Reading Theories and Telling Stories in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

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My thesis engages with reader-response theory in order to show how the realisations it makes might be refined by deconstruction. Reader-response theorists such as Stanley Fish and Norman Holland acknowledge that a subjective element inheres within all interpretation. This has an unsettling effect for literary criticism, which traditionally grounds its claims on notions of objectivity. Criticism must be rethought; both Fish and Holland promise to practise a self-conscious literary criticism which represents more accurately the experience of reading.

My thesis begins with an analysis of reader-response which demonstrates, however, that its attempt to inscribe the act of reading fails; it takes place within a text which is read. Reading inevitably recedes. Neither Fish nor Holland explicitly addresses this dilemma. Deconstruction, on the other hand, takes it into account; it works with, not in spite of, it in order to show that self-consciousness must be approached in a certain way if it is to remain useful.

My thesis does not therefore offer a new theory of reader-response but rethinks this phase within the history of theory by responding to the challenge presented by a recent self-consciousness in theory and literature alike. I show that it is possible, in reading works of contemporary fiction alongside texts by Derrida (and those who think after him), to deepen our understanding of what it is to read.

Reading cannot be grasped; it is marked by that which cannot be known. Its drama resounds with the recent shift towards a notion of ethics predicated upon the unknowability of the other. My thesis wonders repeatedly what consequences this appearance of the unknowable has for literary criticism; to acknowledge its centrality is to accept that the role of criticism cannot be to fully capture the text. Instead, the readings I offer remain attentive, in the face of their failure, to the irrecoverable.

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Introduction
Telling Truths about Reading

Timothy Clark, Nicholas Royle and a number of other theorists—whom we might loosely group as "those thinking after Derrida"—have recently suggested that the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise, now the Research Excellence Framework or REF) is a governing force central to today's university; for Royle, it casts its "eerie shadow" "over everything".[1] The RAE's presence is, Royle's description suggests, sinister. "[E]verything in the RAE", Royle explains, "has to do with counting, with disavowing the unaccountable and uncountable".[2] Clark complains similarly that it demands a "compartmentalising and neutralising professionalism".[3] J. Hillis Miller who, as a subject of the US system, does not write under the spectre of the RAE, nonetheless observes analogous developments; he argues that the university, as it becomes ever-more "technologized" and "globalized", finds increasingly that its "mission" is "to produce an educated workforce to make the region where it is located 'competitive in the global economy'".[4]

Thus, for these writers, the university of the RAE is a closed system centred around attainable and tightly delineated objectives. However, they describe the actual work in which academics are involved—thinking, teaching and reading—in very different terms: as strange, often unquantifiable, and sometimes difficult to identify.[5] Royle, for example, argues that "reading entails something unreadable, in reserve, something that resists being understood *now*".[6] Peter Schwenger, in an essay entitled "Uncanny Reading", suggests that it is a practice characterised by

[1] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 112.
[2] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 112.
[3] Timothy Clark, "Literary Force, Institutional Values," *The Question of Literature: The Place of the Literary in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Elizabeth Beaumont Bissell, Angelaki Humanities (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 103.
[4] J. Hillis Miller, "Literary Study in the Transnational University," *Black Holes or, Boustrophedonic Reading: Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 57.
[5] For discussions of the "unaccountable" nature of teaching see Clare Connors, "Teaching Rhythms," *Parallax* 12.3 (2006) and Barbara Johnson, "The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre," *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982), as well as Bill Readings' chapter "The Scene of Teaching" in which he suggests that it is "interminable" and thus always "structurally incomplete" (Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 159). Sarah Wood, too, argues that "[t]eaching cannot defend its procedures with appeals to doctrine. It is unprotected" (Sarah Wood, "All the Way to Writing," *Angelaki* 12.2 (2007): 138).
[6] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 57; italics in original.

"strangeness".[7] Miller, too, writes of an "excess intrinsic to reading".[8] In *The Ethics of Reading* he asserts that

> Reading itself is extraordinarily hard work. It does not occur all that often. Clearheaded reflection on what really happens in an act of reading is even more difficult and rare. It is an event traces of which are found here and there in written form, like those tracks left in a bubble-chamber by the passage of a particle from outer space .[9]

Miller claims that reading is elusive: "hard work" and difficult to describe. He aligns it with that which is too far away ("outer space") or too small ("a particle") to be seen clearly or known fully. Moreover, the final phrase of this passage arrests our attention. In an otherwise direct and authoritative academic text, Miller's use of simile and his invocation of "tracks left in a bubble-chamber" and "outer space" strike us as whimsical; the phrase "here and there" is conversational and vague. This sudden shift in tone performs the affront "reading" constitutes to the "written form" of Miller's work.

Reading, just one of the tasks in which academics are involved is, these texts stress, an event which leaves only traces; I may "trace" but cannot capture it. Sarah Wood therefore announces that "reading and writing" are neither "forms of production" nor are they "reducible to knowledge".[10] Forbes Morlock points out that "reading yields no quantifiable result". It can, he admits, "of course, be measured (as in: have you done the reading?), but quantities of pages and books read make for deliriously bad performance indicators".[11] Bill Readings declares that "Thought is non-productive labour, and hence does not show up as such on balance sheets except as waste".[12] The work done by academics sits uneasily in relation to the aims prescribed by the RAE; the "non-productive" and trace-like quality of much academic pursuit cannot be captured by the "balance sheets" with which the institution attempts to justify itself. For Morlock, "one of the features of the infamous 'Research Assessment Exercise' (RAE) in the United Kingdom is that it seeks to create competition (ultimately over financial resources) in areas of endeavour which are, although hardly

[7] Peter Schwenger, "Uncanny Reading," *English Studies in Canada* 21.3 (1995): 340.
[8] Miller, "Literary Study in the Transnational University", p. 485.
[9] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*, Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine (New York; Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 3-4.
[10] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 138.
[11] Forbes Morlock, "The Institute for Creative Reading," *Angelaki* 12.2 (2007): 5-6.
[12] Readings, *The University in Ruins*, p. 175.

uncompetitive, not best organized on a competitive basis".[13] Clark stresses that "there is a tension" between "institutional values" and this non-productive reading and thought, which he labels "literary force" but which, as we will see, adopts a variety of different names: the trace, *différance*, reading, writing and the Other, to name but a few.[14]

Clark, Miller, Royle, Morlock and Readings all describe the above tension as a contemporary phenomenon and particular product of the RAE. Of course, in some ways, the RAE of today's universities is in fact a (particularly visible) instantiation of a far older dilemma. Jacques Derrida writes that "[a]s far as I know, nobody has ever founded a university *against* reason. So we may reasonably suppose that the university's reason for being has always been reason itself, and some essential connection of reason to being".[15] Derrida points out that the university and the notion of reason are intimately twined, and always have been; yet the activities which take place within it are in many ways unreasonable, resistant to reasoning.

The debate in which Clark, Miller and Readings engage may well be especially pronounced today; the current scarcity of financial resources renders the pressure to quantify and to compete acute. However, it is not new; it gestures towards a paradox by which "literary study" and "literary criticism" have always been marked and from which they cannot escape. Clark begins his essay with a vignette in which he imagines what would happen if "the ghost of, say, James Joyce or William Blake" came into the room as he was preparing a lecture or seminar on *Ulysses* or *The Four Zoas* and asked what he was doing. Clark wryly leaves it to us, his readers, "to imagine their response" to the answer: "'I'm teaching it as literature …'". Clark concludes: "My point is this: why does this answer, so obviously truthful, seem so inadequate and reductive, almost as if the main effect of studying, or teaching, something 'as literature' were to contain or to curtail it in some way".[16] Studying—and the necessity of classifying what one studies—is an institutional

[13] Morlock, "The Institute for Creative Reading": 5.
[14] Clark, "Literary Force, Institutional Values", p. 92.
[15] Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils," *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 135; italics in original.
[16] Clark, "Literary Force, Institutional Values", p. 91; Miller points out in "The Critic as Host" that "'criticism' is often said to kill 'literature'". Criticism is frequently figured as a "parasite" which feeds on literature, its "host" (J. Hillis

operation which limits the force of the literary. Thus, any criticism or study we might produce inevitably compromises the literary quality which inspires it; we are destined from the outset to fail, likely "[m]ost of the time" to "forget the strangeness of reading".[17]

There will never be a properly *literary* study. Any account of the literary will say something other than that which it wishes to say; much as it might desire to capture the quality of the literary, it is destined always to betray it. One might conclude, given this sorry state of affairs, that it might be best to give up on literary study and criticism and look for an alternative with which to replace them. Catherine Belsey certainly seems to think so; she announces, perhaps hopefully, that "[w]e are witnessing the end of literary criticism".[18] However, such a conclusion is too hasty; the apparent impossibility of literary study might, in fact, be something with which we would do well to work. In a roundabout way, the quality of the literary is made *most* apparent in our failure to capture it; in our inability to give an account of the literary, its non-accountable nature becomes evident. Thus, the paradoxical and impossible nature of literary study offers a unique, if counter-intuitive, possibility; my project here, in this thesis, is to explore and to perform it.

My thesis takes its prompts and its inspiration from the situation I have just outlined (the situation in which it is, itself, written and read) and is fascinated by a group of texts which cultivate reading's power—and its weaknesses—in particularly marked ways. The texts I will examine force us to consider reading's untrainable power; they permit me to think a new dynamics and ethics of reading.

Such a project is, inevitably, bound with the very notion of a thesis, which the OED defines as

> A proposition laid down or stated, esp. as a theme to be discussed and proved, or to be maintained against attack (in *Logic* sometimes as distinct from hypothesis n. 2, in *Rhetoric* from antithesis n. 2); a statement, assertion, tenet.[19]

Miller, "The Critic as Host," *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (Harlow: Longman, 1995), p. 278). Miller is, however, sceptical of the divide he proposes; his essay asks "can host and parasite live happily together, in the domicile of the same text, feeding each other or sharing the food?" (Miller, "The Critic as Host", p. 278).

[17] Schwenger, "Uncanny Reading": 340.

[18] Catherine Belsey, "English Studies in the Postmodern Condition: Towards a Place for the Signifier," *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 123.

[19] Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press. Available: http://www.oed.com/. Consulted 19 November 2009.

A thesis is a position "to be…proved" and defended. If, however, literary study finds that it says something other than that which it sets out to say and that possibility emerges through impossibility, can such a notion of steadfast positionality strictly be upheld? Is a thesis any longer possible? Derrida, in the "defence" offered of his thesis, explains that

> The very idea of a thetic presentation, of positional or oppositional logic, the idea of position, of *Setzung* or *Stellung,* what I called at the beginning the *epoch* of the thesis, was one of the essential parts of the system that was under deconstructive questioning.[20]

Here, too, "the very idea" of a thesis will be "under deconstructive questioning". This will, in many ways, be an anti-thesis. This is not to say that it refuses to adopt or to defend a position (which would be impossible – it is defending one at this very moment) but that in it no "pure" thesis is possible. The position I wish to claim is not distinct and cannot be rigorously defended against its opposite; thesis and anti-thesis remain intimately bound. My thesis emerges only through, and in relation to, its antithesis.

