmare proposed by certain radical literary figures is in fact the skin of a nightmare – one that has been eviscerated at some point during its translation, which is perhaps inevitable – matches Bosteels’s concern for the authenticity of the detective story. Again, Bosteels writes, ‘The first organizing principle behind the philosophy of the detective story consists in recovering this impossible point of the real.’ Reacting to this contradiction – the recovery of the Real, in its Lacanian sense, is impossible – the detective story, even the modern noir version Bosteels suggests revised the classic form of the detective story, is not willing to accept what appears to be failure. Instead, detective stories slip under what is initially recognised as the originary truth of violence an artificial supplement that appears to ground society:

A semblance of justice is what allows society, otherwise on the brink of cynicism, to hide what needs to be hidden, and to show only what it wants to show. After seemingly

37 Johnston 143.
38 Bosteels 263.
41 Bosteels 264.
embracing the passion of the real as a violent antagonistic origin, the *noir* detective genre thus proposes the power of semblance as its tentative utopian end.\(^{42}\)

I have argued that a certain commitment to the truth-as-cause keeps Bolaño from the abyss of cynicism; although it is neither a philosophical nor a literary commitment, it is, in a precise sense, ethical.

Žižek writes that ‘the only true ethical stance is to assume fully the impossible task of symbolizing the Real, inclusive of its necessary failure.’\(^{43}\) In agreement with this antiphilosophical ethos, Bolaño describes ‘top-notch writing’ as ‘the ability to peer into the darkness, to leap into the void, to know that literature is basically a dangerous undertaking’ (*BP* 34). In *2666*, the semblance of justice is absent, the secret of the world remains hidden, but the bodies of women and girls continue to multiply. As they do, details about the bodies that were once shocking become somniferous, as inconsequential to us as they are to the Santa Teresa police. This is arguably the worst form of violence that Bolaño commits against his readers, although the presence of corpses and the absence of a competent detective play a particular role in Bolaño’s antiliterary aversion to placebo texts. Indirectly implying the danger that one must be willing to face when reading a novel like *2666*, Žižek writes regarding detective stories:

> What is of crucial importance here is the *intersubjective* dimension of the murder, more properly, of the *corpse*. The corpse as object works to bind a group of individuals together: the corpse constitutes them as a group (a group of suspects), it brings and keeps them together through their shared feelings of guilt – any one of them could have been the murderer, each had motive and opportunity. The role of the detective is, again, precisely to dissolve the impasse of this universalized, free floating guilt by localizing it in a single subject and thus exculpating all others.\(^{44}\)

A localised counter-narrative emerges during ‘The Part about the Crimes,’ organised by hapless agents of law enforcement, apathetic journalists, and the very suspects designed to exculpate us; it fails to dissolve the impasse of universalised, free floating guilt, which, I would argue, is Bolaño’s intention.

The insoluble femicide (the groundless ground of contingency) points to the absent centre of *2666* (truth-as-cause; Real originary violence) not to the process of forensic investigation, which is a markedly philosophical one inasmuch as it represents the quest for truth-as-end. During ‘The Part about the Crimes’ a journalist from *La Razón*, a Mexico City newspaper, finds himself at the house of Florita Almada, a television psychic who claims that the killings of women are all she can see in her visions, and that she can see the killers’ faces: ‘They’re ordinary faces’ (*2666* 571). Florita discusses her visions with the journalist, Sergio González:

> Well, when these figments of mine speak among themselves, even though I don’t understand their words, I can tell for a fact that their joys and sorrows are big, said Florita. How big? asked Sergio. Florita fixed him with her gaze. She opened the door. He could feel the Sonora night brushing his back like a ghost. *Huge*, said Florita. As if they know they’re beyond the law? No, no, no, said Florita, it has nothing to do with the law. (*2666* 572; italics in original)

\(^{42}\) Bosteels 264-265; italics in original.

\(^{43}\) Žižek, Metastases of Enjoyment 200.

Although Florita is powerless to affect change, one gets the sense that she is a medium between the Real story, the secret of the world, and the story being compiled by the law. The former is grounded in the libidinal economy – the otherwise ordinary faces of killers are betrayed by excessive joy and sorrow – whereas ‘the detective’s act consists in annihilating the libidinal possibility, the “inner” truth that each one in the group might have been the murderer’.\(^{45}\) The way that the detective, as opposed specifically to the psychoanalyst, reacts to the libidinal economy justifies Bolaño’s antiliterary scrutiny of placebo texts.

In the literary universe of the detective story, the detective is empowered ‘to satisfy an inherent craving … in the reader’, able to construct an elaborate but particular truth to cover up the infinitely larger one.\(^{46}\) His or her solution brings about ‘immense pleasure’, turning the story into a placebo text. Alternatively, Žižek writes that ‘psychoanalysis confronts us precisely with the price we have to pay for the access to our desire, with an irredeemable loss (the “symbolic castration”).’\(^{47}\) Referring to the femicide, Grant Farred writes that ‘the place of discovery is not the place … of death’; therefore, ‘The unknowable place is the place of violence, the place that may be near or far away, the place that is everywhere, that makes every place the no place of violence.’\(^{48}\) In 2666, the character Albert Kessler appears to be about to assume the role of the detective, to establish a crime scene and, in doing so, fix the place of violence, freeze the free-floating guilt, and free us from complicity. In other words, Kessler’s official story will be one ‘where the culprit singled out is the murderer and thus the guarantee of our innocence’.\(^{49}\) Kessler is Bolaño’s none-too-subtle stand in for the real-life former FBI agent Robert K. Ressler, who found fame working certain notorious cases of serial murder with the FBI, and as a private practice consultant. Ressler travelled to Juárez at the behest of the Mexican authorities in 1998 to investigate the femicide and the event is mirrored by Kessler in 2666.

The final mention of Kessler in 2666 regards a lecture he gave at the University of Santa Teresa: apparently ‘a popular success like few in memory’, during which an audience of ‘anybody who was anybody in Santa Teresa’ filled the fifteen-hundred-seat university hall (for the first time) ‘to wait for the scientific miracle, the miracle of the human mind set in motion by that modern-day Sherlock Holmes’ (2666 610). It is worth recalling here Lacan’s discourse of the university: ‘Lacan tends to closely associate philosophy with university discourse’; the latter discourse ‘is proximate to that of the master’ inasmuch as ‘the knowledge of university discourse ultimately rests upon and serves the arbitrary anchors … of power.’\(^{50}\) No more mention is made of the lecture. Instead, Bolaño buries the conclusion of Kessler’s ‘investigation’ in the third part of 2666, ‘The Part about Fate’, 343 pages before the modern-day Sherlock Holmes disappears from ‘The Part about the Crimes’. Oscar Fate, protagonist of ‘The Part about Fate’, overhears a conversation between two men, one young and the other older, in a restaurant at a gas station south of Tucson, Arizona. The older man is Kessler, leaving Mexico for home after a second, unofficial visit to Santa Teresa. His opinion on the killings suggests the absent centre of irreducible violence that threatens the cohesiveness of the social bond.

The real-life Robert K. Ressler was an agent of the university discourse. He worked for the FBI’s Behavioural Science Unit: ‘Lacan characterizes the reign of (neo-)liberal capitalism as

\(^{45}\) Žižek, Looking Awry 59.

\(^{46}\) Herlinghaus 183.

\(^{47}\) Žižek, Looking Awry 59.

\(^{48}\) Farred 698

\(^{49}\) Žižek, Looking Awry 59; italics in original.

\(^{50}\) Johnston 139.
ushering in the dominance of “science” qua the authority of the university discourse.’

Ressler’s two co-authored text books, *Sexual Homicide: Patterns and Motives* (1988) and the *Crime Classification Manual* (1992), are committed to the quest for truth-as-end, to advancing the knowledge base of professionals. However, Bolaño’s Kessler is more metaphysician than forensic scientist, registering the constituent elements of a crime scene less as clues than as ripples emanating from an ineffable source. Kessler is doubly aware that the crimes in *2666*, in accordance with Bolaño’s antiliterary aversion to placebo texts, will not be solved, and that what has happened to the victims cannot be written without avoiding rather than revealing the truth.

Prompted by the younger man in the Tucson diner to give his ‘unofficial opinion about what’s going on there’ – Santa Teresa – Kessler replies thusly:

‘All right then,’ said the white-haired man. ‘I’ll tell you three things I’m sure of: (a) everyone living in that city is outside of society, and everyone, I mean everyone, is like the ancient Christians in the Roman circus; (b) the crimes have different signatures; (c) the city seems to be booming, it seems to be moving ahead in some ineffable way, but the best thing would be for every last one of the people there to head out into the desert some night and cross the border.’ (*2666* 267)

Kessler’s opinion is telling, although not typical of a criminologist: the killings have nothing to do with the law. His suggestion that everyone living in Santa Teresa is outside of society is, on the one hand, contextual: ‘It is Bolaño’s ability to make us deal directly … with death in its intimate relation to neoliberalism, that lends his work its critical salience.’

On the other hand, Bolaño is able to make us deal directly with the Real of desire as the ceaseless discovery of the bodies of women and girls overwhelms us. The corpses in *2666* are contingencies referring to the excessive, monstrous nature of human desire; reading it we are ‘grounded in a constitutive surplus – that is to say, in the excessive presence of some Thing that is inherently “impossible” and should not be here, in our present reality.’

The receptive reader of *2666* understands that the detective’s quick fix comes at the expense of an intimate realisation. Once Bolaño has stripped any features of the placebo text from *2666*, the conclusion aligns with and sheds light on what happens when desire is subjectively assumed. Paraphrasing Žižek, the conclusion of *2666* ‘is this very withdrawal, this pulling away from the Thing that I myself am, this realization that the Monster out there is myself.’

As an antiliterary exemplar, *2666* is a nightmare, rather than the skin of one.

Back in the Tucson diner, Kessler tells his companion that, during the late nineteenth century, ‘We didn’t want death in the home, or in our dreams and fantasies, and yet it was a fact that terrible crimes were committed, mutilations, all kinds of rape, even serial killings’ (*2666* 266). Kessler says, ‘Everything was passed through the filter of words, everything trimmed to fit our fear’ (*2666* 266). Bolaño has refused to pass the femicide through the filter of words. Kessler makes a distinction between the historical reception of crimes against those who were not part of society and those who were; concerning the latter victims, Kessler says, ‘What happened to them could be written, you might say, it was legible’ (*2666* 267). Johnston writes that ‘Lacan’s specific brand of antiphilosophy requires passing through philosophy,’ just as Bolaño’s antiliterature requires passing through literature – a passage highlighted by Kessler, who, in the

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51 Johnston 139.
52 Farred 692.
54 Žižek, The Ticklish Subject 305; italics in original.
above examples, seems to be describing literary placebo texts.\textsuperscript{55} Johnston describes ‘[Lacan’s] determinate negations of given philosophies rendering possible the birth of novel philosophical trajectories’; I would argue that Bolaño’s negation of the detective story renders possible a novel literary trajectory. Specifically, the way that a crime – illegible, though nonetheless essential – has been inscribed in the very form of violence that 2666 commits reinstates universalised guilt and renders possible analysis. Perhaps it is best to let Bolaño explain the difference between literature and what I have called his antiliterature: ‘Remember,’ Bolaño writes, ‘that in literature you always lose, but the difference, the enormous difference, lies in losing while standing tall, with eyes open, not kneeling in a corner praying to Jude the Apostle with chattering teeth’ (BP 112). We should recognise success in the way that antiliterature loses without declaring itself a contribution to the quest for truth-as-end.

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\textsuperscript{55} Johnston 157.
Tympanising Philosophy: Luxating the Disciplinary Margins through a Derridean Reading of the *Mahabharata*

Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha
Subhendra Bhowmick

I have attempted more and more systematically to find a non-site, or a nonphilosophical site, from which to question philosophy. […] My central question is: from what site or non-site (*non-lieu*) can philosophy as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner?

The present excursion argues for an alignment of ‘embattled antagonists’, namely philosophy and literature, and it does that by referring to Derrida’s seminal work, *Margins of Philosophy*. To press further our argument about the alliance of philosophy and literature, we also allude to Indian philosophy and the great Indian philosophico-literary epic, the *Mahabharata*. Foundational Indian philosophic texts such as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* and countless other subsequent metaphysical texts were articulated through poetic hymns which are endowed with rich literary inflexions. This literary inscape of Indian philosophical texts is ‘in-stressed stressed’ and substantiated when Bharatamuni – the ancient author of *Natyashastra*, the celebrated dissertation on Indian drama and dramaturgy – defined the genre of drama as the ‘Fifth Veda’.

There are four *Vedas* in Indian philosophy and they are regarded as the foundational core of Indian metaphysical tradition and when Bharatamuni elevates drama as the ‘Fifth Veda’ he does that on the assumption that drama is born out of the literary seeds ingrained or embedded within the *Vedas* which are primarily known as philosophico-religious texts.

All these assumptions on the part of Bharatamuni signify the close kinship or non-duality of philosophy and literature and in what follows we take up this coalition of philosophy and literature to hint at a possible commonwealth of epistemic possibilities and to do that we bring in Derrida’s plea for blurring all genre distinctions between philosophy and philosophy’s Other, i.e. literature. Derrida began his *Margins of Philosophy* (1982) with a call for tympanising philosophy and by ‘tympanising’ he means to problematise the traditional definition of philosophy. If one elaborates it further, we understand that Derrida frequently used the terms ‘tympanum’ or ‘tympanon’ to signify the unicity of philosophy or its circumscription within its own sovereign ‘ipseity’. The tympanum is the closely guarded border that totalises the regimes and sovereign mastery of philosophy. This intransigent border patrolling to retain its unique totality has been debunked by Derrida when he talked of de-totalising philosophy or gnawing at its border through a ‘limitrophic’ violence, a violence that opens up the conversation with philosophy’s *Other*. Derrida names literature as philosophy’s self-appointed *Other*, something that philosophy has been excluding for many centuries and Plato’s expulsion of the poet testifies that conscripted unicity of philosophy that does not allow its borders to be luxated.

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2 Sri Babulala Shukla Shastri (ed.), *Sri Bharatamuni Pranitam, Sachitram Natyashastram* (Baranasi: Chaukhambha Sanskrit Sansthan [Reprint edition], 2009) [Chapter 1, Verse 12, page 4 and Verse 17, page 6].
Philosophemes, Derrida complains, generally disallow semiotic egalitarianism and any logic of heteronomy is denied the importance it deserves. The margins of philosophy, therefore, generate a sovereign ‘envelopment’ and ‘hierarchy’ and Derrida in his *Margins of Philosophy* asked for the blurring of such boundaries, for de-tympanising the imperial borders of philosophy. The present paper attempts such de-tympanisation of the boundaries which philosophy erects around itself through a deconstructive analysis of the *Mahabharata*, the Indian foundational text which enjoys a unique disciplinary non-site as mentioned in the beginning in the words of Derrida. Derrida has previously been linked with Eastern philosophic paradigms and theological traditions in several works⁴ and the present paper continues to explore the possibilities of similar alignments between Derridean deconstructive templates and the *Mahabharata*.

Let us add here a note for the sake of convenience. Tympanum is something that inhabits the border, that activates the border itself, and that keeps the pressure from either side of the border in taut balance. Therefore, as and when we tinker with the border of something delimited, we actually criticise the act of bordering or limiting that thing. Inhabitation of tympanum is inhibition of the bordering process.

Thus de-limiting is different from delimiting. One can see that this simple act of hyphenation makes all the difference, while the difference is actually nothing but a simple act of acting upon the limit itself. While denegation of the limit is delimiting, the negation of the same is transgressing (and not transcending in the Hegelian sense proper) the limit or ‘aufhebung’ – the installation of the ‘limit/passage’. This is precisely what we do when we propose to read the *Mahabharata* through some philosophic optic. We tympanise philosophy to criticise its ‘envelopment’ into the ‘philosophemes’, and to untie it by ‘de-tympanising its imperial borders’. Thus de-limiting could be read as ‘de-tympanising’ or lifting the border, which has all along held the order of the philosophical manoeuvring needing now to be tympanised/criticised holistically to re-set the border at some point/joint (un)foreseen. Perhaps the *Mahabharata* may constitute some wild and unforeseen frontier at the tympanising juncture of philosophy; and hence it can be located in a sort of ‘non-site’, as in spite of being a literary epic in its form and content, it is generally considered as a book of philosophy as well. And here we seriously affirm the idea of the non-site as the Other of philosophy, in absence of which philosophy would be delimited.

How do we situate or characterise then a text like the *Mahabharata*? Is it philosophy as literature or philosophy and literature both at the same time? We would argue that it perfectly adheres to Derrida’s notion of tympanising philosophy, enabling the retainment of the sovereign status of philosophy and simultaneously causing the dispersal and dissemination of philosophy’s essential singularity of presence. We would imagine and it is commonly established too that the *Mahabharata* in fact is in a way an emanation and expansion/exegesis of the *Upanishads* and related works of Indian philosophy.⁵ For us, then, the *Mahabharata* is both philosophy as literature as well as philosophy and literature simultaneously. We would try to establish this claim by foregrounding on the philosophical theme of cosmography or cosmological time/deep

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time (in our sense that departs from Daniel Lord Smail’s usage, which we will return to at a later point of this essay)/kala or what we call thick time as enunciated in the Mahabharata. Time comes out here in our schema as the primary philosophical signifier and in the subsequent sections we would see how the Mahabharata philosophises on the philosophic category of Time and even a cursory glance at the Mahabharata.

In the course of the discussion we would demonstrate how in explicating the notion of thick time or ‘contretemps’, the Mahabharata exemplified Derridean idea of the deconstruction about 2,500 years ago. Since Western philosophy is built upon its Greek origins, the distinction of philosophy and literature can be traced back to an earlier Western metaphysical origin (Nietzsche’s use of ancient pre-Socratic chorus may be mentioned in this context. We would return to it, however, at the end). But Derrida debunks this genre distinction or devaluation of literature by reading it as the site where philosophy can reconsider itself, ‘By looking in the mirror of its other, like for instance the mirror of literature, philosophy can start to rethink itself.’ The present paper is inspired by this Derridean dis-bordering and such negation of margins and limits allows us to brave the hazards of genre distinctions and we intend to read literature and philosophy coextensively. As Derrida reminds us,

If philosophy has always intended, from its point of view, to maintain its relation with the nonphilosophical, that is the antiphilosophical, with the practices and knowledge, empirical or not, that constitute its other, if it has constituted itself according to this purposive entente with its outside, if it has always intended to hear itself speak, in the same language, of itself and of something else, can one, strictly speaking, determine a nonphilosophical place, a place of exteriority or alterity from which one might still treat of philosophy? Is there any ruse not belonging to reason to prevent philosophy from still speaking of itself, from borrowing its categories from the logos of the other, by affecting itself without delay, on the domestic page of its own tympanum (still the muffled drum, the tympanon, the cloth stretched taut in order to take its beating, to amortize impressions, to make the types (typoi) resonate, to balance the striking pressure of the typtein, between the inside and the outside), with heterogeneous percussion? Can one violently penetrate philosophy’s field of listening without its immediately – even pretending in advance, by hearing what is said of it, by decoding the statement – making the penetration resonate within itself, ... In other words, can one puncture the tympanum of a philosopher and still be heard and understood by him?

The penultimate sentence of the above quote, we believe, is highly significant and this is exactly what we have been trying to suggest through our reading of Derrida and the Mahabharata. The sovereign singularity of philosophy is undone by so called non-philosophic categories and yet such non-sites emerge as alien insiders, the Self rubs shoulder with the Other to attain better self-knowledge. And to adduce a Mahabharatic evidence we may quote from the 2014 book, Mahabharata Now that drives home similar points.

Although philosophers, both in medieval Sanskrit and in modern English, have formulated a separate ‘systemic’ Philosophy of Vyasa or Philosophy of the Mahabharata, when we approach it with sharp ethical or metaphysical questions, in answer, the book, Bhisma or Krshna tells us one or more stories and leaves it at that. Its job seems to be simply to...
describe in suggestive detail the actions of different people ... in particular situations. [And one may recall, in this context,] Ludwig Wittgenstein’s advice to philosophers, ‘Do not explain, just describe’.\(^7\)

In these just quoted lines, literature is assigned the role to philosophise and philosophy is seen to be musing through literary modes. The philosophers are sometimes lost in their abstracted and abstruse vocabulary – though the vocabulary is often generated/played in the concreteness of popular life. We invite the Other of philosophy – be it literature for the time being, as Derrida says – to offer the concrete stories of life to the philosophers. The present paper therefore, attempts the Derridean ‘purposive entente’ with the outside of philosophy, allowing the possibility of finding philosophy ‘hear itself speak, in the same language, of itself and of something else’ and determining ‘a nonphilosophical place, a place of exteriority or alterity from which one might still treat of philosophy.’ We believe our critical Derridean reading of the Mahabharata blurs the border zones between philosophy and its alterity or non-philosophical places, enabling cross-borderal supplementation through the ‘logos of the Other’. Such a reading practice is tantamount to epistemic ‘ambush’ luxating the frontiers of philosophy only to enrich it and in the process what comes out in the open is the ‘repressed of philosophy.’