Representations of Reading

The twentieth century "school" which most obviously addresses questions concerning the nature of reading is the reader-response theory of Norman Holland, Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. The first section of my chapter will consider it alongside literary works in which, as Gerald Prince writes, the "narrative text is partly constituted by the result of various reading operations it performs on itself".[21] Prince refers to texts which contain self-conscious or -reflexive moments—"reading interludes"—which he elsewhere labels "metanarrative signs" and which we might simply call "metafiction".[22] By playing the thesis game, by adopting at the outset a slightly adversarial position, I will suggest some of the flaws in both of these accounts. As I will show in the paragraphs which follow, the theorists both of metafiction and of reader-response realise that we cannot uphold classical notions of objectivity. They propose instead a more honest and self-

[20] Derrida, "Punctuations: The Time of the Thesis", p. 120.
[21] Gerald Prince, "Notes on the Text as Reader," *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, eds. Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman Wimmers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 234.
[22] Prince, "Notes on the Text as Reader", p. 237; Prince discusses "metanarrative signs" in Gerald Prince, "Metanarrative Signs," *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 1995).

conscious mode of criticism or fiction. However, they fail to enact it. Their work thereby points to a yet more profound dilemma, which I will explore in the second and third sections of my chapter.

Fish claims to practise "a brand of criticism whose most distinctive claim was not to be criticism at all but a means of undoing the damage that follows in criticism's wake".[23] Holland, in his book *Poems in Persons*, interviews readers and "[tries] to get them to *avoid* literary analysis and to talk instead about their feelings and associations to the literary works".[24] Both theorists claim to shun and to move beyond literary criticism.[25] Fish and Holland alike echo in their work Belsey's desire for the "end of literary criticism".

In doing so, Holland and Fish frame literary criticism as damaging and undesirable; they evince a dissatisfaction with the way in which it typically proceeds. For them, criticism is, most specifically, as Andrew Bennett points out, a "distortion", an "artificial, supplementary, or even parasitic defacement of reading".[26] Criticism fails to capture what actually takes place when we read. The rationale behind this grievance becomes apparent, for example, in Fish's *Is There A Text in this Class?* At one point in his text, Fish considers Plato's *Phaedrus*. When talking about the text Fish writes that it "challenges" certain assumptions "or, to be more precise, forces the reader to challenge" them.[27] Fish's initial claim is made in a form frequently employed by literary criticism. In it, the text is the subject of the verb challenges: Fish announces that the text challenges certain assumptions. This phrase gives the impression that the text acts and has an existence all of its own. Criticism frames itself as an impersonal and objective account.

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[23] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 6.
[24] Norman N. Holland, *Poems in Persons: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 61; my italics.
[25] Derrida, to whom I will turn in my chapter's next section, although a very different thinker nonetheless expresses a similar sentiment to Fish and Holland when he writes that "[l]iterary criticism is perhaps structurally philosophical. What I am saying here is not necessarily a compliment" (Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature," *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), p. 53). What this dissatisfaction entails for Derrida is, as we will see, quite different to the conclusions reached by Fish and Holland.
[26] Andrew Bennett, *Readers and Reading*, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 1995), p. 13.
[27] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 41; Fish employs this revisionary structure throughout his work; earlier, for example, he writes of "the intuition which stands (or, more properly, on which the reader stands)" (Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 40).

Reading, Barthes points out in *S/Z*, is framed as "nothing more than a *referendum*". The reader "is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text". The "literary institution", Barthes explains, maintains a "pitiless divorce" "between the producer of the text and its user".[28] It depicts the reader as passive recipient of the text. Barthes argues, however, that "reading is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a grammar which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority. It is a form of work".[29] He describes it a little later in his account as a "labor of language".[30]

Fish concurs; his further comment—"or, to be more precise, forces the reader to challenge"—revises and qualifies his initial statement. "To be more precise", Fish points out, we ought to include the reader in our formulation; the poem's "challenge" does not in fact have an existence apart from him/her. Thus, the objectivity claimed by literary criticism is "false". Fish writes that "the choice is never between objectivity and interpretation but between an interpretation that is unacknowledged as such and an interpretation that is at least aware of itself".[31] Holland, too, argues that "no critic can do anything" other than "[work] explicitly from his transaction of the text". He claims, therefore, that "all criticism is at least de facto transactive. It becomes de jure transactive when the critic explicitly builds on his relationship to the text".[32] Like Fish, Holland points out that the choice is not between a "transactive" and a non-transactive account, but between an account that is explicitly transactive and one which is not.

Criticism is always "an interpretation". Reader-response, echoing for literary theory the realisations effected for philosophy by Husserl's phenomenology, realises that meaning and perception (or interpretation) are inseparable. Iser formulates this yet more explicitly. He tells us that reading is a

[28] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4; italics in original.
[29] Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 10.
[30] Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 11.
[31] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 167.
[32] Norman N. Holland, "Re-Covering 'the Purloined Letter': Reading as a Personal Transaction," *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, eds. Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman Wimmers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 363.

creative process and that "[t]he convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence".[33] The work does not exist until it is read; the text is realized by its reader.

It is therefore imperative, Fish and Holland suggest, that we render our interpretations—and their possibly idiosyncratic nature—apparent. Holland declares that we must "[recover] reading as a personal transaction" and thus "restore stories to their rightful owners".[34] In order to acknowledge the inseparability of interpretation and s/he who performs it we must turn our attention to the reader and accord him/her "joint responsibility for the production of […] meaning", as Fish writes in his 1980 preface to *Is There a Text in this Class.*[35] Holland promises to do so by offering as honest an account as possible. He writes that "you may feel that my response is idiosyncratic—so be it. The important thing is that we be as candid as we can, I in my assertions, you in your disagreements".[36] He proposes, for example, to pay close attention to his use of pronouns: "I shall […] adopt a style in writing this book in which I do not assume automatically that I am privy to incontrovertible truths about the text. I shall be frank with 'I' or 'you' or 'we' when the event I am talking about depends on the specific and unique way my mind or yours has constructed it, and I shall use 'one' or 'people' to generalize about human beings only when I really mean *everybody*".[37]

Holland therefore suggests that "[o]ne might call [his work] metacriticism or even infracriticism".[38] We cannot escape interpretation but ought, instead, to be more honest, performing a "metacriticism" conscious of its own investments and operations and thereby making criticism's (imperfect) state obvious.

A similar conclusion is drawn in a very different context by Patricia Waugh in the opening chapter of her book *Metafiction*. Waugh notes that "[t]he simple notion that language passively reflects a

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[33] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), p. 212.
[34] Holland, "Re-Covering 'the Purloined Letter'", p. 370.
[35] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 3.
[36] Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. xiv-xv.
[37] Holland, *Poems in Persons*, p. 4; italics in original.
[38] Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, p. vii.

coherent, meaningful and 'objective' world is no longer tenable".[39] Like Fish, Holland and Iser, Waugh claims that we can no longer uphold notions of "objectivity". She argues, again similarly, that we must turn instead to a meta-discourse: "'[m]eta' terms, therefore, are required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers".[40]

These theorists all suggest that a meta-language or -criticism might more honestly reflect the condition in which we find ourselves when we read, use language or, for Waugh, write fiction. The solution is not, however, that simple. In the paragraphs which follow I will, by looking more carefully at Waugh's theory of metafiction and at the "metacriticism" Fish and Holland perform, show that neither in fact "works". The inconsistencies to which they subject us point to a more profound instability, which I will outline in my chapter's second section.

Metalanguage, Waugh explains, is a term coined by the linguist L. Hjelmslev who "defined it as a language which, instead of referring to non-linguistic events, situations or objects in the world, refers to *another* language: it is a language which takes another language as its object".[41] The "meta" prefix means "behind", "beyond" or "after". A metalanguage is, therefore, as in Waugh/Hjelmslev's definition, a language which goes "beyond" or "behind" language in order to tell us something about it. Waugh applies this logic to fiction; she claims that "[*m*]*etafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact".[42] In doing so, Waugh argues, it makes a "statement about the creation of that fiction".[43]

Waugh adds that "this results in writing which consistently displays its conventionality, which explicitly and overtly lays bare its conditions of artifice".[44] Scholes suggests that metafiction

[39] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, New Accents (London; New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 3.
[40] Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 3.
[41] Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 4; italics in original.
[42] Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 2; italics in original.
[43] Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 6.
[44] Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 4.

"attempts, among other things, to assault or transcend the laws of fiction".[45] The "assault" and "transcend" of Scholes's formulation couches his claim in stronger terms than Waugh's. Nonetheless, both writers express a similar belief that metafiction makes "conventionality" or the "laws of fiction" apparent. Byatt's *The Game*, which is "based on the complex and basically antagonistic relationship between two sisters in their thirties, the unmarried Cassandra, an Oxford don specializing in Medieval romance literature, and Julia, a popular novelist who writes about the problems of contemporary women", provides an example of such a practice.[46] (Although I will refer to other novelists elsewhere, I offer Byatt as my example in this opening chapter because many of the themes in her fiction—theory, literature and criticism, as well as academia and the university—are, also, concerns in this chapter).

Byatt's work is littered with comments which employ language usually applied to or about, but not found within, the novel. For example, Ivan tells Julia that Cassandra strikes him as "[a] literary convention". Elsewhere, he tells her that he is "'even laying [himself] open to appearing as the selfish lover in one of [her] books'".[47] The novel points to the conventionality of Cassandra's character and to the function performed by Ivan's; the novel proffers, within itself, observations usually made by the literary criticism which takes place outside it. The text, within itself, performs the interpretive work usually reserved for the literary criticism which follows it; critics of Byatt's work therefore stress her role as writer *and* reader, author *and* critic of her work; Kathleen Coyne Kelly coins the term "ficticism" to describe the "hybrid of fiction and criticism that Byatt practices".[48]

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[45] Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 1995), p. 29.

[46] Giuliana Giobbi, "Sisters Beware of Sisters: Sisterhood as a Literary Motif in Jane Austen, A.S. Byatt and I. Bossi Fedrigotti," *Journal of European Studies* 22.3 (1992): p. 245; the novel is an especially apt example here because, as Clare Hanson points out, it too, patterns the realisations outlined above. Hanson explains that "Cassandra, Byatt has said in an interview, is a better writer than Julia, because she sees writing as artifice. That is, she is aware that language is not transparent, that it has its own, metaphorical life" (Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The "Woman's Novel" in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 127-8). *The Game*, like the claims made by Waugh and reader-response, is underpinned by an awareness that language is "artificial" and "not transparent".

[47] A. S. Byatt, *The Game* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 146 and pp. 133-4.

[48] Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *A.S. Byatt*, Twayne's English Authors Series (New York; London: Twayne Publishers; Prentice Hall International, 1996), p. 115; theorists of metafiction also point to this dual function. Robert Scholes suggests that "[m]etafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself". (Scholes, "Metafiction", p. 29) For Mark Currie, too, metafiction functions "as a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism" (Mark Currie, *Metafiction*, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 1995), p. 2). For Patricia Waugh, metafiction produces a "formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism'" (Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 6).

The novel's most overtly metafictional feature is, however, its use of a "novel-within-the-novel".[49] It occurs to Julia that she might write a book, which she would call "A Sense of Glory". She describes it thus:

> Now, I could write this novel about a woman with a dream world that – extends her possibilities. And she introduces a real man into this world, and understands – really understands – *one aspect* of him, this way […] And the dream world, which is beautiful, is quite shattered when she meets him again after a long time.[50]

Giuliana Giobbi explains that "Julia 'translates' her sister's life-lie into a successful novel ('A Sense of Glory')".[51] *The Game*, too, is a "translation" of Cassandra's life into a novel. Julia's description summarises perfectly the plot of Byatt's work. Kathleen Coyne Kelly therefore argues that "[h]ere, the writer—Byatt, certainly, but also Julia—invites the reader to *watch* her fashion her fiction".[52] Kelly's conflation of Byatt and Julia is telling; through Julia, she implies, we may consider the way in which Byatt has constructed her novel.

Jane Campbell thus argues that "*The Game* […] takes its place beside other 'self-reflexive' pieces of contemporary fiction in which novelists examine the procedures of their art".[53] Clare Morgan announces, similarly, that Byatt is "a 'metafictional' novelist in that she employs structural under-mining of convention" and that "[p]art of [her] agenda is, then, the politics of narrative".[54] Campbell and Hanson's claims that Byatt's novel "examines" artistic procedure and "the politics of narrative" reasserts Waugh's belief that metafictional moments "draw attention to", "lay bare" and

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[49] Jane Campbell, "The Hunger of the Imagination in A.S. Byatt's *the Game*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 29.3 (1988): 160.
[50] Byatt, *The Game*, p. 136; italics in original.
[51] Giobbi, "Sisters Beware of Sisters": p. 247.
[52] Kelly, *A.S. Byatt*, p. 31.
[53] Campbell, "The Hunger of the Imagination in A.S. Byatt's *the Game*": 147.
[54] Clare Morgan, "Between Worlds: Iris Murdock, A. S. Byatt, and Romance," *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 515.

"display" the novel's conventionality or fictional status. Metafiction, according to these writers, uncovers the "fictiveness of fiction", to borrow a phrase employed by Byatt.[55]

For its theorists metafiction *reveals*, and thereby facilitates a discussion of, the fictionality of the fictional text. However, to suggest that these comments are revelatory is to imply that, prior to their inscription, we believed Byatt's narrative to be "real". This claim is obviously absurd. A much earlier example of a meta- moment, the memorable scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Bottom *et al* prepare their play, highlights this absurdity and thereby hints at what really happens at these metafictional moments. The characters, concerned that "a lion among ladies, is a/most dreadful thing", decide they must remind their audience that he is not real:

> Snout: Therefore another prologue must tell he is not a lion.
> Bottom: Nay, you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck, and he himself must speak through, saying thus or to the same defect: 'ladies,' or 'fair ladies, I would wish you' or 'I would request you' or 'I would entreat you not to fear, not to tremble. My life for yours. If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life. No, I am no such thing. I am a man, as other men are'–and there, indeed, let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner.[56]

Snout and Bottom propose to uncover the lion's fictional status, making it clear to the audience from the outset that he is in fact Snug the joiner. However, this scene is, of course, funny. Its comedy derives from its misplaced and excessive anxiety; the suggestion that we might think Snug's lion to be real dramatically over-evaluates the power of his performance. The suggestion is ridiculous, especially when considered in relation to the incompetent play these characters finally produce. We, the audience, know that the lion is not real; we do not need to be told.

In the act of telling us, however, Snout and Bottom implicitly propose that their play might transcend its fictional form. They introduce the notion of a "real" lion which did not, prior to this moment, exist. Their reference does not clarify the division between fiction and the real, but introduces into fiction a notion of the real it would otherwise have excluded. Thus, their discussion

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[55] A. S. Byatt, *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), p. 176.
[56] William Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, eds. Gary Taylor and Stanley W. Wells, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Act III. i, p. 585, William Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, eds. Gary Taylor and Stanley W. Wells, vol. 2 (London: Guild Publishing, 1989).

achieves the exact opposite of that which it sets out to do. Instead of delineating the division between fiction and the real, it confuses it.

Kelly's claim that "the writer—Byatt, certainly, but also Julia—invites the reader to *watch* her fashion her fiction" enacts a similar confusion. Kelly describes Byatt and Julia alike as "the writer". Her claim assumes that Byatt and Julia are the same, or at least equivalent. She accords Julia a status as "real" author. Julia is, however, a fictional character; she cannot be the author of the novel that we read. This impossibility reminds us that the description "A Sense of Glory" offers of *The Game* takes place *within* Byatt's novel; it occurs within a fictional frame. These comments are not *simply* a description of *The Game* (although they do gesture towards it) but are also a further event in its fictional narrative. The declaration does not stand outside, nor is it simply "about" the novel, but further contributes to the "game" that it plays. This complex situation points towards a "vertiginous illogicality" which is, for Currie, intrinsic to the notion of "self-consciousness". He points out that "something which is defined by its self-consciousness must surely be conscious of its own definitive characteristic. It is not enough that metafiction knows that it is fiction; it must also know that it is metafiction if its self-knowledge is adequate, and so on in an infinite logical regress".[57]

I will return to the idea of the "infinite logical regress" later. It suffices here to point out that the "metafictional" aspects of Byatt's text do not offer us a straightforward or unproblematic revelation. "A Sense of Glory" and *The Game* are not the same and we do not see the way in which Byatt fashions her fiction. Byatt's novel performs only a "*sort of* turning back", as Derrida writes. The "pure" self-reflection that Waugh and others claim for metafiction is, he explains, "a stupid and uninformed rumour".[58] We discover, in these examples, that we cannot unproblematically point

[57] Currie, *Metafiction*, p. 1.
[58] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 41; my italics. Derrida makes a similar point in "Psyche: Invention of the Other". He points out that self-reflexivity is "more resistant than it seems" and that it "not only does not produce coincidence with or presence to itself but instead projects forward the advent of the self, of 'speaking' or 'writing' of itself as other" (Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Invention of the Other," trans. Catherine Porter, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, vol. 1, Meridian (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), p.7).

to fiction within a fictional frame; we cannot step outside of it in order to "reveal" or comment upon it. The moment of revelation eludes us.[59]

The term metafiction in fact contains a contradiction. The meta- prefix seduces us into believing that metafiction speaks beyond fiction and reveals it in other than fictional terms. Its prefix proposes a break; the second half of the term, however, returns metafiction to the very fiction it claims to move beyond. As the examples above have shown, metafictional comment takes place through and within fiction (meta also means "among" or "along with"). Inseparable from the ostensible object of its "critique", it is implicated *a priori* in the very field upon which it supposedly comments.

Fish and Holland's metacriticism faces a similar impossibility. It is, equally, unable to step outside of the criticism which "distorts" reading; it finds itself bound to reproduce the failings of that with which it would break, as I will now show. As I explained above, Fish proposes to pursue a mode of criticism which more honestly represents the act of reading and of interpretation. He therefore offers us a model in which "the getting throughs, the figuring outs, the false starts, the interpretations (as it turns out) prematurely hazarded are not in my analyses regarded as the disposable machinery of extraction; rather, they are the acts of structuring and restructuring, hypothesizing and dehypothesizing, stance taking and stance revising, the succession of which is the structure of the reader's experience".[60] He claims that "[i]t is as if a slow motion camera with an automatic stop-action effect were recording our linguistic experiences and presenting them to us for viewing".[61] Fish informs us that he will record what Iser describes as the "time-flow of the reading".[62]

[59] Although revelation is impossible, we cannot abandon the *language* of revelation *tout court*; it remains necessary, for reasons which will become clear later.
[60] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 144.
[61] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 28.
[62] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 109.

Fish puts this into practice with a sentence from Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, focusing on the first two phrases: "[t]hat Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no certainty in Scripture".[63] Fish argues that "the reader", having read the first phrase, "commits himself to its assertion" but does not, however, know what will come next. There are a number of possibilities; Fish suggests:

> That Judas perished by hanging himself, *is* (an example for us all).
> That Judas perished by hanging himself, *shows* (how conscious he was of the enormity of his sin).
> That Judas perished by hanging himself, *should* (give us pause).[64]

He notes that "there are, of course" further possibilities but that they "[narrow] considerably as the next three words are read: 'there is no'". Fish suggests that the reader then expects to find the word "doubt" and is therefore astounded to encounter instead the phrase "certainty in Scripture".

The premise on which Fish bases his analysis is no doubt correct; there *are* a number of moments in our reading when we do not know what will follow and we do, frequently, form and revise our expectations. This is not always true though. Fish's analysis assumes that we read in a strictly linear fashion. It is however equally possible that, skipping across the page, we might in fact see the end of the sentence first; the suspense Fish outlines might never occur. Moreover, Holland satirises Fish's "stop-motion method of reading" as one "which surely came from watching too much football on television" and it's easy to see why.[65] Fish begins (as I do) by citing the sentence as a whole. Thus, his reader already knows the way in which it ends; before he even properly begins his analysis, we successfully read the two phrases. The pause between the first and the second phrase of the sentence is, in this reading, fleeting and momentary. In Fish's analysis, on the other hand, we hesitate at this comma for an almost frustratingly long time. The pace of Fish's analysis paralyses the sentence, rendering his claim to capture our reading of it absurd; it is very different to the "time-flow" in which we "actually" read.

Fish admits this failure in relation to his analysis of a different sentence; he writes that "[s]ome of you may want to object that my analysis of the sentence is more tortuous and torturing than the

[63] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 23.
[64] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 24; italics in original.
[65] Holland, "Re-Covering 'the Purloined Letter'", p. 366.

reader's experience of it. And you would be right".[66] His declamation, although unabashed, intimates frustration. He proposes at the outset to capture the reading experience, but concludes abruptly with a declaration in which "the reader's experience" and his "analysis of the sentence" are not the same. Moreover, as Fish analyses it, he repeatedly re-cites fragments of the Judas sentence. Thus, we are forced repeatedly to read them until we are left with the feeling, as noted by Adam Phillips, "that comes when one endlessly repeats a word only to be left with an enigmatic obstacle as to its sense".[67] The "reading experience" becomes increasingly distant as Fish places more words between the reader and the sentence s/he reads and has read.