Consequently, to luxate the philosophical ear, to set the loxos in the logos to work, is to avoid frontal and symmetrical protest, opposition in all the forms of anti-, or in any case to inscribe antism and overturning, domestic denegation, in an entirely other form of ambush, of lokhos, of textual manoeuvres.\(^8\)

Will it be said, then, that what resists here is the unthought, the repressed of philosophy?\(^9\)

The unconcealment or aletheia of the suppressed, if we recall Heidegger, occasions the manifestation of Dasein, an unfurment that causes multiplicities of flowering – making disclosures but always stopping short of truth-claiming as such – or polysemies of significations, a task, according to Derrida, that philosophy must aim for. Such a polysemic approach owns up the dis-owned outside.

It may be about this multiplicity that philosophy, being situated, inscribed, and included within it, has never been able to reason. Doubtless, philosophy will have sought the reassuring and absolute rule, the norm of this polysemia. It will have asked itself if a tympanum is natural or constructed, if one does not always come back to the unity of a stretched, bordered, framed cloth that watches over its margins as virgin, homogenous, and negative space, leaving its outside outside, without mark, without opposition, without determination, and ready, like matter, the matrix, the khora, to receive and repercuss type.\(^10\)

Once we allow the suppressed/repressed Other of philosophy its unconcealment, we attain the epistemic polysemy or the epistemic egalitarianism that Derrida envisaged. To do that one needs to expand one’s traditional optics to envision philosophic lineages even in so called non-philosophic sites, as did Heidegger by illustrating his notion of ‘unconcealedness’.

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\(^8\) Derrida, Margins x, xix.

\(^9\) Derrida, Margins x, xix.

\(^10\) Derrida, Margins x, xix. (Emphasis ours.)
Philosophic exposition of Time in the Mahabharata comes out as that unique reality where philosophy and literature coalesce to constitute the common terrain of epistemology where philosophy borders onto literature and vice versa. The present paper keeps in mind this disordering and tries to achieve that by dwelling on Time through a reference to the philosophical trajectories of the Mahabharata. In the Mahabharata, we believe, philosophy’s self and the Other cohabit. In the subsequent part of the paper, we would go further and would claim that the Mahabharata, in spite of being primarily a literary text, belied all genre distinctions and it contained thousands of years ago the philosophic grains of deconstruction. Derrida’s tympanisation of philosophy seems justified as a symbiotic co-habitation between Derridean philosophical deconstruction and literary deconstruction, as exemplified in the Mahabharata, can open up new philosophic ‘epochs’.

The philosophic treatment of Time in the Mahabharata prompted us to read this epic through a Derridean deconstructive optic to come out with new domains of alternative values. The Mahabharata philosophically offers in our deconstructive reading enough grounds of agential scaffolding at a time when agencies and subjectivities are denied to us. Here we must remind our readers that ours is not a deconstructive reading of the whole of the Mahabharata because such an exercise would be impossible to achieve within the span of a paper. We would go for selected readings of some episodic portions of the Mahabharata to establish our argument of the disordering of philosophy and in doing that we explore new significatory horizons of the Mahabharata, extracting new contemporary philosophical relevance of the epical text written long back. In the process of reading the Mahabharata as a seminal text of adequate contemporary metaphysical relevance we also take the liberty to align our epical reading with current philosophical positioning of Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. We would demonstrate that the Mahabharata enshrines enough examples of Derridean aporia or the deconstructive philosophical contretemps – or counter-time – and it also contains the same interpretive horizon of Badiouian notion of ‘subtraction’ or ‘event’ and Agamben’s idea of ‘inoperativity’ – the ideas which are in demand to fashion a constitutive temporality of change and subjectivity. In the course of the discussion, we would elaborate on these ideas to show that the Mahabharata foreshadows contemporary Western philosophical axioms in a significant way. The notions of ‘inoperativity’ and ‘subtraction’ have a great deal to do with Time as a philosophic category. Capitalism induces in us a hegemonic model of homogeneous and linear temporality, a paradigm of conformity with one exclusive unidirectional model of Time and Badiouian idea of subtraction, Agamben’s theory of inoperativity and Ranciere’s radical doctrine of dissensus call for subverting this unidirectional dictum of time. Both of these ideas suggest a complete withdrawal from the existing patterns of ideology and call for deconstructing the given temporal structures of conformism and collusion. The notion of Time in the Mahabharata subscribes to this philosophy of subtraction, or the philosophy of deconstruction. In what follows we take up this whole idea of Time and deconstructive philosophy in the Mahabharata.

Time as a Philosophical Category, Deconstruction and the Mahabharata

We would now straightaway address the issue of Time in our lives today lived under the condition of global capital. At the outset, we would like to clarify that we were inspired in

initiating this discussion by a Bengali newspaper essay on Time and the Mahabharata written by Arindam Chakrabarty written in three parts in Ei Samay, the Bengali newspaper. The essay, entitled ‘Samay Je Nei’ [There is no more any time], engaged with the problem of late modern paucity of time, wondering in the process the mystery of time-lack in a world surrounded with gizmos and gadgets meant to generate surplus free time by reducing human labour. Professor Chakrabarty points at our haste, the sick hurry and our subservience to the linear model of temporality as induced by capital. On the one hand we have no time to ponder and perhaps we have no such times because we do not feel the necessity to ponder at all, allowing us to be subjugated by the hegemonic temporal order of capital or the temporal narratives of power that by rewarding conformity does not allow any deviation from the given temporal order.

Here we may also recall Daniel Lord Smail’s notion of ‘Deep History’ and the treatment of ‘deep time’ in his seminal work, On Deep History and the Brain that induce us to take into consideration a different paradigm of time as distinguished from the chronological homogeneity of global capital and traditional historiography, a chronology that Western history could not trace back before what it calls the dawn of civilization. Let us quote Smail.

With the sudden and widespread acceptance of geological time in the 1860s, western Europe’s chronological certainties came crashing down. Stephen Jay Gould has called the discovery of deep time a cosmological revolution of Galilean proportions. Over the course of several decades in the mid-nineteenth century, the great historical sciences – geology, biology, paleoanthropology – were made or remade as the bottom dropped out of time, exposing a nearly endless vista.12

Smail was thus opposed to the short vista, not unlike the author(s) of the great epic we are talking about. Perhaps the hurried and harried nature of Western civilisation has got something to do with the unnecessarily myopic vision of the time purveyors living there, the vision that attempted another kind of centrisms other than Eurocentric and geocentric ones. But this time the centric configuration is delimiting more on the line of time than on space. The virulent form of anthropocentrism is perhaps rooted in this crippling short vision too. Smail holds that this lack of longue duree replicates the Christian mythological range of time which is no more than merely about five thousand years since the idyllic days of the Garden of Eden. Smail thus claims that Western historiography suffered from the ‘grip of sacred history’.13

On the other hand, Indian epics and mythologies are full of astronomical numbers. Although the main story of the Mahabharata centring on the War of Kurukshetra corresponds to the temporal order not out of human proportions, the supplementary stories often make mind-boggling claims about durations. The curses, austerities, penances, oaths etc. would more often than not take hundreds and even thousands of years. Now if we are permitted to look at a different mythological register, we may note that the measure of time like Kalpa is also huge and Brobdingnagian. Kalpa is one diurnal and nocturnal cycle of Brahma, which equals to twice 4,320,000,000 years!14

Perhaps the traditional Indian mind – of course we are running the risk of making a hasty generalisation – generally likes to bask in time as an entity to live through, enjoying the same by living substantially within it. Time is ‘thick’ for them insofar as it is an end in itself. The

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13Smail 1.
opposite is to treat time as too ‘thin’ to be felt, and to employ it as an instrument – i.e. the means to ‘other’ ends. And today’s global capital knows the best what could be those ‘other ends’ could be. This may lead us straightaway to the ideas of ‘reflexive modernity’, ‘reflexive modernisation’ etc. – enunciated by Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash among others – which would be instructive for our purpose of understanding the time-hurry nature of our life today.

Reﬂexivity may refer to several things in social sciences which are not always too close to one another. In addition to the old philosophical import of ‘seeing with added eye’ or its widely known current meaning of ‘self-referentiality’, or the ‘systematic reﬂection on the unconscious presuppositions’ or the continuous feedback of social scientiﬁc knowledge to the commonsense, it is also even somewhat symptomatic of hanging in the midway of the conscious and the unconscious.15 We are mostly interested in a sense close to the latter one but with more speciﬁc shade of acting on the spur of automatic reﬂex as opposed to basing on well-thought reﬂection, so to speak, the hall mark of modernity.

Beck … often works from the contrast of ‘reﬂex’ with ‘reﬂection’. Reﬂexive he argues has more to do with reﬂex than reﬂection. Reﬂexes are indeterminate … Reﬂexes cope with a world of speed and quick decision-making … Beck [however] often omits to say that [the ‘contemporary’] individual must choose fast, must – as in reﬂex – make quick decisions.16

This ‘Reﬂexive modernity’ and we, i.e. its children, are left, on the other hand, with no time to reﬂect on what to act upon or act along or react to, nor having any need to do any reﬂecting nevertheless, for to reﬂect is to relate, to relate is to relay, to relay is (to delay and) to relax, to relax is (to wax and) waste – i.e. wasting away of energy, resource and most importantly, time, which is money itself through the operation of capitalistic logic of the interest rate and through the functioning of capitalism as a system that must not be dislocated, deconstructed, subtracted or ‘inoperated’ in the interest of the upward spiralling of the interest rate. And, on a different but related meta-linguistic detour, to reﬂect is to ponder, and to ponder is to wonder, to wonder is to wander, and, then, to wander is to squander i.e. to waste, (and thus we may opt to be delivered onto the former route, or we may decide to experiment with a different paradigmatic register that could lead) even to blunder, to subvert, or at least to criticise and, in Derridean terms, to tympanise.

Time therefore is crucial in our philosophic argumentative frame. The ruling ideology of the temporal is crucial to understand and unravel the contours of our current existential condition and it is also instructive for any possible way of emancipation. And a Derridean reading of the Mahabharata dwells on a critique of this ideology of time. One primary reason to do such a reading is to establish again the point we began with, namely the equivalence of philosophy and literature. Time has been a very important philosophic category since Heraclitus’ deliberation of Time and ﬂux, and the Mahabharata does the same by philosophising on it.

We intend to focus on the politics of time that does not allow any room for ‘aporetic time’ or the moment of Derridean aporia or deadlock which could well be, to employ another Derridean term, ‘contretemp’. The idea of aporia brings us to the Derridean logic of diﬀerence and deferment or deconstruction and we would argue that the philosophic notion of aporia also helps


us in arriving at the possibility of ‘time out of joint’ or the enjambment of time. We would imagine that the logic of systemic status quo thrives on the deterministic logic of linear temporality that imprisons the subject into the closure of linearity or into the panopticon of time. In the hands of power, time is a disciplining tool and a punishing or controlling apparatus of hegemony.

Consequently, the hegemonic narratives of our times have valorised terms and concept metaphors such as ‘multi-tasking’, ‘workaholic’, ‘multi-skilled’ etc. The chariot of time is always at our back and we are constantly having a phase of ultra-involvement in their time or what we call ‘thin time’, a state of temporality that ousts the possibility of ‘soul time’ or ‘thick time’ or our time and the ever diminishing state of thick time has made us time-paupers. Arindam Chakrabarty in his essay on Mahabharata and Time has exactly elaborated on this condition of time-pauperity and he referred to the Mahabharata to explain how we need to nurture more our moments of thick time to tympanise – or criticise – the hegemony of time-lack under the condition of global capital. So this act of tympanising the hegemony of time-lack aligns us both to the philosophic task of attaining soul time in moments of Time-pauperisation and also to the primary Derridean task of ambushing the border between philosophy and literature because very soon we would see how the Mahabharata through its deep philosophisation of Time belies all attempts for limiting the margins of philosophy. We should now mention Clifford Geertz, whose development of the idea of ‘thick description’, while writing ‘an interpretive theory of culture’, might have some tacit influence on us, as we coin the notions of thick time (or soul time/our time) and the thin time (or impoverished time/their time).

As stated earlier, in this article we propose to hold time as our problematic, for we feel inclined to re-examine a host of old and new philosophical questions about time and ethics. And we have decided to look into the body of the great Indian epic (philosophico-epic?) of the Mahabharata in particular to obtain some alternative temporalities, since therein we recurrently come across epic characters like Vyasa and Ganesa as a couple, Bhism, or Arjuna, or Chirakari, or Ahalya, who, sometime, putatively, procrastinate and postpone, as well as deconstruct issues, to explore the possibilities of justice despite, at times, the apparent impossibility of the same. And in those classical textual cases we confront different kinds of time scaling too that lie juxtaposed alongside each other, or are ‘folded’ into, or invaginating, one another as in the event of millennial waiting of Ahalya; or in the instance of the sudden postponement of the War of Kurukshetra by the qualms raised in the then apathetic mind of Arjuna eventually causing the hundreds of verses of the Gita to be produced meanwhile. Both the incidents – one concerning Ahalya and the other, Arjuna – are actually ‘folded’ within a sort of a primary and overt time frame, which is apparently more inclusive but scalar – and therefore impoverished and emaciated – than these dramatic versions of secondary and covert time scales that, purportedly, make the notion of time itself nonlinear, if not non-chronological, and should we say, contretemporal? To our mind, these manners of ‘subtraction’ from the spectre of compulsive progress by employing the strategy of deferment by the above dramatis personae, and those evidences of, say, ‘rhizomic’ multiplication of the framing of time by the storytellers of the previously mentioned early foundational text – we mean the Mahabharata – with their

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pre-empting of the discipline provided by the singularity of the (presumed) modernist ‘arrow of time’, might tempt one to scrap or at least to rethink the ideas around the linearity and integrity of chronological time. In what follows we continue this discussion with reference to the *Mahabharata* and Derrida.

**Thick Time, Deferred Time and the Contretemporal Habitus and a Derridean Reading of the *Mahabharata***

The hegemonic temporal order of global capital induces us into what we call a thin and impoverished temporality and subservience to the latter, denying the possibility of a thick time of variance and deviance as well as resistant subjectivity. Borrowing the deconstructive dharma of Chirakari, a character from the *Mahabharata*, we would presently argue for a paradigm of deferred time or ‘contretemp’ as counter-time. The liberal capitalist mode as the master signifier calls for ‘agonistic’ reading practices as possible vehicles for counter-hegemony and ‘subtraction’ from the reigning (mono-) temporal (World-) order. As the entire socius is a continuous sign chain, where the possibility of action lies in the dynamics of the disruption of this chain to construct a grammar of radical supplementarity and ‘differance’, our everyday dimension of linear time as induced by global capital can be disrupted by what Badiou calls ‘events’; and when an event occurs time is ‘out of joint’. It represents both an invitation to a full appreciation of our ‘being’ and a disruption of our cosm perception of the linear time, an interruption to the normal temporal order, a radical ‘breaching’ open of time – i.e. a deliverance to a juncture wherein the minor beings of designated time-space like subjugating/subjugated being or examining/examined being open up or unfold unto the ‘khoriatic’, ‘rhizomic’ as well as golemic substance and/or subordinate of being-and-scalar-time on the one hand, and nonbeing-and-polysemeic-time on the other. This is perhaps a ‘luxatic’ turn out of the ‘khoriatic’ and ‘tympanic’ diaphragm or the hymenal membrane: a non-‘posist’-able but immensely posibilising ‘liminal’ place of nonbeing/being that blurs the inside and the outside, the pressing and the pressed, the separator and the medium, the protector and the invocator and the desiring and the desired –or which could be generalised/ reduced to agency and structure both or either agency or structure. This may also stand as the background and foreground of the agential. And this is standing aside while inhabiting (on) the sideline, staying apart while remaining a part, something alike a totalising philosophical manoeuvring from/with a de-totalising non-philosophical position/posture. The ‘margins of philosophy’ are the lines wherein swarm the infinite moments of the life and the world, lives that are the worlds – the ‘lifeworlds’. The stories of the imagined but concrete persona or the narratives that constitute the literature are the only fully fledged registers that we really have about these lifeworlds. But that concreteness thrives in what Bergson calls ‘homogeneous time’ – a spatialised species of time – a philosophical concept of time, nevertheless, that has long before percolated into the sphere of the mundane with the aids of common measuring rods – old and new – of time. But, at the depth of our conscious being, the ‘animal therefore I am’ cannot but feel the ‘duree’ and duree alone – yet another philosophically abstracted notion proposed by Bergson – which is the extreme concrete version of experienced/sensed time. Now, literature is (his)story in every spatiotemporal detail where s/he is a whole being straddling the duree only. And to augur singular and holistic philosophy during and from them is therefore always tympanic – an ‘epoche’ or event which is critically distant yet sensitisingly merging with the singular literatures that could never be pluralised without

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damaging their individuality. And there are sciences of all creeds that busy themselves doing the pluralising, to the point of generalising, work which are instantiations of totalism of the ‘middle range’. Thus we are given literature, which is, perforce, at the beginning of all stories. And perhaps Schopenhauer anticipated something like it much earlier than us and we will return to it later. In the Mahabharata we find the flourishing of the very foundational substance that go into the making of the philosophy of a civilisation. The Mahabharata war stands at one of the significant junctures of ‘time-reckoning’ too, if we follow the opinion of the Indian historian, Romila Thapar, who claims that the post Mahabharata ‘dynastic time ... takes the functional form of historical chronology’. She also mentions Manu(s) and their ‘large time cycles’, the seers representing eons of Indian mythological time. Sometimes these eons are separated (or blurred, as water is a liquid that has great connecting/dissolving quality?) by the great tide of water – the Mahaplabana or the great inundation – that dissolves everything at a massive ‘khoratic’ and ‘evental’ moment. Thus, as the name itself suggests, the Mahabharata stands at a confluence – the confluence where cosmic eternity of the mythical meets the quotidian everyday of the chronological-historical.

And, from the stories of great demise we may suddenly revert to a story which begins afresh, time and again. Can’t we see that this epic is always a told story! A story that begins with Souti, an epical character telling the hermits – assembled in the annual sacrificial rite of the great sage, Sounaka – about what Vaisampayana has narrated at the King Janamejay’s snake sacrifice rite from the great epical text composed by Vyasa by telling Ganesa to write them down – a kind of a series of temporal homunculi always starting afresh. Thus the beginnings falter not unlike our Arjuna stumbling before the Kurukshetra war in the Gita, or Ganesa making Vyasa pause even before the scripting of the story commences. We will elaborate on this theme in a later section. But now let us turn to Derrida again and, viewed in Derridean optics, how can we forget that all these relaying narrators are actually pouring things onto the ears of their listeners thus occasioning a series of tympanising phases only to be followed by the subsequent ones?

And now for Derrida, ‘it takes time to do without time’ and any interaction involves a ‘contretemporal habitus’, an untimely habitus, and a deferred time to deconstruct the hegemon. We argue that some instances in the Mahabharata can provide such contretemporal immanence, as described by Derrida. And one of them is the befuddling story of Chirakari, whose name means, literally, the one who does a task taking time without end.

Chirakari – the Literary Derrida – and the Mythical Parents of Deconstruction

In the Mahabharata we meet Chirakari, the son of Rishi Goutama and Ahalya. To us, i.e. to the inhabitants of our time, Chirakari is an enigma. Always keen to do justice to his good name, he remained a habitual procrastinator. He always gave considerable, if not incredibly immense, thought before embarking on some action. Once Indra, the king of the heaven, came to the hermitage of Goutama, the sage, and managed to deceive Ahalya by assuming Goutama’s persona to get into a sexual liaison with her. Meditating, Goutama came to know about the

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21Romila Thapar, Time as the Metaphor of History (Reprinted in History and Beyond) (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) 30-1.
22Thapar 30-1.
23Rajsekhar Basu, Mahabharata (Bengali version) (Kolkata: M.C. Sarkar, 1356 Bengali Era [1960-61]) 1-2.
adultery and with fury he instructed his son, Chirakari, to kill his mother with a sword. Having decreed such a cruel thing, he immediately left for the forest.

Now Chirakari got into a session of intense thinking. To kill or not to kill his mother – the kind of a dilemma that Hamlet had to bear! On the one hand, it is a serious sin according to ancient religious injunctions not to carry out one’s father’s order. On the other, it is no less an offence to commit the sin of matricide. Hence, Chirakari went on deliberating and pondering over various aspects of his act and the more Chirakari thought about all these, the more he got deeper and deeper into the problematic of the situation, which, as far as his mode of life is concerned, could hardly be resolved with any haste. Thus, in the end, Chirakari experienced a very great dilemma only, and he did so in the context of a case where such dilemmas are quite natural. Chirakari was brought to a point where one may either decide to abide by the severe rule of terror issued by the father and commit the matricide, or else may flout this fatherly order in order to remain on the side of life and that of the life of none but his mother. With this fatefulness writ large, Chirakari could do nothing but giving the case at hand more than sufficient thought.