Fish's analysis fails to capture or to take into account the experience of his own reader. Fish's description is thwarted by the fact that it takes place in a text which is itself read. This condition will, of course, pertain to any attempt to represent reading in a written text. Reading does not stop, as Holland realises. Having gathered responses from a number of interviewees, he admits that "I 'read' what they said, in other words, much as I would read a poem".[68] The readings Holland wishes to record will, in the act of recording, be subjected to yet another reading and cannot therefore be 'honestly' captured.

We realise this, again, when Fish notes that "my reader is a construct, an ideal or idealized reader".[69] Fish uses the phrase "my reader" in order to refer to the generalized reader that he has constructed as the object of his discussion. The phrase also refers, however, to "my reader" as s/he who reads Fish's text. This double signification highlights the bind in which Fish finds himself caught; the text's attempt to theorise "the reader" is undermined by the arrival of yet another reader to whom it addresses itself. The "actual" reader is never the same as the one described. This condition applies, too, to my own analysis. I am, as I write, the reader of Fish's text; as you read the quotation above, however, you are; my "actual" fails as a description of the reader. It attempts

[66] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 186.
[67] Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 98.
[68] Holland, *Poems in Persons*, p. 61.
[69] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 48; italics in original.

to delineate s/he who reads *now* (as the French *actuel* denotes) only to discover that "now" is an instant hesitated in the gap between writing and reading.

I am unable to refer to or to articulate the reading which I perform. Any discussion—any writing—of reading finds that it refers elsewhere; even as it attempts to fix one reading, it finds itself read – we cannot capture the experience from which we are nonetheless unable to escape. We are faced, in the examples outlined above (and after Derrida) with a "spiral of infinite regression in representation", which Diane Elam labels *mise en abyme.*[70] Elam illustrates this trope using a Quaker Oats box as example. She explains that "the Quaker Oats man appears on the Quaker Oats box holding a small box, which depicts the Quaker Oats man holding a box with the Quaker Oats man…. and so on *ad infinitum*".[71] The image reproduces itself indefinitely, becoming smaller every time; Elam points out that the abyss "gets deeper with each additional determination".[72] The sequence is never full or complete; we realise instead that "[r]epresentation can never come to an end, since greater accuracy and detail only allows us to see even more Quaker Oats boxes". Elam concludes that "[t]his is rather odd, since we are accustomed to think of accuracy and detail as helping us to grasp an image fully, rather than forcing us to recognise the impossibility of grasping it".[73]

This concept recurs in works of contemporary novelists, but is a particular feature of David Mitchell's work. A character in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Adam Ewing, invokes this infinite structure when he writes that "[o]ccasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrums of itself, but as I approach it, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent".[74] We cannot catch up with "truth" or reach the heart of the "thorny swamp"; we attempt to "grasp" the

[70] Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms En Abyme* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 27; that said, Derrida expresses an explicit distrust of the concept. He writes, "I have never wanted to abuse the abyss, nor, above all, the *mise* '*en abîme*'. I do not believe in it very much, I am wary of the confidence that it inspires fundamentally, I believe it too representative either to go far enough or not to avoid the very thing toward which it allegedly rushes" (Jacques Derrida, "To Speculate - on "Freud"," *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 304) I will employ it for the moment in order to illustrate my argument bearing in mind, however, that Derrida's fear of the "too representative" is well-founded, for reasons which will become clear later.
[71] Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*, p. 27.
[72] Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*, p. 30.
[73] Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*, pp. 27-8.
[74] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Sceptre, 2004), p. 17.

moment of reading, but it escapes.[75] This impossibility demands that we rethink our approach; reading is clearly not a presence we might capture. In order to progress our discussion, we must rethink our temporal and ontological categories, engaging with a "deconstructive" mode of thought to which I will turn in my next section.

The Impossible Representation of Truth and The Truth of Impossible Representation

'What is reading?' proves an awkward question. Miller points out that "[w]e can do it. We can read, but we cannot understand what it is we are doing".[76] The act of reading is at once obvious and utterly elusive. We cannot formulate or describe what reading is yet we intuit it all too well. The coupling of this utter certainty and complete uncertainty render our interrogation, when pursued as above, an infuriating pursuit. We should not, however, despair; Royle points out that "[i]ntellectual uncertainty is not necessarily or simply a *negative* experience, a dead-end sense of not knowing or of indeterminacy. It is just as well an experience of something open, generative, exhilarating (the trembling of what remains undecidable)".[77] In this case, the loop in which we are caught is not a "dead-end" but a spur to new thinking; it demands that we contemplate an utterly different approach to reading, to time and to experience, as I will show in the following two sections of my chapter.

It is not possible to fully represent reading; any formulation I might make is already and inevitably caught up in the logic and the discourse on which it supposedly comments. I cannot halt reading in order to capture it. This means, however, that reading is still *there*; I am reading even as I fail to grasp what reading is. In order to access it, in order to get at this still-happening reading, I need to think differently; I need to reject my representational, or philosophical, approach and attempt instead to think in what we might tentatively call a "non-representational" mode. In order to consider what this might entail I will, in the paragraphs which follow, examine two examples:

[75] Although Ewing is unable to grasp truth, the infinite regress emphasizes his position in relation to it, as his "I glimpse" and "I approach" make clear; as it moves away, the infinite regress places his stance into relief. I will return later, in the third section of my chapter, to this relationality and the possibilities it opens.
[76] Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, p. 48.
[77] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 52.

Emmanuel Levinas's theorisation of language in *Otherwise than Being* and Derrida's notion of the "literary".[78]

Otherwise than Being offers a theorisation of language which summarises and develops the reflections made thus far. Levinas divides language into a saying (which he equates with "responsibility" or "ethics", both terms I will discuss in more detail later) and a said. The said resembles the representational or philosophical mode in which we have proceeded thus far. However, it is not the only option; the saying offers an alternative. Levinas describes saying as

> Not the communication of a said, which would immediately cover over and extinguish or absorb the said, but saying holding open its openness, without excuses, evasions or alibis, delivering itself without saying anything said. Saying saying saying itself, without thematizing it, but exposing it again.[79]

Levinas refers to a saying which, as language's "preontological" condition or law, cannot be "thematized" or figured. Saying, like reading, is "open" and strange. Saying opposes itself and is other to the closures of the "representational thought" of the said.[80]

The "literary" performs a similar function in Derrida's writing. Derrida offers it as an alternative to the philosophical and tells us that "[t]here is no literature without a *suspended* relation to meaning and reference".[81] Blanchot writes similarly that "the work—the work of art, the literary work—is neither finished nor unfinished: it is. What it says is exclusively this: that it is – and nothing more. Beyond that it is nothing".[82] Both writers seem at first sight to suggest that literature, unlike philosophy, loosens its grip on "meaning" and "reference"; it simply "is". We must, however, read this claim tentatively. Neither the saying nor the literary is a straightforward alternative to representation.

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[78] My argument here unites Derrida and Levinas. They are, however, very different thinkers. A later chapter will think in more detail about the differences between Levinas and Derrida's work.
[79] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Texts (The Hague; London: Nijhoff, 1981), p. 143.
[80] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 46
[81] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 48; italics in original.
[82] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 22.

Derrida frequently expresses his claims for the literary in cautious terms. In his interview with Derek Attridge, "This Strange Institution Called Literature", for example, he announces that "there is no text which is literary *in itself*. Literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text".[83] He therefore describes "this institution of fiction which gives *in principle* the power to say everything" and states "[t]he principle (I stress that it's a *principle*)".[84] Derrida emphasises the term "in principle". In the second of these quotations Derrida not only prioritises the term, but accentuates, in his aside, this very act of prioritisation. Derrida's "in principle" defers definition; he explains that "[e]verything is given over to the future of a 'perhaps'".[85] The claims Derrida makes for the "literary" are predicated upon the idea that we do not yet know what it might be.

Jill Robbins, in her book on Levinas, exercises a similar reticence when discussing the saying. Robbins announces, for example, "I hesitate to call this dimension of the work 'Saying' […], because I do not think that we should presuppose that we know what the Saying is" and later "[a]s I have previously cautioned, however, we should not take for granted that we know what we mean by the Saying".[86]

Robbins realises that to speak as though we "know" what the saying is is to close it down and therefore to betray its openness. A saying affirmed as such is no longer saying *per se*. Derrida stresses, equally, that if the literary experience were assured, it would no longer be properly literary. A definitive saying or notion of the literary returns us instantly to what Smith terms the "classically philosophical definition of the classically literary" in which the literary is understood as a "negative gain, or negative capability" which, by acting as "the effacement of philosophy's effacement", gains a "subliminal access" to the "*same* ideal truth" philosophy would present. The literary, in this classical model, offers us, in its "double effacement", an "enhancement of the

[83] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 44; italics in original.
[84] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 37 and p. 40; italics in original.
[85] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, ed. David Wills, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 131.
[86] Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. xxiii and p. 144.

truth".[87] In this theorisation, the literary is not absolutely other to philosophy's system, but can be comprehended within its logic; this conceptualisation brings the literary back to philosophy's same.

The dilemma Levinas and Derrida face gestures towards a difficulty intrinsic in any attempt to think the "other" of philosophy or representational thought. Derrida explains that, in thinking this other, and "[i]n thinking it *as such*, in recognising it, one misses it. One reappropriates it for oneself, one disposes of it, one misses it, or rather one misses (the) missing (of) it, which, as concerns the other, always amounts to the same".[88] We cannot think the other in properly "other" terms; our every thought brings it back to the same.

We realise, as Clark writes, that the "*concept* of the other, or the notion of a language that correlates with the other" is "a contradiction in terms".[89] As I suggested earlier, "pure" saying is impossible and irrecoverable. Levinas's passage therefore fails to capture the openness of the saying. In it, saying regresses in a repeated "saying saying saying" that Robbins describes as a "primordial stammering of ethical language".[90] Levinas is explicit about this dilemma. He sets out to capture the saying but admits that "the very discussion which we are pursuing at this moment counts by its said".[91] He informs us that *Otherwise than Being* will not succeed in capturing the saying that it invokes; the work is destined to fail. Clark suggests that Levinas "seems not only to invite but actually to perform a self-refutation, asserting that his own discourse on the other and *le Dire* is necessarily their very occlusion!"[92] Clark, with faux-incredulity, highlights "what seems to be a pragmatic contradiction in [*Otherwise than Being*] – simply the fact that Levinas writes books at all".[93] Simon Critchley suggests in a less playful manner that Levinas presents a "rather long philosophical suicide note".[94]

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[87] Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, Literature, Culture, Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 179-80; my italics.
[88] Jacques Derrida, "Tympan," trans. Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. xi-xii; italics in original.
[89] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 16; italics in original.
[90] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p. 19.
[91] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 167.
[92] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 182.
[93] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 181.
[94] Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 68.