Meanwhile, however, Goutama’s fury subsided, and the moment that happened he started to run back to his hermitage. All the way he wondered whether Chirakari would be good enough to act according to his name today and defer the killing of his mother. Finally, when Chirakari put down his arms at the feet of his father, expressing his perplexity about the value of this killing, the no more regretful – yet guilty – father adored and praised his son for being so discreet about matters of grave importance. And we are also advised that the benevolent deeds should be expedited, if possible; but the menacing things may be postponed for an indefinite time (‘Subhasyashighran, asubhasyakalaharanam’). Sometimes even a minimal taking of time or postponement to act might save hundreds of lives.

This essentially ‘deconstructive’ episode appears in the epic called the Mahabharata about 2,500 years ago. And in the same epic we also find the maxim – to define is to close. And we have already seen that capitalist modernity leaves a very little time for us to rethink the extant definitions.

However, to ‘luxate’ the things at our disposal, let us draw towards the close this Mahabharatic essay with one authentic genesis story – the genesis of the Mahabharata itself – to which we have already alluded. We will see here that the paradigmatic depth of the hermeneutic and the unending nature of the circles of their meaning, the polysemic and the polyvocal Slokas (verses) of the Mahabharata would always engender opportunity for deconstruction. Even what happens at the surface finally leads us to delve into the deeper layers – and that is exactly what happens during the too ‘literal’ ‘tug of war’ between Vyasa (the author of Mahabharata) and Ganesa (the mythological scripter or stenographer of Mahabharata). The latter imposed a condition on Vyasa that he would agree on the act of composition only if Vyasa dictated the verses non-stop. This imposition was settled by Vyasa in a clever way and both of them eventually came to a negotiating point where Ganesa would not have to wait for the subsequent instalment of the verses, but only on the stringent condition of his always already going through all the layers of ‘differential’ meanings before writing them onto the surface.

Thus Ganesa himself turns into a veritable ‘tympan’ who first understands on his own, letting the meanings have impressions on him; then and only then would he make the writing business to push or press the storyline for the posterity to listen to and, subsequently, to communicate further. The lurking layers of the absent other meanings are all summoned to present themselves at the call of this mythical parents of deconstruction – Vyasa and Ganesa – who dismantle the univocal speech out of hand and amortise it into an ever-widening series of deconstructed meanings with the aid of (and the respite of) the act of writing. A foundational literary text thus anticipates a philosophy which would take its birth millennia apart and continents afar. Can we call it a Derridean ‘double session’? This also has a Bakhtinian dialogic trace as the text contains multiple contesting undertones of meanings, enabling heteroglossic interpretations, thereby deconstructing the univocity of meaning.

We have just seen in the event of the imposition of the condition by Vyasa to Ganesa that script-writer must not write anything without understanding the meaning as polysemically and thickly as possible. This, however, emboldens the present authors to return to their proposed idea of the ‘thick time’, which is now all the more necessary with our Ganesa, for he needs hours to meet what has been required of him. Ganesa compels Vyasa to think as fast as he would finish writing; but Vyasa, the unlettered composer, could make the table turn onto his erudite accomplice by posing his challenge to the latter by inviting him in an unending hermeneutic exercise before doing the mechanical part of the scripting job. May we now move to another Derridean idea – the idea of the existence of a variety of texts even preceding, or existing alongside, any of the scripted form of languages? We are actually hinting at the possibility of prevalence of a veritable ‘text’ anterior to what Ganesa has written, otherwise how could we explain the possibility of ‘many levels of meaning’. But where was that ‘text’ actually located? Was it housed in the body of the verses that were being composed by Vyasa only at the hour of its scripting, or they were full of intertextual layers, while these intertextual imports were rendered by the ensemble of pre-Mahabharatic tales from the Vedas and the Upanishads on the one hand, and the etymological and other sources of meaning on the other? And drifting toward some other direction, we may think of the differential renditions of the Mahabharata that were formed in various parts of India in different historical eras; so much so that prestigious Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in India had to think of writing a ‘critical edition’ of the great epic. Can we not take any of them as one more ‘tympanised’ version of the Mahabharata? The Mahabharata is thus always a medium as well as the mediated, always in the process of being formed, be in the mythical versions of multiple sessions of its being retold and reinterpreted, be it by Souti or Vaishayampana in their role of narrator or by Ganesa in his sessions of deep writing, or during the innumerable sessions of their narration amongst the populace.

Finally, to return to the issue of time, we can very well understand that Vyasa has little worry about time crunch. With each verse he breaks open some more time to think, now Ganesa too, having joined him and always taking a long time to understand Vyasa, they are literally ‘subtracting’ them from the mundane. This ‘eventality’ of ‘subtracting’ oneself a la Badiou is true for Chirakari as well as Arjuna in the war front too. Subtracting is related to the idea of morality in the form of duty and justice. With inventing, or breaking open, extra time each time a dilemma occurs, the epical (Chirakari and Arjuna) and meta-epical (e.g. Vyasa and Ganesa) characters are subtracting themselves from the linear and inexorable time with which we are

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26Badrinath 2.
almost obsessed as the only possible version of time. In the acts of contemplative Chirakari or Arjun, do we not find a kind of an attempt to make the impossible possible – a refrain in the later Derrida’s repertoire of philosophical vocabulary? And to do so one always needs time. Thus time is the measure of criticism itself. An original act is always expensive in its extent of wastage of time. And an original act is always a critique of what has been handed down to the present. Thus the Chirakaris cannot but raise questions that take time to be resolved. And who tell us that we really need to hurry? If they are our respected elders, as Goutama was to Chirakari, we only need to face them with our ‘argumentative mind’ awake, as Chirakari did despite Goutama’s clear order to carry out an inordinately cruel job.

Then, what do all these have to do with the tympanised khoratic zone of literature and philosophy? And how does our critique of temporality help in turning philosophy to literature and vice versa? Those will constitute our conclusion that would, of necessity, stop short of concluding themselves, for to conclude is to put closure, to stop tympanising, which might be the most unmahabharatic act. We really never know how to conclude the Mahabharata or conclude/infer anything from its text?

**Conclusion**

There are at least three senses of time in the *Mahabharata*. To our mind, these senses can be mined to get to the essence of our ‘tympan’ of philosophy that the *Mahabharata* is. Let us quote:

> There is, moreover, the question of history and meaning. This is explored in the *Mahabharata* at many different levels. *Kala*, ‘time’, in which everything originates and is destroyed, the determining factor of one’s destiny, is not the historical ‘time’. Neither is it the ‘time’ that is physically measured. It is a force, say, akin to God, in which originates all that *is* and also all that *is not*. It is the ultimate cause of all happenings at another level, *kala*, ‘time’, is the measure of appropriateness. It is combined with *desh* and *patra*, ‘place’ and ‘the person concerned’. These three, *desh*, *kala* and *patra*, that is, ‘the proper place’, ‘the proper time’, and ‘the proper person’, determine the appropriateness of an act and thus its *meaning*. In other words, they determine the *context*, in which a person lives and has his, or her, being; and meaning lies in context. At still another level, ‘time’ as *history* is examined as giving substance to one’s life. The three attributes of history of, the ‘past’, the ‘present’ and the ‘future’, and one’s relationship with them as one’s relationship with oneself, constitutes one of the subjects of the inquiry into the human condition. At the same time, acknowledging the power of *kala* in different forms, the *Mahabharata* raises the question: *am I my history alone*? Is ‘context’ all that there is to ‘meaning’? And with that, the inquiry moves on to a different plane – that of the relationship between history and its transcending, between the eternal and transient, *nitya* and *anitya*, as the substance of life and relationship. All these questions are to be found throughout the *Mahabharata*.

We will shortly return to the first and third of these senses. Let us now add something on certain events of the *Mahabharata* where the notions of time and its deconstructive value can be intriguing. Perhaps this would help us to understand not only the ‘aporetic’ time, but how the *Mahabharata* ‘tympanises’ or ‘dis-borders’ the divide between philosophy and literature. The

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27 Badrinath 9.
28 Badrinath 9.
Mahabharata narrates the battle of Kurukshetra in a great way and this mega encounter has been portrayed in the epic as the battle of all battles that would decide the fate of humanity. At the time of the commencement of War of Kurukshetra, Arjuna, one of the protagonists, felt devastated at the possibility of this gory battle that would cause, perforce, the death (or murder?) of his closest relatives and relations who are now more or less distributed between either of the confronting sides. Krishna, the Avatar as well as the divine charioteer of the valiant Arjuna, then began to sermonise Arjuna about the philosophy of *karma* or righteous action and all his philosophisation form the great text of the Bhagavadgita that contains hundreds (actually 701) of Slokas. During this session, Krishna had to demonstrate his Visvsaroop (theophany) too, right inside the battlefield before the eyes of thousands of warriors who were eager to flaunt their belligerence. And this epiphanic episode cannot but take hours to happen. However, apparently, the whole thing took place in a kind of time-and-space warp, within which a charioteer turns into the prime-mover, leading from the front quite literally. Now it is naïve to measure these mythical intervals realistically. And in the Mahabharata itself there are ample evidences of such time-outs. But one may note the speciality of the occasion. The most climactic situation turns against itself, gets dilated – if not ‘luxated’ – and Arjuna, the man chosen by Krishna – the Avatar – for assisting him in his divine mission of destroying the evil forces on earth, is then trembling with compunction. Thence follows an argument that suspends everything usual in the warfront. What a theatre to stage a deconstructive act!

After Arjuna, let us now return to Chirakari, the other Mahabharatic character whom we have already talked about extensively in our essay. He is an active deconstructionist who breaks open the linear and scalar time to get inside of what we call thick time or soul time. There, and then, he keeps on meditating, and that too not unlike a philosopher, over Cartesian sorts of rights-and-wrongs of either side of his sage-father’s order to kill his mother for her presumed involvement in an illicit sexual encounter with a lecherous god. His meditations, however, invent a kind of a third way, and he thereby differs and defers from taking any of the alternative positions without testing them by rigorous reasoning that could challenge any simple-minded Cartesianism; for, he never came to the closure of a conclusion about the right and wrong of the order, but suspended the same all along, for that could cause an irretrievable loss. Finally we may refer back to the dilemma that our divine stenographer, Ganesa, encountered before the counter-condition of Vyasa. This last instance belongs to a different category, since Arjuna and Chirakari were made ‘inoperative’ while harbouring fateful doubts about what to do or not to do amidst their own biographical context, while Ganesa was obliged to engage himself with differential meanings before materialising the ‘text’ by writing it down.

With the selection of a very few cases from the Mahabharata that seemed really pertinent for our purpose, we do not claim to have made an all-round experiment with the epic of Derridean deconstruction, but we have attempted to spend a ‘tympanising’/criticising session on the epic, keeping in mind how these deliberations can make a case for dis-bordering of philosophy and literature on the one hand, and, on the other, could attempt a critique of temporality by challenging a kind of an un-philosophical drift of the contemporary times that has flattened the thickness of our reasoning and turned compassionate time into thoughtless haste of time-craziness. And, as we have just mentioned, herein we have to delve into rethinking the thing one may call ‘philosophy in literature’. Perhaps the genre distinction is never as acute as in the modern times, the times when the linear time has penetrated literature through ‘realism’ among the other things.
The moment Arjuna and Chirakari start thinking, they ‘subtract’ themselves from the flow of real, ‘historical’ time. These ‘events’ are some of the most philosophical moments of the epic, with their moral, logical as well as ontological interrogations. On the other hand, our epical stenographer, Ganesa, too has been left with very little scope to betray much reverence to the univocal symbolism that realist literature allows. He acts as a khoratic context where polychromatic possibilities of alternative realities may flourish in the mythological literature that approaches philosophy of deconstruction. Under these circumstances, philosophy and literature may transgress each other, this transgression being directly associated with what Derrida calls (and we have elaborated substantially) ‘tympanising’. Now ‘time’ is an extension of ‘being’, for being cannot but exist in time. But, with the enthronement of global and universally applicable historical time our individual beings and their soul times get decimated as well as emaciated.

The Mahabharata is inspirational for us for it offers us to live with a sense of time that is akin to Mahakala on the one hand without throwing us away from the more homely historical time we are ensconced in. Human beings cannot but live in a ‘joint’ of different kinds of time – Mahakala on the one hand, which is religico-philosophical, and biographically sliced historical time of past, present and future on the other, taking the first and the third senses of the Mahabharatic time, as stated by Badrinath (see above). The transgression between them is impossibility when things are considered too realistically, but with the aid of a mythological text we very often suspend our wide-awareness, so to speak, and subject ourselves in an experience of a déjà vu with our penchant for khoratic return to the wombs of our many beings. We hold that the multiplexity of the Mahabharatic time offers the opportunity for ‘eternal return’ quite effectively. This transgression is akin to the Derridean Aufhebung/Aufheben, which is, as we have said in the beginning, ‘[l]imit/passage’, and which ‘relaunch[es] in every sense the reading of the Hegelian Aufhebung, eventually beyond ... Hegel’, that is, as we understand, beyond his notion of transcendence. We have the clue that Derrida likes the idea of transgression, but not transcendence that does not pay heed to the mediating tympan. And without that bridging thing one cannot be its Other any more. For Hegel, Othering is a relation between thesis and antithesis, and their resolution is synthesis – a closure, and a transcendence to a new site altogether. Thus, in Hegelian Aufhebung there is scarcely any mediator, only abolition, preservation and transcendence, while preservation hardly functioning as an important middle term, or an active bridge, from what has been abolished, from his function of a philosopher to that of a man of literature. And Attridge hints that Derrida’s oeuvre is a testimony to that too. Does not the ‘tympan’ help the philosopher to hear what he himself says, as Derrida himself alludes to in ‘Tympan’? Now, moving from one tympan to another, does not literature ‘unconceal’ the philosophemes, which hide the ‘worlded’ nature of the everyday life? Where can we find the ‘non-site’ of philosophy if not at the (non-)place where it visits much more than occasionally as if to transgress itself? And when the Mahabharatic Kala in the first sense includes everything what has been (‘originated’) there and what has not been (‘originated’) there, as we have read above in Badrinath’s rendition. Can we not claim that this mighty ‘khoratic’ Time is not only deeply philosophical, but even transgressive in principle? And would it be irrelevant here to get back to Nietzsche and his compliments for the Dionysian cult and the chorus (Khora and chorus are of the same etymological origin) of the pre-Socratic Greek dramas, which – we mean the latter – had association to the pre-Socratic philosophy. We have

29 Derrida, Margins xi.
30 Badrinath 9.
mentioned the ancient Indian *Natyashastra* of Bharatamuni and its relation with philosophy earlier in this article. Schopenhauer too had a deep regard for art (and literature is a form of artistic production) as depicting a universal in terms of an imaginary particulars.\(^{31}\) Thus we have the *Other* of philosophy always lying alongside philosophy itself. The *Mahabharata* is one massive paradigm of this juxtaposition.

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\(^{31}\) Durant 314.
A Saussurean Solution: Embodying ‘Presence’ in Yves Bonnefoy’s Poetics

Layla Roesler

Contemporary French poet Yves Bonnefoy has, over the course of his long career, acquired the often repeated epithet, ‘poète de la présence’. This lapidary formulation is especially apt, for it summarises quite effectively his vision of poetry as the only vector for a genuine interaction with the world through a form of communion that he characterises as ‘présence’. The word itself is not insignificant. Beyond the generalities of common parlance, the term has a long and rich history that hovers between theology and philosophy. His insistence, therefore, on the use of such a connotated word calls for examination, particularly in light of the reticence he expresses regarding philosophy. Indeed, despite a rhetoric that minimises, and even repudiates philosophy in favour of poetry, Bonnefoy’s work demonstrates such an intense interconnection between the two that they can easily be imagined as leaf of paper whose two inseparable sides comprise the whole.

As this paper contends, Bonnefoy’s co-opting of the term ‘presence’ is predicated on a philosophical necessity that is linked first to his vision of poetry and its role in transmitting presence, and then to his desire to defend the very possibility of presence against, in particular, the deconstructionist challenge to it. And as this paper further argues, the originality of his approach lies in the fact that beyond redefining a poetics of presence, he resolves, at least partially, the problem of integrating presence into a literary text by his rather unusual use of some of the building blocks of structuralism.

In a large sense, his choice of the word ‘presence’ to encapsulate his poetics forces him to contend with the unavoidably philosophical aspect of a term that is heavily marked by its theo-ontological origins. At the same time, his various attempts at definition demonstrate – and this in spite of his reticence – that what he proposes in the shorthand term présence can perhaps only be described as a philosophical endeavour inasmuch as it clearly aims to provide meaning not only for the intellectual, but also for the moral and ethical aspects of life and experience. In addition, Bonnefoy’s strong impetus to integrate and even produce présence in poetry can be seen as the epitome of the difficulty of making literature, and more particularly a literary form as constraining as poetry, take on a function that seems at least partially to eschew aesthetic ambitions in favour of something that resembles much more a philosophical project. This article thus discusses Bonnefoy’s notion of présence along two axes, identifying first that which he retains for his own purposes from the more traditional definitions of presence, and addressing then the issue of how he uses the tools of structuralism to counter the philosophical impossibility of presence proposed by the deconstructionist theories of the second half of the twentieth century.

Anchoring definitions: theology and philosophy

As suggested above, a first significant point in defining Bonnefoy’s ‘présence’ is that it can be seen as a form of retrieval, or recycling, in the sense that it is by no means an expression that Bonnefoy created ex-nihilo to further his own expressive needs. On the contrary, it is impossible to ignore its theo-philosophical origins. The Bibliothèque Nationale’s document on its 1992 Yves Bonnefoy exhibit clearly indicates the importance of this axis to his thought. Discussing his readings of Plotinus, Shestov and others, the text asks: ‘Were these readings philosophical or
rather theological?’ The answer is telling: ‘The most important ones lay on the boundaries between the two domains.’

As concerns the theological angle, a number of critics have pointed out the fact that Bonnefoy’s own use of presence recapitulates some of the more ‘technical’ aspects of how, theologically, the term figures the incarnation of the divine. Ronal Gérald Giguère, for example, suggests that

The notion of incarnation [in Bonnefoy’s poetry] can […] be linked with the Christian notion of God becoming flesh. According to Christian dogma, Christ incarnates the Father and the Verb, who are thus doubly given to the world, both by the Gospel and in the person of Christ. Could we not see poetic language as being given back to the world by Bonnefoy’s poetry? At the very least, is this poetry not the attempt to give poetic language back to the world through its incarnation of reality?

His comment recapitulates a goal that seems to subextend much of Bonnefoy’s focus on présence, appearing notably in the suggestion that presence can inhabit poetry through the latter’s own capacity to figure the world – that poetic language can be reality and allow the reader to commune with this reality. Giguère locates Bonnefoy’s vision of language within Christian imagery, but it is important to stress that the theological axis to Bonnefoy’s thought lies not so much in the narrative forms and symbols of Christianity – he himself explicitly says: ‘I am not a Christian; I have no faith’ – but rather in the fact that his writing aims to address notions of transcendence and communion that are germane to a broader spiritual viewpoint. More importantly perhaps, its theological roots colour Bonnefoy’s présence with the moral gravitas contained in the word, reinforcing his rejection of overtly aesthetic ambitions for poetry and highlighting the urgency of his need to communicate the idea itself through all the means at his disposal.

Still, Bonnefoy’s explicit denial of a Christian frame of reference recalls the fact that presence also has philosophical roots, and suggests that his ambivalence regarding theology gives added value to the significance of this second substratum. Indeed, in his own writing, philosophers such as Plato, Nietzsche, or Plotinus, among many others, continually appear as references or counterpoints to his thought. This orientation clearly colours his work, with David Jasper, for instance, suggesting that Bonnefoy’s philosophical grounding shifts ‘through Husserl and Heidegger towards an ethics of reading the ‘other’ in a hidden narrative whose possibility is ‘conditional on the unconditional responsibility of being-for-the-other.’ As with the theological connection, the philosophical origins of ‘presence’ strengthen his disavowal of the aesthetic claims of poetry. Along those lines, Jean Starobinski clearly expresses Bonnefoy’s position when he says that the writerly need expressed by Bonnefoy resembles an ‘ethical, or rather, ontological necessity far more than an aesthetic need.”

2 See, for example, Richard Vernier, David Jasper, John Naughton, et al.
These philosophical currents are plainly discernible in Bonnefoy’s writing, and have given rise to a substantial body of critical texts. It can be argued however that the need for the specific term ‘presence’ is perhaps motivated by a philosophical stance that is rooted in a form of opposition tempered by pragmatic utility that is linked to the challenge to the very notion of presence that Derrida brings to bear on Western metaphysics through his development of what has come to be known as deconstructionism.

The deconstructionist challenge

As concerns deconstruction, a number of critics have noted parallels between Bonnefoy’s position and that of Derrida. Alex Argyros, for example, suggests that for Derrida and Bonnefoy alike, ‘Presence is the possibility of integrity, of propriety (the proper, property – a ‘vrai lieu’ – etc.) and access which allows for the erection of truth as a normative principle.’ Indeed, it is patent that texts such as Bonnefoy’s ‘La Présence et l’Image,’ indicate a strongly held prise de position that correlates both with his thorough familiarity with the positions of deconstruction, but also with the great reserve he feels regarding its capacity to accurately express our relationship to the world and to language. Along those lines, his thumbnail sketch of the deconstructionist vision of the interaction between writer, text, and reader is clearly marked by his reticence. In deconstructionism, he writes,

It is not the author who is; it is his language, which is said to be neither false nor true, and signifies nothing more than itself. But they also add that this language is infinite; its forms and effects are dispersed throughout the book and can never be wholly summed up. Because of this, and more clearly so than in the past, the act of reading is said to hold a creative function – as long, of course, as the reader pays attention to the textual depths and gathers as many of them as possible within the network of his analysis. Reading has become a responsibility, a contribution; it is equal to writing and even an end in itself since the reader cannot consider himself as more real, more present to himself than the writer.

Though Bonnefoy’s description remains neutral on several points, his opposition to some of the more easily recognisable elements of the deconstructionist position – the challenge to the centrality of the author; the auto-referentiality of language; the absence of truth, of self-presence – is unmistakably marked by his own use of the conditional ‘serait’ (‘are said to be’), or the apposition ‘ajoute-t-on,’ (‘they add’) both of which allow him to take distance from these emblematic deconstructionist themes. For if it is clear that he can accept certain aspects of the re-evaluation of authority – and even embrace them, writing in ‘L’Analogie Suprême,’ ‘Yes, beneficial has been the challenge the reign of the author and of his utterance, in the name of the rights of language and of desire, those very things whose paths are impersonal’ – it is equally clear that his is a voice of opposition, for he continues with: ‘But this challenge cannot be maintained: the role of our inherent free will to decide that meaning exists must be recognized,

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7 See, among others, Steven Winspur’s ‘The Poetic Significance of the Thing-in-Itself’ or, more generally, the ‘Problèmes métaphysiques’ section of the 1983 University of Pau colloquium on Bonnefoy, and the more fully developed ‘philosophie’ section of the 2006 ‘Colloque de Cérisy.’ Similarly, the 2007 Poétique et Ontologie colloquium devoted to Bonnefoy clearly grapples specifically with this aspect of his work.
9 Bonnefoy’s 1981 ‘Leçon Inaugurale’ (Acceptance Speech) delivered after being elected to the Collège de France.
10 Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 224.
11 Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 176.


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and the author must reaffirm himself, if not through the eddies of writing, at least by his relation to his own work, to which he must assign meaning. Such statements make it difficult to exclude the idea that Bonnefoy’s strong adhesion to the notion of presence might also be anchored in a form of resistance. For despite their undoubted merit in forcing reflection on matters that had seemed thereto to have escaped critical analysis, the ideas proposed by Derrida have also met with general incomprehension and even fierce opposition. Thus it might be argued that inasmuch as Derrida’s thought is generally considered to be opposed to very possibility of a stable and unvarying presence, the intransigency of this position might have contributed to Bonnefoy’s desire to ‘salvage’ (a transposition of the ‘sauver’ he so frequently uses) the notion itself from the violence brought to it by the deconstructionist model.

Poetry and ‘l’acte poétique’

These are the outlines of the various definitions of presence and how they might have impacted Bonnefoy’s own ‘présence’. Before continuing, however, it is important to stress the primacy that poetry and the poetic act have for him because it is in the light of his feeling for poetry that some of his positions, and more particularly his intransigent attitude toward philosophy, become more comprehensible. Bonnefoy has clearly said that he feels himself to be first and foremost a poet; his mission is to render unto poetry the ancient transformative power it once held. For him, as his essay ‘Sur la fonction du poème’ suggests, poetry has a purpose, indeed, an ontological being that sets it apart from other literary forms. Critic Jacques Plessen indicates that this Bonnefoyian ‘fonction’ refers more to the semantic potential that lies in poetry than to a technical investigation into the details of how poetry works, or even an attempt to arrive at a definition of poetry. Plessen indicates that ‘in his reflection on poetry, Bonnefoy starts from the question […] “What can poetry do?” and not from “What is poetry, or how does it function?”’ This comment is entirely congruent with the position Bonnefoy holds: for him, poetry has a power that transcends the formal limitations of the words agglomerated on a page; poetry is, in fact, almost a belief. In a sense, his position is akin to Pascal’s leap of faith, stating that beyond rational understanding there exists a world which is no less real and true for not being immediately perceptible: ‘tout ce qui est incompréhensible ne laisse pas d’être.’ According to Bonnefoy, the salient fact is that poetry has power. And what it can do is give the reader access to the présence that forms the cornerstone of his poetics.

This focus on function leads to that minimising of the aesthetic value of poetry which is one of the more notable characteristics of Bonnefoy’s poetics. His position is marked by his adamant opposition to those who would see in poetry nothing more than the mere ‘effet de présence.’

There are critics who believe that certain words have been placed within a text to produce an effect via some form of writing strategy, and that this effect is what the author wants the reader to feel. But myself I believe that poetry begins when that plane of consciousness

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12 Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 176.
13 ‘On the Function of the Poem’
15 Note: Except for one, all translations from the French used in this paper are my own.
16 Trotter’s translation is the following: ‘Not all that is incomprehensible ceases to exist,’ but I feel that an expansion is necessary to really give the meaning of Pascalian phrase: ‘those things that are incomprehensible do not cease to exist [just because we don’t understand them].’
where we can perceive or delimit or desire to produce ‘effects’ dissipates. Words do not exist in a poem to produce an effect.\textsuperscript{18}

As his statement makes clear, his focus is not on style, but elsewhere, at a level is unquestionably linked to the connection between writing and presence: poetic words are not meant to simulate presence by means of an aesthetic conjuring trick; they are meant to truly provide it. It is the strength of this conviction that confers to Bonnefoy’s poetics its overtly moral bent. Bernard Falciola, for instance, says of Bonnefoy’s poetry that ‘one finds in it a concern that could be described at least equally as moral as aesthetic.’\textsuperscript{19} Falciola is not alone in this assessment; indeed many critics have pointed to this moral dimension, especially insofar as it conditions in large part what one might describe as the ‘tone’ of Bonnefoy’s own statements regarding his poetry. It also has an impact on the clear scission he makes between the ambitions of poetry and those of philosophy, and his commensurate repudiation of any ‘philosophical explanation’ for his work.

**Inseparable bodies: présence and philosophy**

And yet, Bonnefoy is unable to create a hermetic separation between the two domains. Indeed, when he addresses the notion of a schism separating poetry from philosophy, the surface of his discourse seems to express a resolute rejection of the very notion of ‘philosophising’ as when he writes:

> I refuse to use any philosophical means whatsoever to address the problem of that which can be perceived. Affirming is my only concern. […] I cannot, I have no desire to construct the dialectics of the world, embedding the perceivable within Being with the meticulous patience of metaphysics: my intent is only to name. Behold the perceivable world. Speech, that sixth and highest sense, must go forth to meet it and decipher its signs. The only pleasure I take is in this task alone, in the quest for the secret that Kierkegaard had lost.

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It would be difficult to imagine a clearer repudiation of philosophy. Nevertheless despite his disavowal of a philosophical approach to the problem of expressing ‘le sensible,’ Bonnefoy builds the whole structure of his utterance around an explicitly philosophical lexicon. Indeed, the ambivalence contained in the explicit desire to reject philosophy, and the specifically ‘philosophical’ framework within which that rejection takes place, is not without significance, for the resistance expressed here in terms of an opposition between a notion of philosophy and the acts of ‘affirming’ and ‘naming,’ points to the real tension lying at the core of Bonnefoy’s writing, namely the uneasy cohabitation created by his overt rejection of conceptual systems, and his simultaneous need for those same systems in order to efficiently convey an intellectually coherent thought process. This need is of course linked to the importance he attributes to the task of transmitting presence, for the semantics of the word ‘affirming’ itself calls up the idea of a conviction one seeks to impart.

Indeed, the problem of ‘affirming’ rather than ‘philosophising’ is linked in large part to the telos of expressing presence through writing. And as Bonnefoy himself is painfully aware, presence is an experiential quality of interaction that, almost by definition, cannot be mediated

\textsuperscript{18} Bonnefoy, Nuage, 351.

\textsuperscript{19} Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 30.


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by language: ‘What can words retain or say,’ he writes, ‘when presence gives itself in the
universe of the instant?’ Insurmountably, however, Bonnefoy is forced to use language to
express this presence, and this is perhaps where the originality of his thought is most evident.
For the notion embedded in the text cited above of speech as a sixth sense also resonates for
those who, like Bonnefoy, are familiar with the very specific vocabulary of structuralism.
Indeed, his definition of ‘la parole’ as the highest of the human senses relies on the
nomenclature used by structuralist thinkers. Simultaneously, however, Bonnefoy’s statement
extracts the act of speaking from the structure of language where structural linguistics situates it,
and places it in a wholly personal configuration that associates it with the physical senses.

This unusual strategy is linked to the difficulty of finding a solid ‘technical’ foundation for
the specificity of poetic language and its capacity to formally integrate the notion of presence.
Indeed, to return briefly to the word ‘sensible’ (‘obtainable through the senses’) evoked in
Bonnefoy’s statement, the term itself is an earlier avatar of the more familiar ‘présence’. In a
1972 interview, he explains why he eschewed ‘le sensible’:

It is a word (‘le sensible’) which I no longer use because it could be interpreted as meaning
‘concrete,’ ‘limited to sensory perception,’ when for me it is not linked to the appearance,
to the texture of the world, but on the contrary, to that which slips out of perception even if
in exchange it confers on perception its intensity and seriousness of purpose.

This comment allows us to glean a notion of what présence is not, that is, one understands that it
is not only the natural quality of the world – its ‘texture’ – but rather something which
simultaneously lies beyond perception, and acts on this very perception to give it an impact
stronger that a mere physical experience of the world.

And yet, the question remains of how such a project might be accomplished. Bonnefoy’s
comments about deconstructionists demonstrate his familiarity with contemporary literary
problems and their implications on his own work. However, I would argue from a more
technical perspective that if what Bonnefoy takes from deconstructionism are important and
useful ways to re-evaluate the relationship between writer, writing and meaning, in reality, many
of the fundamental building blocks of this re-evaluation of language are the result not so much of
deconstructionist investigations into language and meaning as the work of Saussurean structural
linguistics. Indeed, based on the way Bonnefoy positions his belief in the potential for language
to integrate présence, coupled with the terminology he uses, the impact on his thought of
structuralist linguistic analyses is undeniable. And while it is doubtless true that structuralism
has been largely disgraced by more contemporary linguistic theories, particularly on the
American continent, it remains a vibrant source of mental imagery and reference, perhaps even
more so for a writer of Bonnefoy’s generation.

A structural lexicon

What has particularly interested me is that Bonnefoy goes beyond a simple re-inscription into his
own work of structuralist vocabulary – most notably the signifier/signified tandem that
composes Saussure’s conception of the sign, and the crucial ‘langue, langage, parole’ (speech
capacity, language, utterance) triad. Rather, Bonnefoy’s approach toward structuralism seems
simultaneously to involve a rather specific resistance to its underlying principles, coupled with a

21 Bonnefoy, Improbable, 126.
22 Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 58.
significant recategorization of the Saussurean vocabulary, which he then seamlessly incorporates into his own work. This re-categorization has also been noted by Bruno Gelas, who writes that:

Bonnefoy would doubtless not disclaim [the framework of linguistic thinking] especially insofar it is structured around the idea of whether words are the place and the object of an exchange between those who speak. But he displaces the terms: that which he names ‘langue/parole’ has no real relation with the Saussurean opposition between ‘virtual vs. realized’ […] (the question then being that of understanding why he nevertheless continues to use this conceptual pair).23

Gelas’ point is well-taken, and his question certainly pertinent. The answer, I would suggest, lies in Bonnefoy’s need to rationalise the possibility for présence within the poetic text. In point of fact, what is fascinating is not only the fact that Bonnefoy uses terms that are such clear codes of a structuralist outlook, but that he integrates them so totally into his own position that he seems to completely forget their ‘adopted’ origin. For example, in an oral reaction to a paper read at a conference on his work, Bonnefoy responds by saying that he agrees with the analysis, but that he must ‘transcribe it into my own personal language, which uses the categories of ‘presence,’ ‘language,’ and ‘utterance.’’24 This ‘personal language,’ needless to say, reproduces terms taken from the Saussurean sources.

And yet, of Saussure’s tripartate structure for language (langage, langue and parole), not all elements have equal importance in Bonnefoy’s mental landscape. Indeed, Bonnefoy focuses almost exclusively on langue and parole, which are vital to his thought. In the Saussurean model, these two terms are symbiotically linked, though conceptualised in an oppositional relation. Langue (language) is an abstraction, a collective notion that is a sort of mental storehouse containing the rules and structures needed to produce communication, but parole refers to a concrete activity that is strictly individual. Saussure refers to it as the ‘execution’ of language, writing: ‘execution is never carried out by the collectivity. Execution is always individual, and the individual is always its master: I shall call the executive side speaking [parole].’25

The importance for Bonnefoy of this third element of the Saussurean triangle cannot be overestimated inasmuch as the term ‘parole’ points to the essential contribution of the individual speaking being which he emphatically claims for us when he comments, for example: ‘In fact, parole is much vaster than language, and it carries that which language does not, that is, hope placed in the future, a displacement toward other states within the relation of the subject speaking to himself and to others.’26 Even more importantly, Bonnefoy’s statement also indicates the capacity of parole to break out of the bonds of the linguistic system and provide the theoretical opening of language to présence inasmuch as it is always an act determined in a specific moment by an individual speaker. Succinctly, thus, one might say that for Bonnefoy, ‘parole’ is the wedge driven into the heart of all linguistic representation, forcing an opening at the place where language tends naturally to seal itself – and us – off from life.

But concretely, how can parole, the ordinary utterance of any person, become présence? John Naughton sheds some light on the matter when he accurately pinpoints the origin of présence as being extra-linguistic. He writes: ‘it is important to stress […] that when Bonnefoy speaks of

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24 Bonnefoy, Poésie, Art et Pensée 132, my emphasis.
26 Bonnefoy, Poésie, Art et Pensée, 402.
presence, he is evoking what first of all occurs outside the world of language. Poetry does not begin as words, it begins as a relation.27 Naughton’s position is difficult to contradict, particularly since it concurs with much of what Bonnefoy has himself indicated over the course of his writing. And yet, this view of the situation has its own shortcomings: in a sense it simply begs the issue, insofar as the problem that faces Bonnefoy is not so much acknowledging the inner conviction that ‘any element of creation, however simple and ‘impoverished,’ may become a presence, may become the lamp that beckons toward unity,’28 but rather the very concrete problem of how to convey not only this conviction, but even more importantly, présence itself through language.

Bonnefoy’s solution to the problem is simultaneously abstract and practical in the sense that he relies on concrete elements derived from linguistics to provide a theoretical perspective that criticizes the deconstructionist rejection of language’s capacity to fully express presence. Indeed, in response to the famous Hegelian observation that language can apprehend neither the ‘here’ nor the ‘now’ as objective entities, but can only grasp them as movements indicating absence, Bonnefoy acknowledges the impact that Hegel’s observation had on his own thinking: ‘It was precisely those pages from the Phenomenology of the Mind, those pages on the here-and-now, that were one of the fundamental shocks of my poetic thinking.’29 The response he brings to bear indicates, however, his visceral opposition to Hegel, as Christian Berg indicates when he argues that in Bonnefoy’s position ‘the Hegelian mechanism is reversed because rather than binding consciousness to knowledge, sensate experience – the keystone of Bonnefoy’s poetics – ejects it, expropriates it, and dooms it to absence and death.’30

Berg’s point is well-taken, for Bonnefoy’s opposition to conceptual knowledge has been clearly established in critical literature, and subtends indeed his attempt to extract the notion of présence from its inherently philosophical framework. His earlier texts in particular, equate presence with reality, setting it in direct opposition with the idea of ‘concept.’ His position is most clearly evoked in an early essay where he writes, ‘nothing is less real than the concept,’31 leading us in the same essay through a litany of real things which can impinge on us, but which cannot be conceptually expressed:

the least concept is a master of evasion […] Is there a concept for a footprint in the night, for a cry, for a rock tumbling in the underbrush? For the impression felt in an empty house? Of course not, the concept retains of reality only those things that allow us repose.32

In large part, then, it is his definition of presence as an anti-conceptual experience, an act bound by time and place – the ‘here’ and ‘now’ that Hegel cannot account for – that allows Bonnefoy

28 Naughton, 47.
29 Bonnefoy, Poésie, Art, Pensée 45. Hegel writes in paragraph 97 of the first section of the ‘Consciousness’ chapter: ‘It is as a universal too that we utter what the sensuous [content] is. What we say is: ‘This’, i.e. the universal ‘This’; or ‘it is’ i.e, Being in general. Of course, we do not envisage the universal This, or Being in general, but we utter the universal; in other words, we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we mean to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves refute what we directly mean to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, the sensuous being that we mean’ (Miller translation, 60).
31 Bonnefoy, Improbable 19.
32 Bonnefoy, Improbable 15.
both to reject the philosophical dimension of presence and to seek a means to justify its possibility in language.

Concretely, thus, Bonnefoy’s refusal of the Hegelian model is materialised in his projection of the capacities of poetry. In response to the well-known association Hegel makes in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* between ‘now’ and ‘night’ (‘To the question: “What is Now?”’, let us answer, e.g. “Now is Night”’), Bonnefoy equates poet Gérard de Nerval with Hegel, writing: ‘Yes, “now” is night is also what the author of *Aurélia* [Nerval] tells us, along with “here” is night also. The access to unity is barred by monsters, which are our illusions.’

Bonnefoy suggests that even if Hegel’s association might have been randomly chosen, the semantic weight of the word ‘night’ translates a certain anguish to which there is a possible response. Thus Bonnefoy continues: ‘But we have to move forward among these shadows. And if now is night, nothing says that tomorrow, by the grace of a few poems, a bit of daylight will not appear, thus making it clear that his rejection of the Hegelian model is contained in poetry. His project is unquestionably ambitious, but it is precisely, I would suggest, the Saussurean framework that allows him to find a means to oppose the Hegelian limitations on language. For if language itself is the problem for Hegel’s approach to expressing the deictic *hic et nunc*, Bonnefoy’s reversal of the Hegelian model uses the tools provided by Saussure to suggest a means to resolve the problem of indicating deixis through language.

In fine, the perception Saussure and Bonnefoy have of linguistic terms appears as though each of them perceived the same image through opposite sides of a single lens. For if the high value Bonnefoy gives to *parole* does indeed derive from the characteristics that Saussure imputes to it, Bonnefoy’s approach demonstrates that he is inverting the structure and values that Saussure presents. The latter dismisses *parole* as an inadequate object of study. He defines ‘the instances of *parole*’ as ‘self-willed, short-lived, variable, contingent,’ and concludes that because of these characteristics, ‘the study of *parole* must by no means interfere with the study of *langue*, which is the sole object of linguistics.’

For Bonnefoy, in contrast, it is the very contingency, variability and ephemeral quality of *parole* that allows it to faithfully reproduce the nature of reality. He describes the quality of this reality to be eminently anchored in the passing of time, in irreversible choices made, in our necessary reaction to the vicissitudes of the unforeseen:

> It is what determines […] our real existence, within lived experience, and which consists in the passing of time that we are subject to, the limits, the unforeseen simultaneities, the way chance takes our acts away from us, etc. It is everything that we could call our bodily existence, with all that that idea implies in terms of quick decisions, irrevocable choices, obstinacy – and in terms of reflection also, attentively or compassionately, on these aspects of reality.

All of these undeniable aspects of the reality experienced by individuals in their embodied, ‘incarnated’ selves, are, for Bonnefoy, encapsulated in the use of *parole*. And it is precisely this double capacity of *parole* to be the expression of the individual speaking being, while being the

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35 Bonnefoy, *Vérité de parole*, 60.
37 Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 62.
accurate reflection of reality that allows it – potentially – to become a harbour for présence. As he writes ‘The difficulty of poetry is that language is a system, while its utterance is presence.’