For Levinas, this moment of "self-refutation" is less absolute and absurd than Critchley's exclamation would have us believe. He does not lay down his pen, but continues to write, and notes that:

> If the philosophical discourse is broken, withdraws from speech and murmurs, is spoken, it nonetheless speaks of that, and speaks of the discourse which a moment ago it was speaking and to which it returns to say its provisional retreat. Are we not at this very moment in the process of barring the issue that our whole essay attempts, and of encircling our position from all sides?[95]

Levinas stresses that, even as philosophical discourse "withdraws from speech", it continues to speak and, as it does so, the "speaking" it "a moment ago" performed belatedly appears; a chance arises, as discourse "returns to say its retreat", for its saying to manifest itself. Levinas does not blithely reject philosophical discourse, but posits the threat of "occlusion" as fundamental to his project. Levinas does not reject the said (which would be impossible), but speaks philosophy in such a way that its saying may emerge. This is, moreover, the *only* way in which saying might appear; we can locate only "the approach, the one-for-the-other of saying, *related by* the said".[96] The said betrays (the secret of) the saying.

The saying emerges through the said which compromises it. We may witness the possibility of saying as, and only as, a trace or "contradiction" within a "said" to which it is at once foreign and uniquely bound.[97] Judith Butler writes that "[t]he 'preontological' domain to which Levinas refers (of which he says any representation would be a 'betrayal') is difficult to conjure, since it would seem to surge up into the ontological, where it leaves its traces. Any finite representation betrays the infinitely represented, but representations do carry the trace of the infinite".[98] The "contradiction" Levinas presents is not a dilemma we must overcome but an event in which the "traces of the infinite"—seldom self-evident and easily overlooked—may be read.

The "non-representational" cannot be separated from but takes place in and through the "representational". These realisations allow us to return to, and to read more carefully, Derrida's

[95] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 169.
[96] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 170; my italics.
[97] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 135.
[98] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 96.

claim for the literary and its "*suspended* relation to meaning and reference". Derrida does not mean here that literature suspends meaning and reference *tout court*. Derrida does not claim that the literary *suspends* meaning; that, he says, would be "impossible". We cannot suspend reference altogether; our language continues to refer. Instead, the literary enters into a "suspended relation to meaning". Derrida writes that literary works "suspend not reference (that's impossible) but the thetic relation to meaning or referent".[99] The literary alters its, and our, *relationship* to meaning; Connors suggests that it displays reference "as though it were bracketed or in inverted commas".[100] Although the literary cannot sever its relation to meaning and to reference, it may bracket or suspend it, figuring this relationship otherwise.

Derrida does not claim to step outside of philosophy into the literary but argues that "[w]e should begin by taking rigorous account of this *being held within* [*prise*] or this *surprise*". We are held within a language and a logic which we cannot escape and which, for that reason, we "cannot dominate absolutely" – our inability to elude this language opens us to "surprise".[101] We cannot escape language but might aim to make its "limits […] tremble".[102]

The literary is therefore for Derrida an "*excessively* philosophical gesture: a gesture that is philosophical and, at the same time, in excess of the philosophical".[103] The literary is at once excessively philosophical *and* in excess of the philosophical; it takes place at the "philosophical limit", at the point at which "philosophy fails to be what it wants to be". The literary takes place in and through philosophy; it is a "disputation" we might sense within it, if only we know how to read it, a question to which I will now turn in my final section.[104]

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[99] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 45

[100] Clare Connors, *Force from Nietzsche to Derrida* (London: Legenda, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2010), p. 121.

[101] Jacques Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement..." *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 158; italics in original.

[102] Derrida interviewed in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 112.

[103] Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Malden, MA: Polity, 2001), p. 4; italics in original.

[104] Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, p. 55.

Reading and Responsibility

Having noted in my first section the impossibilities of "representational thought", I decided that we must instead pursue a "non-representational" moment. It quickly becomes clear, however, that the "non-representational" is not a straightforward alternative to representation. To posit is as such as to fall back into representational thinking and thereby to betray that for which we aspire. We must aim instead for an instant which emerges through the hesitation or hyphen of re-presentation itself. By representing reading—and by failing to represent it fully—we may touch upon its non-representational "happening".

We cannot successfully represent reading. However, therein lies possibility. I quoted earlier the infuriating moment at which Fish writes "[s]ome of you may want to object that my analysis of the sentence is more tortuous and torturing than the reader's experience of it". Fish finds himself unable to describe our reading; the experience slips away from his analysis. The reading experience is not, however, as opaque as it might seem at this moment. The shift to "some of you" accords the reader—Fish's reader—a heretofore unremarked prominence. As Fish's "reading experience" recedes, therefore, a different reading experience—the experience of reading his text, the text "you" are reading (which, at this point, of course, you aren't reading)—becomes more evident, more troubling. We cannot describe any reading yet in any reading the quality of reading may be glimpsed. Bennett, citing a question posed by Pierre Bourdieu—"Can you read a text without wondering what reading is?"—suggests that "reading seems inevitably to slide into a theorization of reading".[105] Even as the experience that we are trying to capture remains "completely elusive", it happens and we might therefore slide into it.[106]

Fish's text is unable to grasp reading. However, reading might nonetheless be detected in it via an experience which happens *in* reading. Levinas writes that

[105] Bennett, *Readers and Reading*, p. 14.
[106] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 16.

> In the writing the saying does indeed become a pure said, a simultaneousness of saying and of its conditions. A book is interrupted discourse catching up with its own breaks. But books have their fate; they belong to a world they do not include, but recognize by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and getting themselves preceded with forewords. They are interrupted, and call for other books and in the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said.[107]

Levinas here reiterates a point I outlined earlier: "the saying" becomes, in writing, "a pure said". It cannot therefore be captured by Levinas's (or by any other) book. Levinas notes, however, that books are "interrupted" and suggests that it is in this interruption of the said said again that its saying might become apparent.

Levinas suggests, moreover, that the saying might become apparent *only* in this interruption. Derrida figures this "*structural necessity*" through the notion of the countersignature.[108] He explains that

> If something is given to be read that is totally intelligible, that can be totally saturated by sense, it is not given to the other to be read. Giving to the other to be read is also a *leaving to be desired*, or a leaving the other room for an intervention by which she will be able to write her own interpretation: the other will have to be able to sign in my text.[109]

The "otherness" Derrida and Levinas desire will not become apparent in a text that is "totally intelligible" and "saturated by sense". It becomes evident only when the other is "able to sign" Derrida's text.

The work is therefore given over to risk. Clark, when writing about Blanchot and Heidegger, suggests that

> a recurrent movement of thought, albeit with some risk, can be traced throughout. Blanchot, no more than Heidegger, does not attempt to write *about* language. Language is rather, as it were, doubled upon itself to let speak, not a discourse *about* anything, but the 'essence' of language itself – though it must be added that 'inessentiality' is the most prominent trait of this 'essence'.[110]

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[107] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, pp. 170-1.
[108] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 131; italics in original.
[109] Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, p. 31; italics in original.
[110] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, pp. 66-7; italics in original.

It is possible to read, in the work of these philosophers, a strange movement in which language is "doubled upon itself to let it speak" and in which the "about" of philosophy is suspended. We are, however, equally able *not* to read their work in this way; I suggested, in my analysis above, that we "might" and we "may" glimpse reading or that which exceeds representation. The slippage I just noted is subtle and it is equally possible to read Fish's text (as I did in my chapter's first section) *without* admitting it. For Clark "the *heteronomy* at issue" is "completely elusive" and therefore easy to miss.[111] He explains that "it always remains perfectly possible to read Heidegger, Blanchot and Levinas in terms of the very modes of language that they put into question".[112] We may still read Heidegger and Blanchot's work in terms of that which it is *about*. It is possible to perform a reading sensitive to the slippage or contradictions which constitute that which exceeds representation in any text. It is, however, equally possible not to. No text can claim or guarantee a reading in which this doubling movement becomes apparent. Clark's observations lead us to realise that the work of these philosophers is not self-assured; the "literary" quality towards which they aspire is not certain; it can be conferred, or denied, only by reading. It cannot therefore be written or guaranteed.

These texts depend for their future on a reader they do not and cannot fully know; we become aware both of Connors' observation that "a text can never guarantee its own future conditions of reception" and that it relies absolutely upon this reception for its future condition.[113] Reading and the literary are closely bound; Derrida goes so far as to conflate the two when he comments on "literature or reading (you say 'reading literature')".[114]

We as readers are responsible for the text and must consider how best to do it justice. These questions of responsibility and justice are not, however, straightforward. Given that we must read in the text that which it is unable to write, we must read what is not there and without any

[111] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 16; italics in original.
[112] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 186.
[113] Clare Connors, "Derrida and the Fiction of Force," *Angelaki* 12.2 (2007): 13.
[114] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 49; Derrida does not mean, by this that the "literary" is conferred *solely* and arbitrarily by the reader. He claims that "literature" is not merely "projective or subjective" (Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 44) He writes instead "[t]here is therefore a literary *functioning* and a literary *intentionality*, an experience rather than an essence of literature" (Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 45; italics in original).

guarantee that we will do so correctly. Derrida highlights this difficult demand when he announces that the text must leave the other room. What Derrida means by this is far from clear; the terms in which we usually think "leaving room"—as non-narcissistic, or responsible, or altruistic—are disturbed in Derrida's work. In his essay "There is No *One* Narcissism" Derrida argues that there is "not narcissism and non-narcissism". There are, Derrida concedes, "narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended". However, "[w]hat is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming, hospitable narcissism, one that is much more open to the experience of the other as other". Whatever gesture we might perform would seem to be compromised in advance. Derrida writes that "I believe that without a movement of narcissistic reappropriation, the relation to the other would be absolutely destroyed, it would be destroyed in advance".[115] Literary criticism and philosophy must, Derrida tells us, perform a "narcissistic reappropriation" if they are to "leave the other room" or to respond responsibly.

Derrida tells us that

> [m]y law, the one to which I try to devote myself or to respond, is *the text of the other*, its very singularity, its idiom, its appeal which precedes me. But I can only respond to it in a responsible way (and this goes for the law in general, ethics in particular) if I put in play, and in guarantee [*en gage*], my singularity, by signing, with another signature.[116]

Derrida must append to the work "another signature". In order to "respond" to its singularity he must put his own into play. The result is "as it were a duel of singularities, a duel of writing and reading, in the course of which a countersignature comes both to confirm, repeat and respect the signature of the other, of the 'original' work, and to *lead it off* elsewhere, so running the risk of *betraying* it, having to betray it in a certain way so as to respect it, through the invention of another signature just as singular".[117] Derrida informs us, somewhat counter-intuitively, that the most responsible reading is that which "betrays" and "leads" its object off elsewhere. Robbins observes similarly that "the best way for the commentator to respect Levinas's work" is "to read it deviously, to misunderstand it entirely". Like Derrida, Robbins argues that the "best" and most

[115] Jacques Derrida, "There Is No *One* Narcissism," *Points: Interviews, 1974-1994*, eds. Elisabeth Weber and Peggy Kamuf, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 199.
[116] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 66; italics in original.
[117] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 69; italics in original.