The limitations of poetry

And yet, Bonnefoy’s careful intellectual construction, using the building blocks of structuralism to rationalise the possibility for presence to inhabit language seems also to fail him. A first level of concern addresses what might be seen as the latent anxiety that poetry might not provide sufficient access to presence. This concern is one that is certainly not limited to Bonnefoy, but constitutes one of the leitmotifs of contemporary poetics. Stephen Winspur reports Roland Barthes’s assessment of modern poetry as an ‘objective poetry,’ concerned with recapturing an ‘infrasignification, a presemiological state of language’ and trying to reach ‘the transcendent quality of things.’

Given the desire to attain a ‘presemiological’ object located beyond language, Winspur asks the very valid question, ‘how does the poem’s linguistic structure create the appearance of being its exact opposite – an ideal, or Kantian, object uncontaminated by language?’ In other words, how can a poem, which perforce must deal with language, erase that same language to reveal the referent of the word, that is, the thing itself?

This problem is particularly acute for Bonnefoy, for as Arnaud Buchs points out, this same criticism can be addressed to the notion of presence itself, especially in the adamant opposition Bonnefoy makes between it and conceptual systems. Buch writes:

The concept must be cast aside in order to access what Bonnefoy calls presence – also written Presence, thus showing the problem more clearly – which is said to be the apprehension of the object such as it is outside of language. Already we see the first paradox of a poetics conceived as the pure reflectivity of language, as the criticism of language by language, the denunciation of the concept by the concept (for indeed, what are the One, Presence, the Image and the other broad terms of Bonnefoy’s poetics if not concepts?); poetry seems not to have the means to escape from this circle. It is, on the contrary, a headlong flight towards ever more language whereas what it wants is a return to something resembling a pre-linguistic apprehension of reality.

Thus Bonnefoy’s tenacious faith in the capacities of poetic language to provide readers with an experience of presence stumbles, in the end, on the duality of presence itself and the difficulties that accompany its transmission, thus demonstrating the true difficulty of making a purely literary text bear the burden of conveying position that is eminently philosophical.

Conclusion: the essay as a potential solution

As I have argued more completely elsewhere, in the end, and in spite of his stated conviction that poetic language can render presence, this presence cannot be served by poetry alone. This fact is borne out by the body of Bonnefoy’s writing and his overwhelming reliance on the essay to convey his ars poetica. Indeed, much of the impetus driving the writing and structuring of his essays resides in a need to provide a more manageable and perhaps more stable access to the

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38 Bonnefoy, Entretiens, 67, emphasis Bonnefoy.
40 Winspur, 42.
41 Arnaud Buchs, Yves Bonnefoy à l’horizon du surréalisme, (Paris, Galilée, 2005) 11-12.
42 ‘Fragmentation and Unity: Language and its becoming in the Essays of Yves Bonnefoy.’

A Saussurean Solution: Embodying 'Presence' in Yves Bonnefoy's Poetics. Layla Roesler.
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The notion of *présence* and this is linked not only to the conceptual nature of presence, but also to the socio-cultural role of poetry in the contemporary literary landscape and the fact that it has remained, or has even *become* the most intransitive of genres because of its perceived obscurity and potential inability to communicate to a broad readership.

Bonnefoy's reliance on the essay to complement his poetry can thus be seen as an attempt to inflect the reader's capacity to recognize and embrace the true experience of *présence* within the poetic text. Indeed, if Bonnefoy's firm commitment to the notion allows him to posit the capacity of poetic language to convey it, far less certain is the idea that readers not conditioned to recognize it will adequately perceive *présence* in a text. In some way, then, the reader must be taught to 'see' it. Perhaps the essay, which allows for a description of presence that cannot be given in poetry, is the most efficient means of doing so. A second, even more pragmatic consideration that parallels this potential 'training' of the reader is the inescapable fact that we live in a society with diminishing numbers of readers of poetry. As a consequence, poetry alone may not touch significant numbers of readers, and may thus not allow enough readers to come into contact with the notion of *présence* which is Bonnefoy's primary objective. The purpose of his essays is thus potentially two-fold, first, at a lesser level, they inform readers of the larger capacity of language contained in poetry, and secondly, they prime the readers and encourage them to turn to poetry in order to seek what Bonnefoy calls the 'salvation' that can be found there.

But in the end, if literature, in the form of poetry, is the ardently desired *telos* of this position, the limitations of purely literary writing are manifest: though poetry *may* contain presence, that simple possibility is not enough to encompass its full philosophical complexity through poetic language alone. Bonnefoy anxiety transpires in the poem 'Le Haut du Monde:'

Est-il vrai que les mots soient sans promesse
Eclair immense en vain,
Coffre qui étincelle mais plein de cendres?43

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43 Is it true that words are promiseless
An immense flash of lightening in vain
A dazzling coffer but filled with ashes?
Feeling Moral Obligation and Living in an Organic Unity: Virginia Woolf’s response to G. E. Moore
Rohini Shukla

Introduction – Climbing the Cathedral Spire

There is an abundance of scholarly work on the topic of Virginia Woolf’s writings and philosophy. One popular trend uses the theoretical framework of continental philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, Nietzsche, and Montaigne, amongst others, and argues that Woolf’s works are literary embodiments or instantiations of their concepts, methods, or even entire philosophies.\(^1\) Another trend repudiates any connection between Woolf’s literature and philosophy altogether, denying that the latter can provide any insight into the former.\(^2\) This denial seems reasonable, for Woolf wrote in times when traditionally accepted answers to amaranthine philosophical questions were vehemently doubted. Lackey calls this phase in the intellectual history of European thought ‘modernist anti-philosophicalism.’\(^3\) Modernist anti-philosophicalism can more appropriately be called modernist anti-metaphysicalism, for it was primarily a critique of the metaphysical dogma propounded throughout the history of Western philosophy – from Plato up to Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes and Kant.\(^4\) Much of significance is the fact that British philosopher G.E. Moore, a contemporary of Woolf, was a pioneering proponent of anti-metaphysicalism,\(^5\) and interestingly, we know that Woolf engaged with his magnum opus – *Principia Ethica* (1903).\(^6\) Despite the proliferation of secondary literature on Woolf’s writings and philosophy, an exposition of the precise influence of Moore’s thought on Woolf’s writing is curiously lacking. Indeed, reducing her writings to literary articulations of what other philosophers have said, as has been the popular trend, denies her any philosophical merit in her own right. When Woolf writes, ‘I am climbing Moore like some industrious insect determined to build a nest on the top of a

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\(^3\) Lackey 77.


Cathedral spire,” it is up to the critic to explicate the precise nature of this climb, as I attempt to do in this paper.

I begin with a brief exposition of Moore’s notion of ‘the good’ as experiencing moral obligation within an organic community. In doing so, I highlight a crucial loophole within his conceptual framework – he does not theorise the conditions for the possibility of experiencing moral obligation, and therefore renders ‘the good’ ultimately ineffective in taking moral decisions. In the second section, I read Woolf’s novel To the Lighthouse (1927) as conceptualising precisely the conditions for the possibility of moral obligation missing in Moore’s framework, in explicitly epistemological terms – the ability to experience what Martin Štelf calls ‘states of heightened perceptive intensity.’ Furthermore, I argue that Woolf partakes in the anti-metaphysicalist and anti-naturalist rebellion characteristic of Moore’s ethical theory by articulating a ‘new materialism.’ Her crucial philosophical intervention lies in conceptualising this new materialism as at once logically continuous with Moore’s realism and critical of the subject–object dichotomy he upholds.

G. E. Moore’s Ethics - Moral Obligation and Moral Excess

In Principia Ethica, Moore regards ‘the good’ as the most fundamental ethical concept. He does not however use the good as an adjective or an attribute, as in good person or good car where the standard of evaluating ‘goodness’ is the object it is attributed of. It is precisely such an account of goodness essential to ethical naturalism that Moore is attempting to avoid in his own ethical theory. Ethical naturalism as James Rachels defines it is the idea that ‘moral properties (such as goodness and rightness) are identical with “natural” properties, that is, properties that figure into scientific descriptions or explanations of things.’ Moore’s main criticism of ethical naturalism is that it involves commitment to the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (PE 111) – a fallacy that he claims to have infected ‘almost every book on ethics’ (PE 62). Of particular interest is the crucial aspect of this fallacy, amongst others, of confusing a non-natural property (what Rachels calls moral properties) for a natural property (PE 91).

Moore takes natural properties like colour to be constituent parts of wholes, such that without the parts, the wholes are rendered ‘contentless’ (PE 66). He writes about the good, contrasting it with natural properties:

it is immediately obvious that when we see a thing to be good, its goodness is not a property which we can take up in our hands, or separate from it even by the most delicate scientific instruments, and transfer to something else. It is not, in fact, like most of the predicates which we ascribe to things, a part of the thing to which we ascribe it. (PE 124)

In arguing thus, Moore seems to tacitly assume that ethical naturalism amounts to reducing ethics only to the natural sciences. Ethical naturalism could in principle involve reducing goodness to a

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9 Štelf 20.
value conceptualised in naturalistic terms, like pleasure.\textsuperscript{13} Moore does not however consider this form of ethical naturalism, because his primary concern is to repudiate ethics from the natural sciences. Moore’s concern indeed fits neatly within the larger concerns of the modernist world view E.M. Adams talks about in Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View – the unconscious longing to define the relationship between the language and methods of science, and the language and experience of values, either in terms of reconciliation or final repudiation.\textsuperscript{14} Moore seeks final repudiation, by espousing a conception of the good as devoid of any concrete existence. That is, unlike natural properties, the good is considered to have no existential implications.\textsuperscript{15} The important question then is, if the good is not a physical part of a whole the way yellow is part of a yellow object, what enables us to ‘see a thing to be good’ according to Moore? 

We must first inquire into the kind of ‘things’ Moore considers to be good. Ross interprets the Moorean notion of goodness to be a property of states of affairs.\textsuperscript{16} This interpretation captures the essentially social nature of goodness that Moore is concerned with, for a state of affairs would involve a multiplicity of individuals and the relationships between them in particular situations. It does not seem, however, to account for another, perhaps more significant, concern of Moore’s – the experienced directness of our moral evaluations which then translate into action. Moore believes that we are all aware of a certain ‘simple, indefinable and unanalysable object of thought’ (72 PE) by which we mean the term good. He says, ‘good is good, and that is the end of the matter’ (PE 58). He explains the meaning of simplicity by drawing an analogy between yellow and the good – it is the indivisibility of goodness into other concepts like happiness or pleasure, similar to how the colour yellow cannot be further divided, by way of analysis (PE 59). Simplicity therefore implies indefinability and unanalysability – the good cannot be defined in terms of pleasure, and yellow in terms of blue, for both are wholes in themselves (PE 52).

Here, Warnock highlights a crucial disanalogy that escapes Moore’s attention. Yellow can be ostensibly defined, whereas the good cannot, and arguing that the good is in some way ostensibly definable would amount to an obvious naturalistic fallacy.\textsuperscript{17} Despite this disanalogy, however, there seems to me to be another fundamental similarity between the good and yellow that Moore is emphasising through the analogy. He asserts that ‘just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is’ (PE 59). Here, one’s inability to explain to another what yellow and good are comes from the fact that the two are epistemologically available only directly – the former through perception of sense data, and the latter through what Baldwin terms ‘veridical ethical intuitions.’\textsuperscript{18} The difference between these modes of knowing – perceiving and intuiting is, as Nick Zangwill points out, that the former is aposteriori whereas the latter is apriorti. The latter is apriorti, not in the Cartesian sense of having eternal ideas planted in human minds by God; using contemporary vocabulary, Zangwill interprets Moore’s notion of goodness as a modal principle – ‘moral

\textsuperscript{13} Baldwin 82.
\textsuperscript{15} Baldwin 101.
\textsuperscript{18} Baldwin 101.

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supervenience.'

Zangwill argues that moral supervenience ‘is an essential characteristic of moral properties and it is an essential characteristic of our thought about moral properties.’

We ‘see’ a thing as good in relation with other natural properties of the same thing. The crucial point is that unlike ethical naturalism as Rachels defines it, Moore does not believe that natural and non-natural properties are identical, causally or essentially related. The latter supervenes the former. Moore’s ingenuity lies in pointing out that despite the relation of supervenience, there is a certain directness with which we epistemologically access both natural and non-natural properties – just as we see a thing as yellow, we ‘see’ a thing as good, and this seeing forms the grounds for our commonsensical inference that the two exist.

Now, given Ross’s interpretation of goodness as a property of states of affairs, we must ask, how would being able to see the good as a property of states of affairs lead to ethical action? In order to account for the strands of utilitarianism articulated in Principia Ethica, one would first have to conceptualise humans as moral agents, and not just beings who have certain perceptual abilities, as Ross does in his interpretation. In other words, Ross implies that ‘the good’ is about states of affairs; quite inconsistently with Moore’s objective of theorising what it is to ‘do’ good, the nature of the human self as a moral agent remains unaddressed.

I therefore refrain from using Ross’s interpretation and instead espouse Baldwin’s interpretation of goodness as ‘the concept whose application to states of affairs issues in a specification of what, in a particular situation, one ought to do.’ Here, the question of human agency (what one ought to do in particular situations) and the social nature of the good (as being applicable not just to individuals but to states of affairs/situations) are accounted for. Furthermore, the directness of moral evaluations is explained anew. One does not merely ‘see’ the good; one ‘applies’ the concept, assuming the former, thereby bridging the gap between seeing or knowing the good and ethical action. The application of the concept takes the form of ‘moral obligation,’ argues Baldwin, such that, in doing good one would essentially feel obliged to partake in a creative project – that of creating x state of affairs as against y ‘all things considered,’ knowing that x will be intrinsically better by itself. Here, the phrase ‘all things considered’ is reflective of Moore’s ideal utilitarianism. It implies, rather ironically, that the value of x state of affairs becomes apparent independent of any other contingencies, including the utility value or consequences that might follow from creating it. Furthermore, feeling obliged to create the good would be preceded by comparative acts of imagination, because a particular state of affairs would become evident as intrinsically better only in relation with other states of affairs. In Moore’s words, a ‘comprehensive comparison of the ordinary judgements of mankind’ will make what creating the good involves evident (PE 137). Hence, as James Fieser puts it, creating an intrinsically better state of affairs would mean doing something ‘morally commendable’ when there is no logical necessity to do so. That is, it is not logically necessary, but only morally obligatory to create an intrinsically better state of affairs, after the relative moral worth of different states of affairs has been imagined and evaluated.

20 Zangwill 126.
21 Zangwill 127.
22 Baldwin 76.
23 Baldwin 76.
24 Baldwin 77.
Interestingly, Moore considers the relationship between actions and obligation as synthetic (PE 58). That is, what one feels obliged to do can only be inferred from what one actually does. Without such inferences we would be fruitlessly speculating. Conceiving the relationship between moral obligation and ethical action as synthetic leads to nothing but a reinforcement of generally accepted norms. The result of considering all things, turns out to be after all, as Leonard Woolf notes in his autobiography, an uncritical conservatism and therefore thoroughly divorced from politics. Moore’s argument is indeed an instance of circular reasoning – everyone ought to (feel obliged to) do what everyone does, because everyone does it. It is at this juncture that I would like to elaborate on Moore’s notion of ‘organic unities’ (PE 76), and pursue a new line of critique.

Organic unity is the idea that ‘the value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts’ (PE 79). It follows from this principle that given a particular state of affairs, its value cannot be reduced to the value of its parts, whether the parts are themselves intrinsically good or good only as a means. We must therefore inquire into precisely the excess moral value that cannot be accounted for using the sum of its parts. In evaluating the intrinsic value of different states of affairs, what enables one to experience moral obligation to create a particular state of affairs, over the other, based on their respective moral excesses? In answering this question, we need to explain the conditions for the possibility of feeling moral obligation, given that the value of wholes cannot be reduced to the value of parts. Without having the conceptual grounds for experiencing moral obligation clear, Moore’s notion of the good is rendered ineffective, for a comparison between multiple intrinsic values will not be possible. To my mind, the crucial loophole in Moore’s notion of the good seems to be the failure to account for what the conditions for the possibility of moral obligation are.

**Virginia Woolf’s intervention - If only he could see**

Far from being able to create or even participate in his familial or social state of affairs, Mr Ramsay feels no moral obligation whatsoever; a compelling sense of moral inertia breeds within him, such that he even fails to acknowledge his actions as having consequences that affect others and his relationship with them – be it his intemperance, his brutish sarcasm, or his tendency to rub things in. Mr Ramsay is a metaphysician by profession. His student Charles Tansley considers him ‘the greatest metaphysician of the time’ (TL 86); Mr Banks tells the reader soon after that ‘his last book was not quite his best book’ (TL 89). Naturally, Mr Ramsay is fraught with insecurities about his intellectual and personal worth, and in moments of extreme self-deprecation says metaphysics is no different from ‘talking nonsense’ (TL 97).

The image of a dismal philosopher, and philosophy barely able to subsist as an academic discipline reappears in Woolf’s literary oeuvre. These depictions alone are insufficient to argue that Woolf partook in the anti-metaphysicalist rebellion, although they are symptomatic of an in-depth and systematic engagement with philosophy. In this section, I take on the task of elaborating on Inglis’s assertion that ‘Woolf, properly read could help us towards a more balanced view that these two aspects of the novel (the ethical and epistemological) vitally interpenetrate one

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27 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New Delhi: UBSPD Pvt Ltd, 2012 [1927]) 38-42. (Hereafter TL)
28 In *Orlando: A Biography*, the protagonist often engages with philosophy – he reads ‘Bishop Berkeley’s philosophy for the tenth time’ (197). Lackey coherently demonstrates how the demise of philosophy from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century is systematically traced in this novel (80-81).

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another,’29 by reading To the Lighthouse as conceptualising precisely the conditions for the possibility of moral obligation lacking in Moore’s framework, in explicitly epistemological terms – the ability to experience states of heightened perceptive intensity. Woolf partakes in the anti-metaphysicalist and anti-naturalist rebellion characteristic of Moore’s philosophy, by articulating a new materialism, at once continuous with Moore’s realism and yet critical of the subject–object dichotomy he upholds.

Mr Ramsay’s mental space is invaded by Ps and Qs and Rs. He often speculates,

He reached Q … But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in distance … Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate … Meanwhile, he was stuck at Q. On, then, on to R. (TL 80-82)

Mr Ramsay believes that speculation about property-less metaphysical universals will yield him the ‘immutable, non-relative Truth,’30 a pursuit that presupposes ‘an ahistorical and universal thinking faculty that uses logic.’31 It is not a coincidence that Mr Ramsay is well versed in the pioneering figures of transcendent empiricism, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, and the bastion epoch of ‘reason’ – the French Revolution (TL 97). Consequent to his preoccupation with the metaphysical, Mr Ramsay is as though ‘born blind, deaf and dumb, to the ordinary things’ (TL 134). Mrs Ramsay asks herself out of sheer frustration, ‘But did he notice the flowers? No. Did he notice the view? No. Did he even notice his own daughter’s beauty, or whether there was pudding on his plate or roast beef?’ (TL 134). Indeed, his perceptual field is scant and narrow, compared to others who inhabit the same spaces.

Mr Banks on the other hand puts everything in his vision to the test of science. Lily shows Mr Banks her painting, and ‘he turned – with his glasses raised to the scientific examination of her canvas’ (TL 109). She is disappointed at his inability to appreciate, or even approximate comprehending it. Both Mr Ramsay and Banks uphold the subject object dichotomy, by taking for granted the independent existence of their respective objects of perception; the former is concerned with metaphysical objects, the latter with objects of science. It is important to note a fundamental difference between the epistemological consequences of dealing with their respective objects – scientific examination does not block Mr Banks from mundane objects of perception, as Mr Ramsay’s metaphysical speculation does. Banks is baffled at the sight of Lily’s painting because it is a ‘purple shadow with irreverence’ (TL 108) that she takes to aesthetically represent Mrs Ramsay. His comprehension, his ability to understand and appreciate a complex piece of art is impaired, while his perceptual abilities, unlike those of Mr Ramsay remain intact.

When Moore claims epistemological significance for our commonsensical belief that the directness of our perception warrants the independent existence of objects we perceive, he is critical of precisely the metaphysical dogma Mr Ramsay is invested in. For Moore, as we saw, a discussion of Ps and Qs devoid of sense data (arising from natural properties) is futile because it disregards how we perceive them. Moore’s own intellectual trajectory, beginning with contempt for metaphysical dogma inherent to Kant’s transcendental empiricism and Hegel’s absolute idealism, to realising the limits of his sense data theory rendered common-sense his theoretical

30 Lackey 77.
31 Lackey 77.
We also examined Moore’s notion of the naturalistic fallacy as problematising the influence of natural sciences in the realm of ethics. While Mr. Banks makes value judgements through scientific examination, Moore’s attempt is to account for simple non-natural properties such as the good (and beauty), without reducing them to objects of the scientific method. In doing so however – accounting for natural and non-natural properties within the theoretical framework of common-sense (not metaphysics or natural science), Moore upholds the historically cherished subject-object, perceiver-perceived dichotomy; much of his later career was spent in formulating a proof for the existence of the external world as independent of individual perceivers.33

Woolf shared with Moore the contempt for materialism. In Modern Fiction, she makes her anti-materialist/anti-empiricist stance clear by asserting that the materialist writers34 ‘write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.’35 The materialist writer is invested in describing the empirically visible, the seemingly true and enduring facts, none of which are of Woolf’s concern. For Woolf took recourse in the ‘dark places of psychology.’36 If nineteenth-century European philosophers like Heidegger, Cassirer, Russell, Carnap, Lukacs and Goldman considered the emerging discipline of psychology as their central point of counter-attack, Woolf readily embraced it giving rise to what Martin Jay calls an ‘aesthetic and literary modernism.’37 Stream of consciousness as a method, which captures the fluidity of thought as opposed to the fixity of empirically visible objects, suggests Woolf’s anti-materialistic predilections. Her philosophical intervention is however not limited to this much celebrated formal invention. Implicit in To the Lighthouse is what Martin Štelf calls Woolf’s ‘new materialism.’38 Quite unlike Mr Ramsay and Mr Banks, we often find Mrs Ramsay held captive by what she sees. As she knitted a pair of socks or simply sat around, she ‘became the thing she looked at’ (TL 124) – the ray of light projected by the lighthouse, rhythmically intersecting her field of perception. It is such moments, when the perceiving subject ‘literally as well as metaphorically’39 mixes itself with surrounding material objects, that Martin Štelf terms states of heightened perceptive intensity. In the very act of perceiving itself the distinction between the perceiving subject and the perceived object collapses. This collapse is not symptomatic of Woolf’s mystic tendencies, as it seems at face value. As Julie Kane argues, tracing Woolf’s intellectual relationship with mysticism and theosophy of her times, moments of heightened perceptive intensity articulated in her later works embody Woolf’s attempts to capture ‘the authenticity of perceptions.’40

Woolf’s new materialism, if not mystic, does seem antithetical to Moore’s philosophy. For the idea of a subject literally blending with an object flies in the face of common sense. Despite this seeming inconsistency, I establish continuity between Moore’s realism and Woolf’s new materialism. It is very much to Moore’s credit that Woolf could articulate her critique of the

32 Baldwin 7-35.
34 Woolf is referring to Mr Wells, Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy.
36 Woolf, Fiction 162.
38 Štelf 20.
39 Štelf 21.
subject-object dichotomy by drawing from him who very much espouses it. Besides reflecting Woolf’s systematic philosophical engagement with Moore, this also suggests that the radical potential of a philosophy could very well remain unconscious to the philosopher himself.

In To the Lighthouse, the subject-object conflation is not always articulated in literal terms, as in the instance mentioned above. It is more often articulated through Woolf’s use of colour in the novel; we must note the visual primacy in Moore’s discussion of natural properties through repeated examples of colour. According to Jack Stewart, Woolf’s use of colour in To the Lighthouse ‘forms a psychological spectrum.’ According to Jack Stewart, Woolf’s use of colour in To the Lighthouse ‘forms a psychological spectrum.’ Let us briefly examine the notion of a psychological spectrum. Much like the post-impressionist painter, Lily is not limited by boundaries of material objects in aesthetically representing them. When Lily paints ‘colours (are) thinned and faded; the shapes etherealized; … random marks scrawled upon the canvas…for(ing) them to move, flow’ (TL 102-103), such that a human portrait looks like a purple shadow. Clearly, Lily does not ‘attempt at likeness’ (TL 108), and as Stewart remarks ‘nothing, in the creative process, is simply one thing.’ The artist’s creative process exemplifies fluidity, not only at the level of inner lives, but also at the level of visual sense data.

Sensory fluidity is not entirely absent in Moore’s own conceptual framework. We have already seen that Moore expounds a realist pluralism, where in multiple objects are believed to exist in the external world, independent of our awareness of them. Objects (wholes) have natural properties (parts) which Moore believes to have existence in space and moments of time. Moore does not however give us any criterion by which we can affirm an object as necessarily having a part, or a set of parts. That is to say, in Moore’s peculiar realism, we have no reason to believe that an apple must be red, or any other colour. The problem, as Baldwin puts it, is that ‘too little is considered essential.’ In consequence, ‘there are no constraints on what changes are admissible as changes in an object.’ Woolf builds on the lack of essentialism in Moore’s framework, and creates an economy of colours as navigators within the multiple narrative strands in the novel. Specific characters are often associated with particular colours – Mr Ramsay and other male characters are associated with various shades of reds and browns, and Mrs Ramsay and Lily with shades of blues, greens and purples. Colour associations are established through descriptions of backgrounds like the grey-green light (TL 243) and material objects like the reddish brown stockings (TL 75) invoking imaginative responses from the reader; but as we saw with Lily’s paintings, there is hardly a clear foreground-background distinction. From the perspective of particular characters, there is an opening of different spaces of perception, such that, as we noted earlier, some characters have relatively scant perceptual fields as compared to others. Mr Ramsay simply cannot see what others do. Andrew rather casually remarks about his father’s philosophy, that the crux of the subject-object relationship lies in thinking of a table ‘when you are not there’ (TL 65). Heidi Strol argues that this remark highlights Andrew’s accurate understanding of Mr Ramsay’s philosophy as that of a metaphysical traditionalist. However, given that Mr Ramsay has an otherwise scant perceptual field, and that Andrew is a soldier who has not been described as having any interest in academic philosophy throughout the novel, not to forget his contempt for Tansley’s ‘point of view’ (TL 43), Strol’s argument has no force. I suggest instead that Andrew’s

43 Baldwin 48.
44 Baldwin 48.
45 Strol 308.

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remark simply implies that it does not matter whether or not the table is in Mr Ramsay’s perceptual field because he does not quite see mundane objects like a table in the first place. Mrs Ramsay and Lily on the other hand perceive a rich world of objects and colours and hence have access to “aesthetic and imaginative spaces (that) loom large and demand to be filled.”

In order to explain this difference in accessible perceptual fields, we must turn to Woolf’s notion of human consciousness, which is, again, continuous with Moore’s understanding of the same. According to Moore, consciousness is always an awareness or knowledge of an object that consists of various sense data – Moore uses the phrase ‘transparent awareness’ (PE 134). In another seminal essay, *The Refutation of Idealism*, Moore explains the transparency of awareness as consciousness ‘looking through’ something blue and seeing nothing but the blue. Moore seems to believe that consciousness has blue content by virtue of having sensations of blue objects. Woolf goes one step ahead of Moore. Consciousness according to Woolf is such that on perceiving an object, not only does transparency of awareness become evident, it expands to encompass the field of objects themselves. That is, through perception, consciousness transcends the individual, and gets defined by the ‘ever-widening circle of its own outside.’ The psychological spectrum therefore stretches across humans and impersonal inanimate objects, by way of perception and sensory fluidity.

Here, there is an important shift in how perception is discussed. For Moore, when consciousness is conceptualised as awareness of sense data, the latter is considered as belonging to objects in the external world. For Woolf, however, given that consciousness encompasses that which is perceived, sense data can no longer be considered as belonging to the external world. There is in fact no tenable distinction between the inside and the outside. Sense data for Woolf is central to the process of perception, and not so much a characteristic of the external world as it is for Moore. Mr Ramsay’s perceptual field, being scant, suggests therefore that the relative expanse of his consciousness is scant. Despite the fact that he inhabits the same world as Mrs Ramsay, Mr Ramsay’s experiences are inevitably perceptually impoverished while Mrs Ramsay’s ‘range of experience seemed limitless’ (TL 123).

Now, we have already seen that non-natural properties, on Zangwill’s interpretation of Moore, ‘morally supervene’ natural properties, such that, when we see a thing as good, we see it in relation with the other natural properties it has. Since Mr Ramsay lives in a perceptually impoverished world, by implication, he also lives in a morally impoverished world. Mr Ramsay does not perceive natural properties that others like Mrs Ramsay perceive, and hence he also does not perceive the non-natural property of moral obligation that she does. Obviously, Mr and Mrs Ramsay see the very same lighthouse. When James expresses his longing to visit the lighthouse despite the rough weather, Mrs Ramsay convinces James that it is unlikely they could go, but not entirely impossible. Mr Ramsay thinks of Mrs Ramsay’s hopefulness as ‘extraordinary irrationality’ (TL 77). She disregarded the facts and ‘in effect, told lies’ (TL 77). Mrs Ramsay’s ability to empathise with an eight year old’s mundane desires seems to emerge from the fact that the lighthouse as well as James are encompassed by her individual consciousness. Quite unlike his wife, Mr Ramsay reduces the lighthouse, and perhaps his own son, to another P or Q; his static

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46 Stewart, Distance 84.
48 Moore, Refutation 36-9.
49 Štelf 20.
and opaque consciousness renders him least perceptive when it comes to understanding people, and hence, his uncouth behaviour and perpetual interpersonal crisis.

This brings us to Moore’s notion of organic unities. The value of a whole state of affairs, as we saw, is not equivalent to the sum of its parts, according to Moore. Instead of asking how one could calculate the value of a whole, Woolf seems interested in what it means to live in an organic unity. For in times of moral disillusionment, an overwhelming awareness of ‘the pettiness of some part of her, and of human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking, at their best’ (TL 93) renders the notion of an organic unity counter-intuitive, if not an impossibility. On the global level, having witnessed the horrors of the First World War and anticipating another of greater intensity, an organic unity can hardly be a given. Since each individual has an overtly indeterminable perceptual expance, it is her husband’s disillusionment with the organic nature of his family and community that Mrs Ramsay struggles with through the novel. Here Mrs Ramsay’s own experience of heightened perceptive intensities, which presupposes her consciousness as expanded across a state of affairs becomes relevant as an epistemological precondition to make its organicness evident. Along with the multiple first-person voices simultaneously at work in the novel, and the ‘cosmic view from nowhere which both frames and disrupts individual consciousness,’ Mrs Ramsay’s extensive consciousness and perceptual field accomplishes the ‘reverberation of one solitary experience in another,’ thereby forming a grid that unifies the organic unities. Mrs Ramsay, by virtue of having her perceptions ‘tangled in a golden mesh’ (TL 105), that is, being integrated with the organic unity, also faces the risk of being ‘momentarily dazed and blinded’ (TL 78) by other members of the unity who continue to live as individuated fragments. She can share and ‘transfer’ (TL 76) her feelings and experiences across various individuated consciousnesses, and consequently feel moral obligation. If barred from those of others, especially her beloved, she would repent – ‘if he only put implicit faith in her’ (TL 87): faith in seeing the world the way she did.

**Conclusion**

My attempt has been to trace the precise influence of Moore’s thought on Woolf’s writing, as articulated in her novel *To the Lighthouse*. I have argued that Woolf partakes in the anti-metaphysical and anti-naturalist rebellion characteristic of Moore’s ethical theory; furthermore, she is critical of Moore’s framework by conceptualising the conditions for the possibility of moral obligation in explicitly epistemological terms, and articulating a new materialism which is at once continuous with Moore’s realism and critical of the subject-object dichotomy he upholds. If indeed we live in a mesh of perceptions and experiences, this paper is a minuscule strand in the larger mesh of Woolf and Moore’s literary philosophical works.

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50 Lloyd 147.  
51 Lloyd 148.
The Preciousness of Everything
The 2014 Brian Medlin Memorial Lecture

Brian Matthews

The Willandra Billabong, which in moderately wet seasons relieves the Middle Lachlan of some superfluous water, and in epoch-marking flood-times reluctantly debouches into the Lower Darling, divides the country between those rivers into two unequal parts. Roughly speaking – the black-soil plains (which are chiefly light red) lie to the south of this almost imperceptible depression, whilst on the north – sometimes close by, sometimes out of sight, and sometimes thirty miles away – the irregular scrub frontier denotes an abrupt change of soil, though the uniform level is maintained.

'Here you enter upon a region presenting to the rarely clouded sky an unbroken foliage-surface, with isothermal zones rigidly marked by their indigenous growths. A tract of country until yesterday bare of surface water for lack of occupation, and lacking occupation for dearth of surface water. Which goes to show that regularity of rainfall is not ensured by copious growth of timber.'

'However, a hundred miles back in that leafy solitude – just where the line of water conservation, creeping northward from the Lachlan, here and there touched the line creeping southward from the Darling – [you can stand on] ... the veranda of the barracks, [of] Goolumbulla station ...'

This could be from one of Brian Medlin’s letters to Iris Murdoch, directing her gaze into the bush, detailing and observing it with forensic care, effortlessly slipping into a self-deprecating pedantry – ‘black-soil plains (which are chiefly light red)’ – narrating with a rhythm driven by the love of quirky logic – ‘a tract of country until yesterday bare of surface water for lack of occupation, and lacking occupation for dearth of surface water.’

It isn’t Medlin, though so many of his attentive descriptions of the bush for Iris Murdoch are as good and as vivid, including his painstaking exegesis of the billabong which he explains without irony is not ‘a pond’. The piece I quoted is the work of someone important to Medlin and someone who is an evocative, murmurous presence in this correspondence: it is the voice of Joseph Furphy’s Tom Collins in Furphy’s great novel, Such is Life.

We are camped amongst ragged old black box surrounded by river reds. Black box is a rough-barked eucalypt that grows near water and on flood plains. It tends to take over from the red gums as you move to higher, dryer ground though, like them, it needs flood conditions to germinate. It gives the landscape an austere, muted, undisciplined, tough quality. The red gum is the smooth-barked large tree that gives watercourses all over Australia their Australian feel ... The red gum is without doubt, to any objective judge, the most beautiful tree in the world.

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1 This lecture was given at Flinders University in June 2014, preceding the launch of Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie: The Correspondence between Iris Murdoch and Brian Medlin 1976-1995 edited by Gillian Dooley and Graham Nerlich and published by Cambridge Scholars Press.

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This is Medlin, with the same loving familiarity with the remote landscape as Collins, with his own lyricism, his own Collins-style insistence on accuracy and verisimilitude. It is a kind of writing which, to some extent at least, his profoundly affectionate correspondence with Iris Murdoch drew from him; the close yet paradoxically distant relationship gave him a sort of permission to be a poet again. Murdoch recognises him as a poet not only because he sends her some of his poems but because she sees unerringly the poetic sensibility and vision which find their space in the freedoms of personal, private correspondence with a dear friend.

Iris Murdoch is corresponding with a man who, on his own rueful admission, has left his life’s work till his last few years. How to get things written, what to write about, how to write were topics Medlin and I frequently canvassed over a coffee or a few beers. Once when I told him, yet again, still having actually written very little, that I had a terrific idea for a story, he said, ‘Ah, all those great books rotting in the mind.’

In an early letter, Iris Murdoch remarks that ‘character is … much concerned with showing how contradictory, muddled, incomplete and basically mysterious people are. Opaque.’ What she liked about Medlin’s stories and poems, she says, was their ‘sort of lyrical sense of the funny, messy mysteriousness of life. Tom Collins,’ she adds, ‘is very good at this.’

I wasn’t bad at it myself 47 years ago when I first met Brian Medlin, but not in the complimentary way Murdoch means. I was fearing that life was about to become deeply mysterious, not very funny and probably messy and some of these premonitions had obscurely to do with Brian Medlin.

A couple of years after Medlin became the inaugural Professor of Philosophy at Flinders University, I arrived to join the School of Language and Literature, as it then was, as a junior lecturer. It was my first university appointment and, by the time I’d found my office and gratefully closed its door behind me, I was feeling rather in awe of everyone. This was January 1969 but I had taken up my post at the very end of the previous year, having arrived six months late after a bout of peritonitis. This late arrival meant that my entire experience of the School had been attendance at the final Board Meeting. At this meeting two members of the Philosophy discipline, Professor Medlin and Greg O’Hare, clinically and relentlessly laid bare the delinquency of a member of staff whose failure to carry out his responsibilities as a teacher and a head of discipline had resulted in serious disadvantage to an otherwise first class Musicology student. A significant part of the problem, though by no means all of it, was the staff member’s failure to keep adequate records of the student’s work over the year. The Medlin/O’Hare inquisition was a riveting performance – the delicate strokes of a scalpel alternating with broad, slugging whacks of a sledge hammer – and I left the meeting silently intoning over and over ‘I must always record the marks’, ‘I must always record the marks’ …

In late January of the following year I made my official appearance. I knew two people in the whole school – Syd Harrex and Ken Arvidson – and they were both on leave. I felt hugely intimidated by many of those whom I didn’t know, except by sight and reputation, and of all these the tall, dark, formidable, famously witty and saturnine Professor of Philosophy was the one I feared most. It didn’t help that I was allotted the room next to his but anyway, in those summer days before the start of my first ever term as a lecturer, I would arrive early in the morning, go into my room and more or less skulk there while I worked out how to make up for what seemed to me suddenly a catastrophically inadequate intellectual preparation for my new life. I didn’t even go to morning tea. After about two weeks of this reclusive behaviour, I was startled one morning when there was what sounded like not a knock but a kick on my door which then burst open before I could speak and in walked Professor Medlin.
‘Look, mate,’ he said, ‘if you’ve taken a vow of silence for some reason, then of course I’ll respect it. As a matter of fact, there are a few people round here that I wish would emulate you. But if that’s not the case, why don’t you come and have a cup of tea and meet some of your colleagues, for what that might turn out to be worth.’

So I did, of course, and my life at Flinders changed radically for the better under what became a stern, no bullshit but straightforwardly affectionate mentorship. As time passed and I learnt to leave more and more often the safety of my room, we spent a lot of time together talking poetry, politics, cricket and gradually, as we grew to know each other better, reminiscing about our very different pasts.

Though in general, like most of us, Brian loathed meetings and committees, the committee room – with its posturings, absurdities, cut and thrust and, sometimes, stimulating debate – was one of the many stages on which Brian gave some of his more memorable performances in those days. I would often sit with Brian at the meetings we attended and so had a privileged view of some of the theatre that frequently followed his entry into a debate.

One time, at a meeting under the chairmanship of a professor newly arrived at Flinders, while Brian was speaking I could see that on the opposite side of the table one of his listeners was becoming quietly enraged. This man was a known and self-proclaimed antagonist of Medlin and the moment he had an opportunity he launched into an extraordinary anti-Medlin tirade. When he had exhausted his onslaught the chairman, apparently unaccustomed to the rough and tumble of a Flinders debate, looked visibly shocked as he offered Medlin the right of reply. Thanking him politely, Medlin said: ‘Mr Chairman, I did not say what I said with the express intention of driving our colleague opposite into an apoplectic fit. That this has in fact happened I can only regard as a bonus.’

At another characteristically tumultuous meeting of the Board of the by then re-named School of Humanities, the head of the Discipline of Fine Arts handed round a printed page headed ‘Propositions’. There were eleven propositions but as it turned out not enough of the sheets to go round. When one of them reached me I put it between me and Brian and we both read it. Brian studied it intently, tracing from one printed proposition to the next with index finger, occasionally nodding or grunting. After a few minutes of this he passed the page on for those who still might not have seen it. When the item came up for discussion there was perhaps a quarter hour of the usual swamping of opinion, outrage, assent and objection and then Medlin entered the fray. Still without a copy in front of him, he said something like this: ‘If proposition 4 is true then propositions 8 and 10 can’t be; if propositions 8 and 10 are in doubt then proposition 6 becomes redundant, if we scrap Proposition 6 then Proposition 1 becomes …’ and so on. It was an extraordinary performance and the question of whether or not there was any flaw in the stages of his analysis – though no one pointed any out at the time – became secondary to the sheer cavalier daring of his intervention.

Medlin expected such daring of others. In May 1988 Brian drove John Bray, Rick Hosking and me to McLaren Vale where we were going to have lunch at The Barn. Having heard from someone that I was going to Sydney the next day, Brian asked me why and I told him it was because I’d won the NSW Premier’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction. He was genuinely delighted to hear this.

‘Do you have to give a speech?’ he said.

‘I do,’ I told him ‘but I haven’t worked out what to say yet.’

‘The Elder Cato,’ Brian said, ‘ended every speech to the Roman Senate with the words, ‘And furthermore Carthage must be destroyed – Carthago delenda est. You should end like that,’ Brian said as if nothing could be more obvious.

Well, with some difficulty and severe contortions of sequence and logic, not to mention some embarrassment, but with the ameliorating help of a judicious amount of alcohol, I actually did contrive to end my short acceptance speech with ‘Carthago delenda est.’ During the drinks afterwards I met Ed Campion, an old friend, very good writer and a Jesuit priest. ‘What did you think of my Latin conclusion?’ I said incautiously. ‘Delenda est Carthago would have been more elegant,’ he said. I reported to Brian on my return and quoted Campion’s amendment. ‘Fucking Jesuits,’ he said.