"respectful" way to read the work of another is to "misunderstand it" and to betray it. She concludes, "[a]t the limit, then, the discourse of the ethical is *almost* indistinguishable from the discourse of persecution".[118]

Derrida writes that "[t]his duty of irresponsibility […] is perhaps the highest form of responsibility". Derrida likens this "irresponsibility" to a "[refusal] to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers".[119] As I explained at the beginning of my chapter, the "constituted powers" of the REF demand that we answer and account for the literary. It seems right that we answer and that we defend and justify the work that we do. I explained, however, that the quality of the literary cannot be justified in this way; it becomes apparent only indirectly, in our refusal or inability to respond to the demands that are made. We best do justice to the literary by failing to account for it.

The seemingly irresponsible answer demands further consideration; it remains open to another reader and thereby keeps the question of singularity in play. Such a performance is visible in Derrida's work. I mentioned earlier Derrida's claim that the countersignature sets up "a duel of singularities, a duel of writing and writing". A little later in his text, Derrida revises this claim; he states that "[i]n reality, I don't even think it is a matter of a *duel* here, in the way I just said a bit hastily".[120] Derrida re-reads and re-writes the phrase "a duel of singularities"; he countersigns it. This countersignature does not, however, efface the earlier phrase; it is still possible to read it. It does not answer to its revisionary countersignature but still states a duel. The two phrases duel and neither wins; each affirms its singular inscription even as we read its relationship to the other.

Neither of these phrases wins and we cannot adjudicate their duel; should we accept Derrida's first claim, that a "duel" takes place, or not? The countersignature Derrida's text inscribes points to the

[118] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p. 13; italics in original.
[119] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 38.
[120] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 69; italics in original.

"insurmountable equivocation" which, for Levinas, underlies one's relation to the other.[121] We must ask, as we read, how we might maintain this "equivocation" and this "duel".

Whatever reading we decide to perform of Derrida's text is, however, haunted by the possibility of another reading. We might read it "deviously", and therefore generously, but cannot forget, as Derrida points out that "I am not proprietor of my 'I', I am not proprietor of the place open to hospitality. Whoever gives hospitality ought to know that he is not even proprietor of what he would appear to give".[122] Even as Derrida's text is subject to my reading my text is in turn subject to yet another reading. I might perform a "generous" reading only to find it once again taken away. I explained earlier that Derrida, through the use of the phrase "in principle", signals towards a literary moment that is not yet decided and that is deferred until the moment of reading. We see now just how radical this deferral is; the future inscribed by Derrida's *yet* is *always* future, a never-to-be-present future of a reading forever open to a further re-reading and reinscription.[123]

Elam therefore explains that "it is impossible to do justice to justice, to carry out one's responsibility entirely".[124] We find ourselves engaged in an "endless work of reparation without the final solace of redemption".[125] Responsibility, as Clark points out, "cannot be calculated in advance"; I can never definitely claim it for my text.[126] Elam concludes, however, that "even though justice is unrepresentable and impossible, one should not stop trying to be just".[127] Perhaps—everything here is "given over to the future of a 'perhaps'"—then, between my writing and your reading, such an event might occur.

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[121] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 170.
[122] Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, p. 85.
[123] This never-yet is well illustrated by the theorisation of the secret Derrida performs elsewhere. The secret, Derrida explains, "remains inviolable even when one thinks one has revealed it" (Jacques Derrida, "Passions: "An Oblique Offering"," *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Wood (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p. 21) In order to affirm the secret we would have to reveal it – at which point it would no longer be one; the secret inscribes the promise of a revelation which is forever deferred.
[124] Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*, p. 120.
[125] Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*, p. 111.
[126] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 186.
[127] Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*, p. 120.

Theoretical Conclusions and Practical Beginnings

Introductory stricture demands, at this point, that I end my "theorisation" of responsibility and propose the "practical" project which will employ this framework in the chapters to come. We are encouraged to read introductions as that which legitimize and justify that which follows. My tentative use of quotation marks around the terms "theorisation" and "practical" imply, however, a distrust of these very distinctions; they return us unthinkingly to the thinking I have contested. To frame the preceding chapter as a theorisation of responsibility, ethics and reading is to place its value in the said and to prize it in terms of what it might *tell* us about these things. I have, however, *already* performed a series of readings from which questions of ethics and responsibility cannot be abstracted; the questions, about the "propriety" or otherwise of any interpretation, with which I conclude have been at play from the outset.

We find that we have already begun. Derrida therefore writes that "[w]e must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace, which cannot take the scent into account, has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be".[128] We cannot "justify a point of departure absolutely" because, in our justification, we find that we have departed already; my introductory chapter does not, and cannot, *simply* legitimize that which follows. I *have*, obviously, adopted a strategy and an approach; I do occupy a position. We find, however, that it is impossible to justify these stances absolutely; "[j]ustifications there are", Connors explains, "but not absolute ones".[129] Our choices are, as Derrida writes, "*exorbitant*" "in spite of the theoretical precautions that [we] formulate".[130]

My introductory chapter is not conclusive; it refuses to serve as a theoretical basis for that which follows. Simply by coming to an end, however, it appears to settle on a certain point or concept; each chapter of my thesis inevitably draws a conclusion. However, these conclusions must be interrogated. My thesis occupies a province in which question and answer does not pertain; it relies

[128] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 162; italics in original.
[129] Connors, *Force from Nietzsche to Derrida*, p. 12.
[130] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 161; italics in original.

instead on failure and re-beginning. It is thrown repeatedly back on interruption and repetition. Blanchot writes that "[w]henever thought is caught in a circle, this is because it has touched upon something original, its point of departure beyond which it cannot move except to return".[131]

Each chapter of my thesis will examine in its own right the concept which presents itself as conclusion in the chapter which precedes it. We have seen, from my introduction, that reading cannot be considered without an awareness of the writing that would represent or record it. My first chapter therefore turns to and is intrigued by composition—its chaos, its revisions, its trial and error—but realises, losing its composure somewhat, that it is able only to access it in the composed form of a finished text. Writing is never fully present; it can only be traced. My second chapter therefore examines the trace only to find, again, that by presenting the trace it betrays the inessentiality by which we are initially fascinated. My third chapter interrupts the others in order to question the reliance of my thesis on Derrida and Levinas. It might seem, given that I refer to their work the most, that the thought of these writers offers the conclusion *par excellence*. As my chapter shows, however, both philosophers caution against taking their thought as theory. My thesis has, by this point, repeatedly realised that the work depends on you and that I can beg, but cannot guarantee, your kindness. My fourth chapter will contemplate tact which, establishing itself as a distant touch or a touching distance, situates its quality in the "between". The con-tact my chapter proposes is impossible; we can only touch upon tact at a tangent. My final chapter appeals directly to you. But asks, can this appeal be made? Can this reliance be wholly thematized?

Although each taking a different concept, every one of my chapters rehearses, with a local colour and specificity, an argument more or less the same as the one set out here in my introduction. Each chapter will find, as this chapter did for reading, that their chosen notions elude or escape them but that, in and through this impossibility, they "happen" or may be glimpsed. This is the structure of desire itself, as I will point out in my coda. The repetition of this structure is both inevitable and necessary. We must begin again each time; each concept must be considered on its own terms.

[131] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 93.

I will examine the above concepts in and through texts by Maurice Blanchot, A.S Byatt, J.M Coetzee, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, David Mitchell, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Ali Smith and Tim Winton. The texts on which I will focus all thematize questions of reading; they are particularly interested in the notions of failure and ethics I have discussed thus far.

The literary texts I will discuss are often referred to collectively as contemporary fiction – a phrase my title employs. However, my aim is not to make a statement about contemporary fiction in general. The analyses I will perform of my chosen texts are not generalizable; they do not make a statement about *all* contemporary fiction. There are many other works which fall into this category which are not as explicitly engaged with questions of reading, ethics or failure. The label "contemporary fiction" is a convenient term by which to group the texts I will discuss; however, what I have to say is specific to the texts about which I will say it.

Moreover, although I have limited my choice of texts to those belonging to the spheres of "deconstruction" and contemporary fiction, these boundaries are somewhat arbitrary. I could just as easily have pursued my investigation across a much broader historical span. As I pointed out at the very beginning of my chapter, the dilemma the REF highlights is not historically specific but a general condition by which literary study is marked; the logic I will discuss may be discerned in the literature and criticism of any period. The fictions and theories upon which my thesis chooses to focus are not the only texts in which the instabilities I wish to explore become evident.

However, my time is limited. I have therefore restricted myself to that which we can classify as contemporary fiction and deconstruction partly because both "contemporary" and "deconstruction" are terms particularly attuned to their arbitrary nature. I have chosen them *because* their legitimacy is so far from "absolute". Deconstruction is a term we might wish to employ tentatively, as I will explain in a later chapter, while "contemporary" worries those who theorise it, as Terry Smith's "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity" shows. Smith's essay asks "what is contemporary art?" Part way through he admits that "the answer has seemed obvious to the point of banality. Look

around you. Contemporary art is most—why not all?—of the art that is being made now".[132] This admission undermines Smith's very project; the suggestion that the answer to his question is obvious and banal sits uneasily with the proposed aim of his essay to offer an exploration and a definition of the contemporary. Smith dismisses this thought. However, it returns again later in his text when he writes "[w]hat is *contemporaneity* other than a pointer (empty as a signifier, overfull as a signified) to whatever it is that is occurring in all of the world right now? How could such a term match, let alone supplant, *modernity* and *postmodernity* as a descriptor of the state of things?"[133] Again, he dismisses this concern. Nonetheless, these repeated admissions frame "contemporary" as a fragile term; Smith's essay is haunted by the potential emptiness of the signifier on which it focuses.

"Contemporary" might, Smith admits, be a vague and unhelpful term, a "soft signifier of current plurality".[134] Admitting everything taking place now, it performs no distinction. However, even this notion of the contemporary as "now" is unstable, as Steven Connor points out. "[C]ontemporary time" is, he argues, a "strange phrase, flickering between oxymoron and tautology".[135] As we realised when attempting to capture the time flow of reading, the present is not easily captured. Derrida writes of "[a] time said to be contemporary that would be anything but contemporary – anything, except proper to its own time. It would resemble nothing, nor would it gather itself up in anything, lending itself to any possible reflection. It would no longer relate to itself".[136] As I will show in more detail in my following chapter, the moment "said to be contemporary" or present misses the present or contemporary it is "said to be". Luckhurst and Marks explain that "[t]he instant of the 'now' always eludes the grasp, can never be self-identical: it is either no longer or not yet present".[137] We find, in the act of announcing the present, that we move into a new present; the

[132] Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry* 32.4 (2006): 683.
[133] Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity": 696; italics in original.
[134] Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity": p. 701; italics in original.
[135] Steven Connor, "The Impossibility of the Present, or Contemporary to Contemporal," *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, eds. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, Longman Studies in 20th Century Literature (Harlow: Longman, 1999), p. 21.
[136] Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), p. 76.
[137] Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, Longman Studies in 20th Century Literature (Harlow: Longman, 1999), p. 3.

one which we set out to capture turns out to be past. Thus, the very term "contemporary" fails to capture that which it sets out to grasp.

The thought of the literary and the philosophical will also continue to trace my analyses; I will, in the following chapters, read the two side by side. You may have noticed that, in the list I offered above of the writers on which I will focus, I refused to differentiate the "literary" from the "theoretical". Given that it is possible to perform a philosophical—and, by implication, a literary—"reading of any text whatever", I am reluctant to assign my texts the label of one or the other.[138] However, even as I do not necessarily wish to reassert these assumptions, I cannot pretend ignorance of them. We read some of these texts primarily as philosophical and others in a predominantly literary fashion. That said, the distinction is not absolute. My "philosophical" texts avow, as I have shown, an aspiration towards or interest in the literary; the literary texts I will read, on the other hand, attempt to philosophise their workings. I read these two not because literature *per se* "hold outs the possibility of a repeated encounter with alterity" nor because philosophy will articulate "truth".[139] Instead, the dialogue and interplay of these two discourses will question the status of my own writing, allowing it to aspire, perhaps, towards a wish Derrida articulates for a mode for which he admits "autobiography" as "the least inadequate" because "most open" name:[140] "[s]till now, and more desperately than ever, I dream of a writing that would neither be philosophy nor literature, nor even contaminated by one or the other, while still keeping—I have no desire to abandon this—the memory of literature and philosophy".[141]

[138] Derrida writes that "[o]ne can do a nontranscendent reading of any text whatever" (Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 44).
[139] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 28.
[140] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 34.
[141] Derrida, "This Strange Insitution Called Literature", p. 73.

Chapter One
Composition

Reading cannot be captured or grasped, but might, in this failure, happen. Literary criticism, by loosening its pretensions to represent, must attend to this im-possibility. In order to consider how it might do this, we must pay attention to criticism's composition, to the way in which it is written.

Derrida writes that we must accept "the impossibility of [the work] ever being *present*, of its ever being summarized by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness. This is why, as we will verify, there is no *space* of the work, if by space we mean *presence* and *synopsis*".[1] Derrida points out that the work is never yet determined. And yet the literary criticism that would treat of this work has, for Derrida, "*already been determined*, knowingly or not, voluntarily or not, as the philosophy of literature".[2] As a "philosophy", literary criticism speaks "objectively"—detached and definitive—adopting an authoritative tone. It claims to know the text about which it writes, proceeding as though both its rules and its object of study were laid out in advance.

As I showed in my introductory chapter, however, such calm authority and detached commentary is not in fact possible; this tone masks the actual impossibilities of representation. Criticism institutes itself at a *false* distance from the reading and writing upon which it would comment; it disavows its role in the constitution of the textual object which is in fact, as I have shown, determined (and necessarily compromised) only at the point at which it is read. Critical writing is not *in fact* detached and definitive. In order to appear "distant and penetrative", it "pushes" its "writing-strokes away".[3] Sarah Wood, whose creative-critical work questions the need for this pushing-away, points out in "All the Way to Writing" that "[i]t is a frequent pretension of critical writing to imply that its significance depends on hypostasising the movements of writing that get critical activity started in the first place".[4] It is a "pretension" of critical writing to hypostasise its movements and to disaffirm its status as writing; Wood points out, however, that these movements

[1] Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference*, ed. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 14; italics in original.
[2] Derrida, "Force and Signification", p. 28; my italics.
[3] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 143.
[4] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 143.

are the very thing which gets it started. Critical writing will always, inevitably, be composed of "writing-strokes", no matter how hard it attempts to deny this fact.

Wood thus challenges us to reconsider critical writing's relation to the philosophical. Wood invokes Derrida who "writes that one day criticism will not have to wait for philosophy […] He writes about going all the way to writing: *'Jusqu'à l'écriture'"*.[5] Wood pursues a critical (or, as she often calls it, a "poetic") writing conscious of its always-implicated investments. Wood, arguing that "[c]ritical writing that goes all the way to writing invites readers to forget, to un-know how to read literature and in so doing to pay attention to the movements of writing",[6] performs a criticism which endeavours to keep literature and reading open, denying her readers the ability to "know" what either might be. As I will show in more detail in my chapter's first section, Wood's critical *writing* draws us toward a more "literary" and uncertain, less "philosophical", form of critical pursuit.[7]

She is not the only one to promote this shift in focus. Maurice Blanchot claims in *The Infinite Conversation* that "the work counts less than the experience of the search for it […] an artist is always ready to sacrifice the work's accomplishment to the truth of the movement that leads to it".[8] Blanchot aligns the "movement that leads to" the work, rather than the work itself, with "truth"; the work or effort which produces the finished text is, for him, more important than the product itself. Roland Barthes, too, asserts that the "writerly" or "*ourselves writing*" is "our value".[9] And Hélène Cixous announces that for writers "what's important is the process. The tempest, the rough draft".[10] Cixous, like Blanchot and Barthes, attributes composition a greater importance that the composed; she declares "I love the creation as much as the created, no, more".[11] Derrida, Wood, Cixous and

[5] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 137 Wood's 'all the way to writing' translates Derrida's *jusqu'à l'écriture.* Her translation differs from that given by Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* which renders Derrida's phrase as '[t]o the point of embracing it [force] as writing' (Derrida, "Force and Signification", p. 28).
[6] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 137.
[7] This division between the literary and the philosophical is helpful and illuminating. As I explained in my introduction, however, the opposition is not simple and needs to be approached in a certain way if it is to remain useful, as my chapter will show. Even at this point, however, we must think the terms tentatively, with their difficulty in mind.
[8] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, Theory and History of Literature (Minnepolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 397.
[9] Barthes, *S/Z*, pp. 4-5; italics in original.
[10] Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 44.
[11] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 20.

Blanchot all encourage us to think a mode of critical writing conscious of its status as writing and attentive to its movements.[12]

But what would such a writing look like? How might we capture this tempestuous "process"? A number of Wood and Cixous' works explicitly undertake the proposed project: Wood's "All the Way to Writing" and "Edit" and Cixous' "Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off" in *Stigmata* and "Post Word" in the collection *Post Theory*. Both Wood and Cixous take the process of composition as their theme; they allude to the production of the work, "[t]he to-be-in-the-process of writing".[13] Cixous is fascinated by "creation" and keen to "confide" to her readers "the mysteries of passage".[14] She attempts in her writing to grasp "'the beforehand of a book'"[15] and the "[t]empest before the immobilisation, the capture, the concept".[16] Wood, too, promises in her essays to "[investigate] writing as it is born, before it aligns itself with anything, before it amounts to much, before judgement. Even before a priori. Freshly picked or still growing".[17] Both writers claim to represent the moment before completion, before writing is fully formed and fixed.

However, my reading of these essays is, perhaps, already too philosophical. Cixous' claim that "I love the creation as much as the created, no, more" is not as definitive as my analysis suggests. Cixous' original French announces "*j'aime la création autant que la créé, non, plus*".[18] Both the French and the English play on the phrase *non plus*/no more. Without the comma, Cixous' sentence implies that she loves the creation more than the created "no more". That is to say, not any longer. When read attentively, the language of this passage hints at a less emphatic, more dissatisfied, relation to writing's "creation". I will return to consider the necessity of such an attentive reading

[12] Barthes therefore announces "[*l*]*et the commentary be itself a text*" (Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text," *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 44) Similarly, Marcel Cornis-Pope demands that we pay attention to criticism as a "mode of re*writing*" (Marcel Cornis-Pope, *Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Writing: Narrative Interpretation in the Wake of Post-Structuralism* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 11; my italics).
[13] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 20.
[14] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 143.
[15] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 20.
[16] Hélène Cixous, "Post-Word," *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 211.
[17] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 140.
[18] Hélène Cixous, "Sans Arrêt, Non, Etat De Dessination, Non, Plutôt; Le Décollage Du Bourreau," *Repentirs*, ed. Françoise Viatte (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1991), p. 55.

in my chapter's third section. First, though, in my second section, I will outline the reasons behind Cixous' equivocation by reading her and Wood's work alongside a number of fictional texts which also take composition as their theme. As I will demonstrate in my chapter's second section, these fictional texts make especially clear the *impossibilities* we encounter when trying to represent the act of writing and thereby highlight a dilemma we must bear in mind when approaching Wood and Cixous' work.

Many texts attempt to capture the act or event of writing. The example *par excellence,* Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, "makes the process of composition part of [its] narration", as Everett Zimmerman points out.[19] This chapter will focus on a number of more recent works which display a similar fascination with their own production: J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy, A.S Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* and David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*. In all four of these novels, the protagonist is a writer. Jason in *Black Swan Green* is a young poet whose work is published in the parish newsletter under the pseudonym Eliot Bolivar. In the opening paragraph of the first novel in Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy, *The Ghost Writer*, the novel's first person narrator, whose name we later learn is Nathan Zuckerman, introduces himself as a man of "twenty-three, writing and publishing my first short stories".[20] Zuckerman thus establishes himself as "the writer-hero of Roth's own version of an artist's life", as Thomas Pughe points out.[21] Elizabeth Lowry notes that "the hero" of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* "is an ageing writer who bears a striking resemblance to Coetzee".[22] When he first meets Anya, a woman who lives in his apartment complex and whom he eventually employs as his typist, he tells her "I happen to be a writer by profession".[23] Finally, in Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* the protagonist, Phineas G. Nanson, abandons his academic life and the language of literary theory in order to become a writer; he "[becomes] addicted to forbidden words, words critical theorists can't use and

[19] Everett Zimmerman, "Tristram Shandy and Narrative Representation," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 28.2 (1987): 127.
[20] Philip Roth, *Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 3.
[21] Thomas Pughe, *Comic Sense: Reading Robert Coover, Stanley Elkin, Philip Roth* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1994), p. 83.
[22] Elizabeth Lowry, "Initial Contacts," *Times Literary Supplement* 24 August 2007: 3.
[23] J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage 2008), p. 17.

writers can".[24] He tells us that "in terms of writing, this looks like a *writer's story.* PGN was a mere Critick, steps centre-stage, assumes his life, Finds his Voice, is a Writer".[25] Louisa Hadley thus suggests that we label Byatt's novel a "Künstlerroman, a novel that traces the development of the artist".[26] We could, equally, describe the other three novels I will discuss in the same way.