The Brian Medlin of these anecdotes and many others like them is certainly present in Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie – the book we’re here to launch tonight – sometimes in astringent asides about vice-chancellors or Flinders University undergraduates, occasionally in bons mots about some of his colleagues. Camping at Monte Collina with fresh water running out, he writes: ‘There are worse fates than hanging round here, five seconds with a Flinders undergraduate being one of them; five milliseconds with a vice-chancellor being another.’ But something about the epistolary form is profoundly and excitingly liberating for him – it allowed him to be unashamedly personal, to digress, to pile detail upon detail, to pontificate and explain, to tell stories and pursue references, to muse, to express freely wonder, exasperation, amazement, love, to inhabit the narrative not guardedly but with the kind of panache and confidence and striking personality that had been typical of him in his prime as a university teacher. A string of letters has obvious similarities to a diary, especially the way Medlin writes, often day-to-day accounts with a thread of what might loosely be called ‘plot’ running through them and which he often returns to from a long, digressive excursion. The comparison with Tom Collins’s diary narrative in Joseph Furphy’s Such is Life is an obvious and powerful one. Tom Collins explains his plan in this way: ‘I purpose taking certain entries from my diary and amplifying these to the minutest detail of occurrence or conversation. This will afford the observant reader a fair picture of Life as that engaging problem has presented itself to me.’

Making the obvious allowances, Medlin’s contributions to Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie match Tom Collins’s expressed purpose: amplified often to the minutest detail, dealing in occurrences and conversations and being itself a prolonged conversation and certainly affording the observant reader a fair picture of life as seen by a poet, a philosopher, a naturalist, a keen observer and, perhaps above all, as seen for the benefit, enjoyment and edification of a dear friend, because, of course, a crucial aspect of the epistolary form for Medlin and, I suppose, for anyone embarking on a substantial correspondence, is who is being written to.

Iris Murdoch’s letters are mostly brief, but they are vital to the fabric of this remarkable narrative. In the first letter of the collection we hear from her in medias res. It is obvious that the correspondence reaches further back than July 2 in (possibly) 1976 and that she is to some extent continuing a conversation. She has yet to see some of Medlin’s prose and poetry but would love to, she has read Tom Collins ‘with the greatest pleasure’ – and thus Such is Life surfaces in the very first letter – and, since Medlin, it seems, may have described to her some of the upheavals at Flinders around that time, including the occupation of the Registry in 1974, she reveals, ‘I fear you might find me reactionary about student participation.’ But how does she find him? ‘Are you a Marxist? What are you exactly, politically, if that isn’t a silly question? Anarchist? Not Stalinist obviously. Maoist? Or –’

As the letters settle into a continuity through the 1980s, a pattern begins in which Murdoch quietly, gently, sometimes eccentrically prompts with news, questions and opinions and Medlin, while not at all ignoring her various lines of thought, enquiry and opinion, uses her letters as a kind of joyous opportunity to take her into another world. So when she supposes on 12 May 1986 that his politics are probably ‘much the same’ as before, he replies, ‘Yes, politically I
ooligal’ leading into an anecdote about how Christine ‘was delivered from Booligal by a party of pig shooters’ which he interrupts by returning to ‘that wonderful old river, the Murray’ which in turn brings him back to the camp on Lake Mournpoul, the brilliant bird life there and how it will be hard to leave in a week when he has to go back to ‘rotten old Flinders’ where there are some things that keep him going, but he wonders whether it is wise for him to stay as it is surely, along with the constant pain from his motorbike accident, ‘an important cause of his depression’. The next sentence is: ‘Yes, politically I remain much the same.’

This is wonderful stuff and typical, and as the years of correspondence wind out, he becomes so much better at it. The long descriptions and digressions become more ordered and organised without losing their spontaneity or the charm of their serendipity. And he is encouraged in what gradually becomes an extended tutorial on the Australian bush and its ways because Iris Murdoch is such a willing and marvelling listener. ‘I like your account of your holiday,’ she writes ‘… leading the good Australian life – very enviable – doing such lovely good things, being with trees and animals. I especially liked the account of the little horse. I see you as a horseman …’ Then she adds, as if recognising that this is the Brian Medlin she has come to know so well, ‘… your friends there sound a good lot too in spite of their political views.’ This is Iris’s gentle, placatory take on Medlin’s ‘I am staying with some friends … [who] are very interesting, vital people, though in many ways very reactionary. They drive me bloody crazy at times.’

Murdoch’s distant presence and her calm, attractive musing on her own and Medlin’s life and work are fascinating from another point of view. Though he refers to things going on in his professional life at times he rarely goes into much detail. ‘Rotten old Flinders is rotten’ and various curt salvos at vice-chancellors are pretty much the extent of his reference to what was in fact a tremendously volatile time in his life as Professor of Philosophy at Flinders and a time of massive upheaval for most of us at the university. At the centre of much of the controversy was the Philosophy Department’s adoption of the system of continuous assessment, which included self-assessment and peer assessment. School Board meetings became tense and hostile; friends and departments divided; a paper war conducted by the dissemination of roneoed A4 sheets hammering out point after point and riposte after riposte invaded the corridors. These antipathies and confrontations in the School at large fed into and to some extent exacerbated a conflict brewing in the English discipline. As Vincent Buckley observed during a similar earlier eruption at Melbourne University, ‘God knows English departments are strange places’ and the English discipline at Flinders at that time strenuously proceeded to exemplify this, dropping into tune with the conflagration sweeping the School as a whole.

Medlin as ever stood very tall in all this though he did not specifically lead it – or at least he tried hard not to lead it. He dealt sternly with the people he styled his ‘enemies’, thrilled some of his friends, sorely tested the wavering equanimity of others and utterly exasperated many more. For the record, he and I agreed entirely about the Vietnam protests which preceded and led into the Flinders’ confrontations but we were often on opposite sides of what now look like the absurd barricades erected in the cause of the assessment wars. We didn’t fall out but we had some serious moments. Some of my roneoed artillery was specifically aimed at Brian, Greg O’Hare, Rodney Allen and Ian Hunt, and I vividly remember – and may still have archived away somewhere – some enfillading mortar attacks dropped by Greg and Brian on me.

My sense that the correspondence with Iris Murdoch gradually gave him a kind of permission, a blessed liberty to write at length about the natural world and talk philosophy and politics – to a lesser extent – with his guard down, is borne out I think by the absence of these academic, professional and administrative horrors from the letters – not wholly absent, it’s true,
and there may be other letters where they feature, but easily overwhelmed by passions and experiences of much greater personal moment and in many cases of course, of profound beauty. There was, incidentally and parenthetically, a postscript to those conflicts and confrontations many years later, when Brian and Christine brought along some of their favourite teas and Jane and I had a cuppa with them in our kitchen. Somehow a spirited conversation about the police force – which included some of Brian’s good memories of the coppers during his imprisonment – became diverted to the old days of the Flinders troubles and Brian, with characteristic good-humoured relentlessness paraphrased for me one of the arguments I had proposed during the roneo wars and then clinically dismantled it. It was a stunning, entertaining performance and, like the eleven Propositions event, the question of whether or not it all hung together was entirely overwhelmed by the panache and intellectual dazzle of the performance. Jane, however, having listened intently, said his rebuttal was flawless.

Events and characters outside the walls and reach of Flinders University are dealt with: his motorcycle accident, for example, which, catastrophic as it genuinely was, he recounts for Murdoch with irony and a sort of half confected, half genuinely outraged spleen. The woman involved, he calls Dr W.K. ‘The only way I could have avoided her,’ he tells Iris Murdoch, ‘was to have stayed at home in bed – and even then I’d give her an even chance of crashing through the front window … “I’m terribly sorry, Professor,” she said as I was lying on the road with my pelvis knocked to bits, “but I do have a PhD in chemistry” … she visited me a couple of times in hospital to tell me how sorry she was and how bad I was feeling.’

In a later letter he remarks, ‘She used to visit me in hospital till I told her to hop it.’ Well, it might have been the very day he’d told her to hop it that I passed a young woman near Brian’s hospital door as I arrived to visit him. ‘That was her,’ he said when I walked in. ‘She’s got a PhD in Chemistry, mate. Articulated straight from Matric to Masters, no doubt. Skipped basic fucking driving, though.’

Never Mind the Bourgeoisie has any number of asides that are part of its charm; some are like that one, some are more sober, like the marvellous farewell to Flexmore Hudson: ‘My intellectual life really began with my friendship with Hudson,’ Medlin tells Iris and his affection and sadness for Hudson in his last ruined years are intensely moving. ‘Bray spoke at the service well and movingly,’ he writes. ‘[But] hardly any of Adelaide’s self-acclaimed literati were there. A poet, a small publisher, a few drinking mates. I don’t know.’

And there is Murdoch’s running joust with the Australian language, occasionally reducing Medlin to near speechlessness, which he indicates by a succession of exclamation marks: ‘Oh my Dear Iris, what are we going to do with you [16 exclamation marks]. Not, repeat not flat as a lizard, but flat out like a lizard drinking. The words are fixed and fossilised into an imperishable beauty destined to remain in midst of other woe than ours and no more to be tampered with by pommy novelists than are the legs of Phar Lap to be redesigned by a merry-go-round proprietor.’

Repeatedly, Iris Murdoch ends letters with a wish that he would come to England, so that they could get together, sing some songs, have a few jars, talk philosophy and literature. Occasionally, Medlin counters with his own invitation and an apparent rejection of her fantasy which is too good humoured to be dispiriting. ‘I must reproach you,’ he writes. ‘I say “Come to Australia” and you reply “Come to England”. What sort of bloody answer is that? England!’ As time passes though, it becomes more and more clear that they are not going to meet and aspects of the correspondence assume a quiet intensity, a fervour and a presence in their lives because increasingly they see that it is all they’ve got. The great friendship, the meeting of minds, the closeness will have to survive in their letters. This means that recurring themes and preoccupations assume progressively and subtly a greater importance.

One of these themes, of course, is Medlin’s portrayals for Iris’s delight and pleasure, of the nature of the Australian landscape. These are all memorable, detailed, passionate and poetic – even when he is telling a sad tale of species loss or destruction – and together they constitute one of the more remarkable and informed evocations of the Australian bush, one that stands comparison with Marcus Clarke’s ‘weird melancholy’ and Tom Collins’s ‘Overhead, the sun blazing wastefully and thanklessly through a rarefied atmosphere; underfoot, the hot, black clay thirsting for spring rain … mile after mile, till the dark boundary of the scrub country disappears northward in the glassy haze …’ And here is Brian Medlin, just one glimpse from his panoply of wilderness scenes: ‘two dingoes came padding towards us through the hummocks … [but by the time he looks up from his book] they’d tumbled to us and turned back. One of them turned again almost immediately and stared at us. Seconds only or maybe even only parts of a second, but it seemed forever. It seemed to use up all the time in the universe. A golden, lucent animal! The life glowed from inside it. Its gaze was intense, brilliantly young but ancient. Not old. Ancient. The inhabitant of every desert ever. Then it turned away and became a mere dog again.’

This is one of the many times when, in the presence of the natural world, he is reminded and convinced of, as he puts it, ‘the preciousness of things’.

His wilderness is a tough place. I remember one time when Brian and I were standing at the windows of the common room in the School of Humanities looking out at the sweep of hills surrounding the Flinders university buildings. It was mid-winter and the hills were green and lush.

‘I hate winter,’ he said. ‘Everything turns bloody green and it looks like England.’ He makes the same point more forcefully to Iris Murdoch. ‘I can’t approve your dislike of harsh landscape … Only in hard country can you find real subtlety. Where everything is pretty, nothing is. Where every prospect pleases, as Alexander Selkirk said, it gives you the shits.’ What Selkirk actually said was, ‘Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile’ which Brian unquestionably would have rewritten as only Vice Chancellors are vile.

Another theme is a long-running, every now and then surfacing discussion about the bourgeoisie. What does it mean? Who are the bourgeoisie? Is Iris bourgeoise? ‘I wasn’t the first to say that your views on art are bourgeois’, Medlin objects mildly on one occasion. ‘You said I’d probably find them bourgeois and, being an accommodating chap, I merely agreed.’

The bourgeoisie question is much on Murdoch’s mind as she prepares to review Medlin’s *Human Nature, Human Survival* – ‘there is much to say on the meaning of “bourgeois”‘ she writes and, indeed, goes on to say it in her famous review in the Melbourne *Age*. But this letter concludes: ‘My heart is with you – never mind about the bourgeoisie.’

This moving conclusion does not mean that she regards the bourgeoisie question as in any way irrelevant or that she’s impatient with it. She is saying that the two of them have a much more personal, emotional, rewarding and profound matter to mind about – their close and loving friendship. The editors’ inspired decision to make this the title of the book recognises this.

Murdoch also supplies the crucial and moving keynote to the book’s central theme – Medlin’s continuing descriptions of and reflections on the Australian landscape and its flora and fauna. ‘You are my Australia …’ she writes to him, ‘Much love to you, friend in a hundred guises, splendid magician.’

Behind this wonderful tribute is the sad recognition that they will never meet again, that she will never go again to the Australia that he has so brought to life for her and that Medlin won’t come to England.

Reading *Never Mind the Bourgeoisie* I hear again Brian’s voice, his passion, his irony, his relentless logic, his despairing impatience, his vast range of reference, his wit, hear it all so
clearly that it seems he must actually be still here, waiting round somewhere to question, joke. He was a great friend to me and to many and a colossus of this university, and it is entirely proper that he be honoured and remembered in a lecture that bears his name. And I am honoured in my turn to be invited to give this year’s lecture and to have the opportunity to launch Never Mind the Bourgeoisie which, as I’m sure you are in no doubt, I think is a wonderful book – like the two people it celebrates: sui generis and utterly beguiling.

So I wish Never Mind the Bourgeoisie a great and successful journey and to conclude with a further affectionate nod in the direction of the man Iris Murdoch learned to address as ‘Dear Mate’: Ceterum censeo Carthago delenda est.

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Mysticism and Stuff Like That

Brian Medlin

For Christine

Introduction by Christine Vick

Read the following essay and you will have learnt a lot about the man Brian Medlin. Not just his ideas and values but how these fused with his loves: poetry, philosophy and the Australian bush.

For me this essay is special; it was written during our last few months together. It was part of our life, our talk: it had a presence. Brian worked on it between bouts of illness and pain, in doctor’s waiting rooms, in hospital and finally from his bed at home. Three days before he died he completed it and handed it to me. ‘Here, I’ve made you a present,’ he said. ‘I wrote this for you.’

I sat at the end of the bed and read. I was blown away by the ease with which he moved from anecdote to analysis, from philosophy to poetry, back and forth weaving them together, telling a story, in fact several stories. And I was moved by how he saw himself and humanity and its artefacts as part of nature, not separate from it, a rare achievement in western society, and central to understanding the photographs in the final chapter. (Photos that were taken on what turned out to be our last visit to “another Best Place” the Coorong.) I was moved by many things...

He asked me what I thought. Then, ‘Do you think I’ve been too hard on Bob Brown?’

‘It’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever written,’ I said. Ten years on I still think that.

***

My first shared poem

I wrote my first poem in 1939. I know this because it was written at the outbreak of the Second World War. I suppose that I must have been reading poetry by then, but the first poem I can remember admiring was Tennyson’s poem, ‘The Eagle’. This was about a year later. For many years poetry was a deeply private practice, both the reading and writing thereof.

Not at first. I know that I confided in my father at least once. He sent a poem of mine to ‘The Bulletin’, the covering note concluding, ‘The author of this poem is twelve years old. Thanking you in anticipation of a favourable response, Jack Medlin.’ Alas for anticipation. Answers to Correspondents for the appropriate week dealt me the best literary advice I have ever had: ‘Don’t use “Thou” and don’t, when stuck for a rhyme for “truth” drag in a “Tyrant’s Hoof”.’

Soon after this, it must have been, my mother came across a poem about death, sensible, I’m sure, and for all its literary inadequacy, right on the knocker. Death, it maintained, was the fact of life. The upshot of this, The Old Girl’s ill-equipped foray into Lit. Crit., was frequent hours of discussion based on the assumption that I was incorrigibly suicidal. This assumption spread like...
locusts throughout an extended family of whom till that time I had been fond. Suicidal or not, I rapidly became murderous.  

(Don’t get me wrong, my mum was a first-rate old Tartar, just out of her literary depth in these shallow sands, that’s all. As for the rest of them, minding their own business was not a deeply-rooted family virtue.)

Trevor Rowe

In 1941, I met my oldest friend Trevor Rowe, still cherished. This was a great stroke of luck for both of us, though it occurred in the context of what to this day I regard as one of the major disasters of my life. Innocent of offence, we became students at the Adelaide Technical High School, an institution which in those days enjoyed a quite unmerited educational reputation. It acquired and maintained this reputation, by selecting out students who had distinguished themselves as primary students. It then subjected them to a merciless course of cramming, almost entirely devoid of intellectual and academic value. So intense was the cramming, such servile swots were the students, that the Adelaide Tech managed, year after year, to cream off the best results in public exams. This in spite of the fact that it pushed its victims through matriculation in three years instead of the four squandered by other schools. That took students to the Leaving qualification. More affluent schools and more prosperous students went on for an extra year to complete the Leaving Honours qualification.

In spite of the fact that Rowe seems to remember me as a goody-goody, at school, this was far from the case. I think that he is inclined to confuse Christianity with conformism. Well, I was at that time, a devout Christian all right, but a non-conformist and non-conforming Christian. With the exception of Rowe, I despised the most successful students of my time, regarding them as boring farts. I was much more drawn to the larrikins amongst my contemporaries, people like Parker and Tansell. (Come to think of it, there was another successful student whom I respected. Nichols could bowl at will I never learnt to play.) As for school work, I did as little as possible, preferring to educate myself at the South Australian Public Library.

I took to Rowe in spite of the fact that he did pretty well, usually coming out amongst the top three or so in the term’s results. In spite of this failing, he was witty and irreverent, agin’ the guvmentt. I’m sure that he detected the same qualities in me, though my early religiosity has caused him to forget the rebelliousness.

Don’t think that this rebelliousness was expressed in daring action. Mostly it operated at the purely verbal level. There were some good gum-nut fights out of bounds in the Botanic Park. From time to time, God blew with His winds and The Great Armada, masquerading as Jolly’s Boats, was scattered across The Torrens – again out of bounds. Yet there was little room for the kind of revolt that enlivened the schools and universities of later years.

I played organised sport at The Tech – footy, cricket, tennis, hockey. Rowe shot at the small-bore rifle-range. I had been using firearms in the bush from the age of about eleven, so that Rowe’s chosen sport had little appeal to me. We did, however, find a common interest in strenuous bushwalking. And I mean strenuous.

Tintern Abbey

And that, I’m sure, contributed to our joint excitement over Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey. The sounding cataract haunted us like a passion. It was of course an unbelievable bit of good luck that the young Wordsworth had bounded over the mountains like a roe. No real compensation, alas, for the pathetic paucity of real sounding cataracts throughout the Adelaide Hills and, as for
the haunting passion, that we had to supply for ourselves. The Adelaide Hills resounded with lines recording the coarser pleasures of Wordsworth’s boyish days.

I speak more for myself than for Rowe, when I talk of our excitement over this poem. He seems now not to remember the enthusiasm we shared for it. Perhaps he has forgotten, perhaps I have reconstructed the past. Perhaps even then I was projecting my own feelings onto him.

Whatever …

Whether or not Rowe heard often the still sad music of humanity, the poem deeply affected me. I became something of a mystic. In the long run not a Wordsworthian mystic, rather an aggressively godless one. Yet, for all that a mystic profoundly influenced by Wordsworth.

Those remarks may seem obscure and even contradictory. So perhaps I’d better say something about mysticism.

Mysticism

Bob Brown’s mysticism

Consider the following passage.

Wilderness emerged as one avenue of spiritual transcendence. When Bob Brown, the hero of the Franklin campaign, told of his first wilderness experience (on the Franklin River), he might well have been recounting an acid trip or an ascent into religious ecstasy: ‘I lost awareness of all else – my raft, my friend, my obligations, myself.’ And then, ‘the process of thirty years which had made me a mystified and detached observer of the universe was reversed and I fused into the inexplicable mystery of nature’. Counterculture devotees mistrusted science for the role it played in devising destructive technology. Rather than observing nature empirically by identifying and observing, as traditional naturalists had done, they imbibed nature holistically, meditating on hilltops and hugging trees. Enjoyment of nature switched from a right- to a left-brain activity. Wilderness, once a Christian temple, became a New Age shrine.¹

First, I shall remark that Bob Brown is properly described as the hero of the Franklin campaign and that accordingly Australia is greatly in his debt.

Next I remark that I see nothing wrong with imbibing nature ‘holistically’ (whatever that may mean). Not in itself. If the practice leads to false belief, if it militates against the empirical study of natural phenomena (and what other phenomena are there?) then of course it is to be condemned.

I do, though, see plenty wrong with Brown’s mysticism, at any rate as here expressed. According to him, he lost awareness of his friend. He lost awareness of his obligations. If these statements are true, then he had ceased to be a moral agent. The universe is not (pace Wordsworth) a moral agent, so perhaps Mr Brown had indeed ‘fused into the inexplicable mystery of nature’.

Brown’s mysticism, as presented here, is pernicious. For he seems to be claiming that there is some higher, better, state of consciousness than that of a moral agent.

Or it would be pernicious, were we to take it seriously.

Several people to whom I read this passage, responded in a way that at first surprised me. I had expected them to say that the passage was pernicious. Instead, they said that it was pretentious.


I believe that they were right. I believe that we cannot take seriously Brown’s claim to have been in such an elevated state of consciousness that he lost awareness of his friend, of his obligations. (Though perhaps he wasn’t thinking of them.) Suppose, for example that his friend had fallen out of the raft, would he have remained blithely fused with the inexplicable mystery of the universe? Of course not. Brown’s fusion then is mere play-acting mysticism, mere pretentiousness.

And what of his consciousness of himself? Did he, for example, let the river take him where it would?

It is true that we are not always consciously thinking of our friends, not always dwelling knowingly on our moral obligations. Nor, for that matter, are we always consciously thinking about ourselves – though some people come closer to it than others. If this is all that Brown means when he says that he lost awareness of his friend, of his obligations, of himself, then his claim is downright trivial and the further claim that he fused with the inexplicable mystery of nature, based as it is upon triviality, is certainly pretentious.

These are only a few of the difficulties for Brown’s account. We’ll spare him most of the others, but there is one that he should certainly face up to. How, if he lost awareness of himself, would he ever know that he had fused with the inexplicable mystery of nature? What had so fused? Did he experience that fusion? But then the notion of experiencing a loss of awareness of oneself is as fine a contradiction as you’re likely to get even on a good day. And if he didn’t experience the fusion, then in what sense did he have any sort of mystical experience at all?

There are human beings who are not moral agents, but certainly Bob Brown is not one of them. What’s more, such people are necessarily exceptions. Human life is the life of moral agents, lived well perhaps, or ill, but of moral agents nonetheless. It’s true that there is never any shortage of smart-arses to argue that morality is a load of bunkum, Nietzsche being perhaps the best known of them all. But their arguments are broken-backed. If there is no such thing as obligation, then I am not obliged to attend to any argument whatsoever, however cogent it may be. Hence, I am not obliged to respect any argument to the conclusion that obligation is some sort of powerful illusion. Human beings are inescapably moral beings. Bob Brown himself is notably a moral being, none the less so for an ‘experience’ that he believes somehow elevated him above morality.

I have suggested that Brown’s claim is merely pretentious rather than pernicious in the way I first took it to be. This doesn’t mean, of course, that it isn’t pernicious at all. Bob Brown, we have said, is a moral being. Now in saying that someone is a moral being, I don’t mean to praise them (or for that matter dispraise them). Moral fervour can be one of the finest manifestations of human nature. It can also be one of the most evil. Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush are both men of moral fervour. Is the world a better place for their presence? Paradoxically, one of the things that can generate moral fervour is a belief that one is somehow elevated above common morality. I don’t cite either George W. Bush or Osama bin Laden as victims of such a belief. But, off his own pen, Bob Brown stands accused of this delusion. Such a delusion can lead to bigotry and intolerance. I don’t know whether Bob Brown is bigoted and intolerant. I do know that if he does suffer from some delusion to the effect that by some sort of mystical fusion with ‘nature’ he has been even for a moment elevated above friendship and obligation, then he is certainly at risk from those vices.

To say this isn’t to say that Brown is subject to these vices. Criticising Brown’s Mysticism isn’t to condemn his politics – any more than praising Wordsworth’s is to approve The Lost Leader.

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Wordsworth’s mysticism

Brown’s mysticism might be called ‘Wordsworthian’ for the reason that like Wordsworth’s it is somehow based on ‘nature’. All that shows though is the inadequacy of labels. For the two positions are utterly different. Consider the following passage from the 1805 version of The Prelude:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent at every turn
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn.
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close about our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and regions of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light –
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The type and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last and midst and without end. (Book vi, ll)

The first thing we notice is the immense descriptive power of Wordsworth. For Brown, Nature is an abstraction, something about which nothing is said. For Wordsworth, the one face of nature has many features, observed in detail, described with fervour.

Next, Wordsworth is not ‘fused’ with nature. He is, of course, part of it since it comprises everything, it is first and last and midst and without end. And yet he is a discrete part, separate to himself, capable of perceiving other parts as distinct from himself.

Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them.

For Brown the essence of the mystical experience is a kind of trance-like loss of awareness. For Wordsworth it is an intensified perception of the detail of the world. It is this that makes Wordsworth’s mysticism exciting while Brown’s is at best boring.

At best boring, at second best pretentious, at worst pernicious. Consider now the following passage from Tintern Abbey.

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, – both what they half create
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide and guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

Wordsworth’s mysticism isn’t only a sharpening of the senses. It is humanely ideological. It hears the still sad music of humanity. It is, moreover, religious. It feels a presence that rolls through all things. This comes as close as one would wish to get to God. A god, not distinct from the universe, not identical with the universe, but immanent in the natural world. (And what other world might there be?)

(Though I point out this difference from Brown, I don’t suggest that in this respect Wordsworth’s mysticism is superior to Brown’s. I am no great fan of God.)

Notice too that Wordsworth’s mysticism is innocent of the pernicious amoralism of which Brown accuses himself. For Wordsworth nature is not, as for Brown, a moral opiate. He recognises in nature and the language of the sense, the soul of all his moral being. For him morality is grounded in sensory experience. Not in sensory experience as such, but in sensory experience as mediating an awareness of a presence pervasive throughout the universe. Pervasive not only throughout the objects of sense, but in the mind of man.

**Morality and the universe**

In what follows, I shall speak dogmatically. My concern is to make positions and distinctions clear, not to justify this position as against that.

I certainly prefer Wordsworth’s mysticism to Brown’s. One good reason for doing so, I believe, is that Wordsworth’s is a ground for morality, whereas Brown’s purports to be an abdication from morality.

That said, I would add that I think that Wordsworth’s supposed ground is mistaken. The universe is not a moral agent. Nor is it the manifestation of a pervasive presence, a presence which is a moral being. And even if it were so, such a presence could not provide a ground for the morality. That presence would be good or evil according to whether it were good or evil. It couldn’t constitute a standard of good and evil, nor the origin of them.

We are moral beings and inescapably so, in spite of the villains amongst us, in spite even of the amoral beings amongst us.

There is I believe an objective difference between good and evil – all things considered and in the long enough run. But the objectivity cannot be supplied, by invoking anything external to human nature as the ground of our moral being. Morality is generated by the social nature of human beings and cannot be validated by appeal to anything outside.
It doesn’t follow from this, by the way, that morality is all bunkum. I’ve said above that any attempt to demonstrate this leads straightway to paradox. (This is the one position in this essay that I take myself to have established.)

This isn’t to say that, as a matter of fact, a man like Wordsworth may not be sustained as a moral being by his supposed perception of a presence that rolls through all things. Whatever it takes. Maybe it was Wordsworth’s mysticism that kept him on the rails – though Browning would have disagreed, of course.

For the mystic these facts are likely to be obscured by the nature of mystical experience, by the fact that it is experience. By that I mean that it comes ready-made as direct awareness. Supposed direct awareness. When we look at a bird in a tree, we have the best reason we can have for believing that there is a bird in that tree. We see the damn thing. (We can be wrong of course, but characteristically we are not wrong.) When we feel a presence that rolls through all things, we may well think that we have equally good reason for believing in that presence. After all, we feel the damn thing. The difference is that in the case of the mystical experience, our beliefs are built into the ‘experience’ shaping it into an apparent perception. In the case of real perception our belief is generated by the bird, say, or by the black drizzling crags. The presence, on the other hand, is generated by the belief. That is, it isn’t perceived at all.

**Mysticism and Atheism**

I shall return to Wordsworth, but at present I want to put a case for atheistic mysticism. Consider the following passage that I wrote some years ago.²

> The postulation of intention behind the universe solves nothing. It accounts for the unexplained order of the universe, by postulating another order still unexplained. (Notably St Thomas Aquinas tried to break this regress, but failed I believe.³) Further, it fails to account for the glory of creation. Creation manifests the glory of a creator only to the extent that it is glorious in itself, whether created or not. The invention of a personal creator, then, has no function except to assuage human arrogance and cowardice, pandering to the notion that only what is personal can be of value.

I suggest that the concentration of the glory of ‘Creation’ into a person, a glorious Creator, may make it easier to realise and express those feelings which are appropriate in response to the glory of the universe.

> In the glory of the universe, we confront the ineffable. To start with, there is the problem of scale. The universe is too big for our imagining. This is an empirical fact. But it is also the consequence of a simple mathematical theorem known as the Map Paradox.

> The world is not a grain of sand. Nor can it be seen in one.

> Next there is the problem of intelligibility. The existence of the universe is a fact, an inexplicable fact. True there are explanations for natural phenomena. There are even explanations which purport to explain the existence of the universe; for example, the universe is the result of fluctuations in the quantum vacuum. But inevitably, all such explanations proceed from something unexplained.

God is supposed to embody both these properties (along with others). He is infinite, too vast to comprehend. And He is unfathomably mysterious, ‘in light inaccessible hid from our eyes’.

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And yet, we are made in the image of God. Since we resemble Him in some way, He resembles us in some way. This cuts Him down to a comfortable human size. At the same time it renders him intelligible to us. But there is no way, be it finite or infinite, that the universe can be made small enough for us to envisage it. Nor is there any way that the fundamental mystery of the universe can be resolved, no way we can achieve a final and intelligible explanation for its existence.

Wordsworth’s mysticism is, at heart, theistic. Through nature he senses a presence. And so he perceives infinity through the finite, the unintelligible through the visible and tangible. Or so it would seem to Wordsworth. But such feats are not possible to a mere poet. Not to Hercules. Not to God Himself.

There is however, another kind of mysticism, that which comes to recognise and feel the vastness naked, so to speak, rather than dressed up as God. I do not mean that this recognition is an awareness of the universe as a whole. On the contrary, we become conscious of our inability to achieve any such awareness. I don’t mean either that the universe becomes intelligible to us. I mean that, however much we may know and understand about the universe, we sense it as fundamentally unintelligible. It’s a bit like looking on darkness which the blind do see. At the same time, I’m reminded of Ulysses’ untravelled world whose margin fades forever and forever as we move. I don’t mean that there are always more things than we can ever experience. Perhaps that’s how the pragmatic Ulysses saw the matter – Homer’s at any rate. The things we know are parts, parts of a greater whole, forever unknown to us. Unknown except for that inevitably partial understanding we may have of bits and pieces. And by a whole, I don’t mean any sort of Parmenidean One. The universe is a plurality, but it is a united plurality. Nor do I mean any sort of Platonic abstraction. The universe is a concrete affair whose parts are studied and largely understood by physical scientists. Largely and yet partly. The greater our understanding, the more our ignorance is exposed.

So far, we have a mere commonsense physicalism, a mere intellectual realisation. Where does the mysticism come in? What makes the realisation mystical is that it is given in experience. (Or seems to be.) The universe is directly perceived through its parts, as was Wordsworth’s presence. And directly perceived as unknowable. Unknowable as a whole.

But such a perception may be illusion of course. The point is that it exists. It happens. It is as real a phenomenon as Wordsworth’s perception. Certainly as real as Brown’s.

That isn’t to guarantee that the phenomenon is a real perception. Such perceptions carry conviction. That is partly why they are perceptions, or seem to be. Alas, they aren’t real perceptions at all. They are real phenomena, yes, but not perceptions. They are not perceptions because the belief that they seem to generate and validate is already built in. It isn’t generated by the supposed perception as is the belief that there is an apple on the tree before me.

When I was young, a boy in primary school, I used to camp in the hills behind Orroroo. I’d live for days on crested pigeon roasted on green sticks. I’d sing as I wandered the scrub, amongst other things Cowper’s great hymn ‘God moves in a mysterious way’. Years later, when I came to read Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey, I recognised his experience as my own. Wordsworth’s Presence was present on the Pekina Creek as well as on the Wye. At that time, I was devoutly religious. Of course I’d found a presence on the creek – I’d brought it with me.

Soon after I’d discovered Tintern Abbey, I ceased to be religious and soon after that I adopted something pretty close to the atheistic materialistic view of the universe outlined above. What Wordsworth calls ‘nature’ still affected me as deeply and intensely as it had done before this change. Not merely hills and trees and stuff, but also things that were more obviously human artefacts as indeed are many of the objects and landscapes that Wordsworth would have included in his nature. Notice here that Wordsworth’s concept of nature differs from Brown’s notion of

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Wilderness. Wordsworth’s Nature is largely a human construction. For Brown every human intrusion diminishes Wilderness.

In spite of my intellectual turn about, I continued to sense, as it were, a deeper reality underlying natural phenomena. But there had been an important change in the experience. For now I brought to the objects of sense a new set of beliefs. Accordingly, I recognised in ‘nature and the language of the sense’ not a presence, but an absence.

This kind of experience has been an important feature of my life and I wouldn’t have been without it. And yet, I value it for what it is, not for something else. It doesn’t tell me about reality. On the contrary it expresses beliefs about reality already held. The same goes for Wordsworth’s mystical experience. And I believe that pretty much the same goes for any other mystical experience, including the visions of saints. (‘The happening of saints to their vision.’)

I have talked of the apprehension of an absence. I do not mean a lack of awareness, the empty mind. I mean an intense awareness, like Wordsworth’s of the objects of sense. Certainly, that intense awareness doesn’t include, or even seem to include, direct access to the soul of all my moral being. In that it differs from Wordsworth’s. But it also differs from Brown’s. For it doesn’t carry with it moral oblivion. I don’t forget myself as a moral being, I don’t cease to be aware of my obligations. I don’t fuse with nature either. I don’t need to. I am not nature, but a part of nature and keenly aware of myself as part of something incommensurably larger than myself.

The kind of mysticism I have tried to describe is, I believe, as good as any other. True, it is not a guide to the ultimate nature of reality. But then neither is any other kind of mysticism. This is, first, because, no kind of mysticism is any kind of guide to any kind of reality and, next, because there can be no guide mystical or otherwise to the ultimate nature of reality. In the nature of things, as a matter of logic, not even God can know the ultimate nature of reality.

Roland E. Robinson

At about the time I came upon Tintern Abbey, I was befriended by the poet and editor, Flexmore Hudson. Hudson had an enormous influence on my life and I have spoken about this elsewhere (Rationality, Reasoning, Ratiocination). I also came to know Max Harris, five or six years my senior and about a million years more sophisticated. From these two men especially, I began to learn that literature was not at all like the stuff we were taught at school. I began to be aware of recent European literature as well as of the sort of things that were kick-starting in Australia.

I learnt that Australian poetry could be Australian, could speak of and to the country I knew. I especially learnt this from the verses of Roland E. Robinson. One would have to say that Robinson is a minor poet, I suppose, but then he is a minor poet of exceptional quality. The body of work is pretty small and there is nothing to match the two or three great passages in Wordsworth. And yet: there are all those good poems, good lines. Much of the time Wordsworth is a bloody old bore. Robinson never. The only half bad poem by Robinson is his one shot at mysticism.

Immutability

Into all sights of lonely grandeur the soul
Shall pass: Into infinity of sea and sky:
Into forsaken spaces wide and bare:
And shall be scattered over the starry whole.
And lost in the voices of the winds crying by:
In waving grass and trees that rustle in air.

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To appreciate just how poor this poem is, compare it with a poem of similar content, Dylan Thomas’ *And Death Shall have no Dominion*.

So much is contentious. What is not contentious is the effect Robinson’s work had on me. His poems spoke to me as few poems have ever done and none until that time. They are simple direct and vivid and they are mainly about one of the enduring passions of my life – the Australian bush.

I have his first book, *Beyond the Grass Tree Spears*. It is inscribed with my name and the date *August, 1944* in a hand-writing imposed by the Adelaide Tech. and soon to be abandoned. I remember vividly opening it and reading the first poem, though I don’t remember where this happened.

**Inscription**

I made my verses of places where I made my fires;  
Of the dark trees standing against the blue-green night  
With the first stars coming: of the bare plains where a bird  
Broke into running song, and of the wind-cold scrub  
Where the bent trees sing to themselves, and of the night  
Dark about me, the fire dying out, and the ashes left.

Another poet who was very important to me at this time (that is, from 1944 to the early fifties) was James McAuley. I came to correspond with McAuley in the sixties and seventies and we met a couple of times. That we thought well of one another’s work doubtless had a good deal to do with allowing us to lean comfortably across the sturdy political fence that divided us. I do not, like McAuley, walk with patience toward the dead, nor expect, as he expected, a welcome in that windless shade. Yet I still admire many of his shorter poems, as I admire few other poems.

Another poet important to me was C. R. Jury – Charles to his many mates. I met Jury a bit after this time – in the early fifties and we became close friends. Jury was a mystic. He was also the author of the two best poems to have been written by an Australian, ‘Sicily in Autumn’ and ‘Sicily in Spring’. And yet his one clear and determined expression of mysticism (‘Hymn to the Muses’), written as it is in a No Man’s Language, leaves me cold.

**Christine and the Coorong 1**

‘Inscription’ was to be a favourite poem of Christine Vick to whom I introduced Robinson’s work almost four decades after discovering it myself. I remember her years ago muttering passionately as we walked in the bitter light through the curly mallee at the head of Yudanamutana Gorge. I could make out the words –

And of the wind-cold scrub  
Where the bent trees sing to themselves.

I met Christine in 1980. We became mates, lovers and eventually married. We shared many things, among them a love of the bush. We travelled widely by conventional car, 4x4, trail bike and light aircraft and, best of all, on foot.

Another thing shared was a love for the poems of Robinson. And so once again I came to share poetry intensely with a friend. This time I wasn’t mistaken, as I seem to have been over Rowe and Wordsworth. Robinson really did mean as much to Christine as to me.

There was one special place that we loved and visited many times, The Coorong. The Falls on Carpa Creek above Yudanamutana Gorge in the Flinders Ranges were to us The Best Place in the World. But another Best Place was my camp, soon to become *our* camp, at The Coorong.
From my early teens I had put in many good days on The Coorong, alone and supported by
my little rifle. Salt Creek was a day’s hard ride from Tailem Bend where I took my bike off the
train. Hanging onto lorries sometimes made the trip easier. Traffic was sparse in those days, but
the drivers were friendly. From Salt Creek you could cross to the Younghusband Peninsula and
find soaks at the inland foot of the dunes.

I introduced Christine to the Coorong, as I had to the poetry of Roland E. Robinson.
Immediately the area, somewhat further South than Salt Creek, became Our Country. There
were times when the whole landscape and atmosphere were suffused with sexual passion.
Whether this was also a fusion with the inexplicable mystery of nature, I can’t say. I can say that
each was fully aware of the other.

There is a poem by Robinson that describes such country.

For Rex Ingamells

Sword grass, sword-sharp to the grasp,
stunted banksia and tea-tree,
hold those sandridges that clasp
the hard bright jewel of the sea.

Camped there we heard the ageless hoarse
ocean down the long sand-bars,
And cries of swans that held their course
Across the galaxies of stars.

I thought of you there, Rex, my friend
I shall not grasp again your hands,
Nor see your face. World without end
The ocean thunders down the sands.

Rex too had befriended me while I was still at school. He was killed youngish in 1955. At that
time he was based in Melbourne, but he too had been a South Australian. (In fact we were both
born in Orroroo.) It is quite possible that Ingamells and Robinson had at some time camped on
The Coorong. At any rate they had certainly camped in coastal country not unlike that of the
Coorong. (There is nothing quite like The Coorong! Nothing at all!)

Recently Christine and I visited The Coorong and our old camp there. In my case, perhaps for
the last time; though I’m hoping for just one more go. The pictures which constitute my final
chapter of Mysticism and Stuff Like That were taken on that visit. They are not mere illustrations,
but an integral part of the document. In taking them, I had in mind the final lines of Tintern
Abbey in which Wordsworth addresses his sister, Dorothy. These lines are apt to the current
condition of Christine and myself because I am dying. What’s more, though, the lines and
pictures belong well together in spite of the great differences in the two kinds of landscape
involved; in spite too of the even greater differences between the two kinds of women. They
belong together for the reason that my experience of nature resembles Wordsworth’s in yet one
more way. Unlike Brown, who was able to become unaware of his friend as he fused with the
mystery of nature, both Wordsworth and I enjoy the friendship, the presence of the friend, as
part of the whole experience. For me, it was as though Christine was not merely present: she was
part of the landscape, sharing and shaping its character.

Nor perchance

If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams

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Of past existence – wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love – oh! With far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake.

Christine and the Coorong 2