Wallhead suggests that "Byatt […] is developing one of her favourite subjects, the analysis of artistic creativity, its sources and procedures".[27] Similarly, Stephen Wade suggests that Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* offers us "cumulative discourses and dialogues on art, on the relationship between life and writing, the idea of what is 'real' and the pains of authorship".[28] Critics of these novels point out that they pose questions concerning artistry, creativity and creation. They suggest, moreover, that these questions are asked and answered thematically, at the level of representation and deliberate reflection. However, the situation is yet more complex. The protagonists of my chosen novels are presented to us not only as writers but, moreover, as the authors of the very texts we read. John Bayley points out that "Byatt's biographer introduces himself to us in a manner not exactly auspicious: indeed he has hardly opened his mouth before we know him to be the author […] of the book".[29]

Phineas tells us "I don't think my mother's death had anything to do with my decision, though as I set it down, I see it might be construed that way", that "[t]he pleasure, for me, I suppose, as I write, is that this time I was thinking of Foucault, and even more of Linnaeus, amongst *things*" and that "[a]ll writing about photographs, including this writing I am at present engaged in, has something decayed (decadent) and disgusting about it".[30] The phrases "as I set it down", "as I write" and "this

[24] A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 250; Celia Wallhead notes that Byatt's earlier novel, *Possession* (which I will discuss later in my chapter on tact), plots a similar progression: "[b]y the end of *Possession* (1990), Roland has become 'possessed' by the desire to write, and he has become so captivated by words that he moves away from practising literary criticism to composing verse and becoming a poet" (Celia Wallhead, "Metaphors for the Self in A.S. Byatt's *the Biographer's Tale*," *Language and Literature* 12.4 (2003): 293).
[25] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 251; Phineas continues, "[b]ut I feel a kind of nausea at this fate for my hero, myself. It doesn't seem very much of an anything. To be addicted to writing is not to want to be, to become, a Writer". His reluctance to categorise the novel as a "*writer's story*" is well-founded; the label over-simplifies that which these novels perform, as I will show later.
[26] Louisa Hadley, *The Fiction of A.S. Byatt* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 89.
[27] Wallhead, "Metaphors for the Self in A.S. Byatt's *the Biographer's Tale*": 294.
[28] Stephen Wade, *The Imagination in Transit: The Fiction of Philip Roth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 90.
[29] John Bayley, "What Happened to the Hippopotamuses' Wife?," *New York Review of Books* 17 May 2001: 16.
[30] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 1, p. 115 and p. 140; italics in original.

writing I am at present engaged in" all refer, in the first person and the present tense, to the process by which Phineas constructs his text. Thus, these comments generate a second narrative alongside the main story Phineas purports to tell us; they invite us to picture Phineas seated at a desk putting together these words. They invite us to picture him in the act of writing the text that we read.

Diary of a Bad Year, Zuckerman Bound and *Black Swan Green* also suggest—although more subtly—that their protagonists have authored the work we encounter. In Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* Señor C tells Anya

> What I am in the process of putting together is strictly speaing not a book, I said, but a contribution to a book.
> The book itself is the brainchild of a publisher in Germany. Its title will be *Strong Opinions*.[31]

"Strong Opinions", we notice, is also the title of the novel's first section; it is implied that the text Señor C supposedly composes and that which we read are one and the same. Similarly, at the end of Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, Lonoff tells Zuckerman:

> 'And you must have things to write down. There's paper on my desk.'
> 'Paper for what?'
> 'Your feverish notes.'[32]

I will discuss the complexities of Lonoff's suggestion in more detail in my chapter's second section. It suffices to point out here, however, that Lonoff tells Zuckerman to begin making notes for his next novel or short story. He tells him "'I'll be curious to see how we all come out someday. It could be an interesting story. You're not so nice and polite in your fiction […] You're a different person'".[33] Lonoff authorises Zuckerman to place him and Hope into fiction. The novel we have just read is, of course, such a story. It is implied that the words we have read are those that Zuckerman has written.[34] Similarly, in *Black Swan Green*, in a scene I will again examine more closely in my second section, Jason sits down to write and the words he composes are those we

[31] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, pp. 20-1.
[32] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 128.
[33] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 129.
[34] There are further suggestions throughout the novel that Zuckerman composes the novel that we read. On the novel's opening page Zuckerman tells us that "like many a *Bildungsroman* hero before [him]" he is "already contemplating [his] own massive *Bildungsroman*" (Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 3) and, following a conversation with Lonoff, he tells us "[o]n a clean sheet of paper I finally wrote down what he'd said so as to see exactly what he'd meant. All he'd meant" (Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 57) The novel informs us that Zuckerman writes and composes a *Bildungsroman* and a "conversation" which must, we assume, be very close to the ones we read here.

have already read in the novel. Mitchell's work is, for Thomas Jones, the "story of a stammering poet finding his true voice as a writer of fluent prose".[35] Jones implies that Jason is the author of the "fluent prose" that we read as *Black Swan Green*.

Thus, these texts purport to unfold writing as it happens, depicting its moment or present and claiming to subject us to composition in their very texture. These novels write about their writing and refer to their gestation. This self-reflexivity is frequently celebrated as a sophisticated gesture; Patricia Waugh suggests that novels such as those I will examine (to which she applies the label "metafiction") signal a "mature recognition" of their "existence as *writing*".[36] Similarly, Hal Jensen claims that in *The Biographer's Tale* we encounter an "exposure of the tricks of literary composition".[37] Waugh frames the self-consciousness of these novels as their coming-of-age; she implies that the novel finally recognises its written form, attaining a self-awareness it previously lacked. Jensen, too, aligns the trope with "exposure" or revelation.

The situation with which these novels present us is, however, more complex than these critics suggest. These writerly moments do not simply convey information and do not function as an unproblematically "mature" self-knowing; writing and composition cannot be straightforwardly exposed or simply thematized. This dilemma becomes apparent when we examine in more detail the claims made by Barthes and Blanchot which I cited earlier. I explained that Barthes asserts in *S/Z* that the "writerly" or "ourselves writing" is "our value".[38] *S/Z* describes the "writerly" as the "perpetual present" of "*ourselves writing*"; Barthes explains that "[t]he writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure".[39] The writerly is aligned with process and a notion of writing as event. Reading this list, however, we realise that it will remain unattainable: how could we ever isolate production from the product it produces? How could we locate a production which produced nothing?

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[35] Thomas Jones, "Outfoxing Hangman," *London Review of Books* 11 May 2006: 34.
[36] Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 19; italics in original.
[37] Hal Jensen, "Unexaggerated Lions," *Times Literary Supplement* 2 June 2000: 23.
[38] Barthes, *S/Z*, pp. 4-5.
[39] Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 5; italics in original.

If we are to represent "ourselves writing" we must—impossibly—write the "becoming" or "perpetual present" of a "production without product".[40] Blanchot suggests that, in order to render its "movement", the work must "sacrifice" itself. In order to attain or capture its composition the "work" would have to forfeit its status as a work. This, of course, cannot be done; the notion of a production which produces nothing is inherently paradoxical; broaching many age-old philosophical paradoxes about time, the act of "ourselves writing" remains elusive. Composition remains a troubling moment which cannot be simply grasped. Nonetheless, writing continues to hold promise; we do not need to abandon the concept altogether. Our failure to capture it places the moment of reading into relief; as I will show in my chapter's third and final section, our inability to capture writing forces us to consider the possibility of reading.

Representing Writing's Trial and Error

Although I have explained already that composition's representation will prove impossible, the first section of my chapter will consider the way in which my chosen texts depict writing. This will, of course, entail a deliberate misreading or naivety; I must begin as though it were possible to represent composition's moment. This blindness is, however, necessary; we must begin somewhere. It will become clear, I hope, that it is only by (tentatively and contingently) establishing a frame in which writing appears possible that we might become conscious of its actual, and potentially productive, impossibility.

The protagonist of Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* is a young poet called Jason who writes under the pseudonym Eliot Bolivar. Moreover, as Thomas Jones points out, "Eliot Bolivar's poems turn out to have the same titles as the chapters of [the novel]".[41] We realise this fact gradually; when Jason meets Madame Crommelynck he tells us that "[w]hile she smoked, she murmured my poem 'Rocks' from May's magazine" and, later, she tells him "'[y]our best poem in here,' she rifled

[40] Barthes, *S/Z*, p.5.
[41] Jones, "Outfoxing Hangman": p. 34.

through the parish magazines, 'your "Hangman". It has pieces of truth of your speech impediment, I am right?'"[42] 'Rocks' and 'Hangman' are the titles of chapters two and five of the novel. Even later Jason tells us that "[a] poem called 'Maggot' about why kids who get picked on get picked on began buzzing round my head".[43] 'Maggot', we discover, is the novel's eighth chapter. Jones points out that "we never get to read the poems". However, we are invited to view the events narrated in each chapter of the novel as the inspiration for a poem Jason writes; we are, according to Jones, offered "a full account of the events that provide [the poems] with their shadowy subject-matter".[44]

Although Jason's poems are not present in the novel, it offers itself to us as an account of that which precedes them and prompts their creation. The novel offers us glimpses of the process by which Jason composes his work. When standing next to the lake, for example, he muses somewhat poetically "[m]aybe I heard a poem, seeping from its cracks".[45] Elsewhere, he tells us "I got sucked in by a poem about a skater on a frozen lake who wants to know what it's like to be dead so much, he's persuaded himself that a drowned kid's talking to him. I typed it out on my Silver Reed Elan 20 Manual Typewriter" and, later, "I doodled for a bit (if you pretend not to look for words they come out of the thickets) but my Biro died".[46] Jason's references to poems seeping from the cracks of a frozen lake and words coming from the thickets are mysterious and evocative; they invoke a Romantic model of artistic creation and inspiration. His overly specific references to his "Silver Reed Elan 20 Manual Typewriter" and his mention of a tool as mundane as a "Biro", on the other hand, return us to the banal, the material and the everyday. Both sentences generate a comic anticlimax as the literary and the mundane converge.[47]

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[42] David Mitchell, *Black Swan Green* (London: Sceptre, 2006), p. 183 and p. 196.
[43] Mitchell, *Black Swan Green*, p. 283.
[44] Jones, "Outfoxing Hangman": p. 34.
[45] Mitchell, *Black Swan Green*, p. 88.
[46] Mitchell, *Black Swan Green*, p. 41 and p. 283.
[47] The convergence of psyche and technē in Jason's account points to a more general condition Derrida outlines in "Typewriter Ribbon" in his thinking of two concepts which, at first sight, "appear to us to be antinomic": the machine and the event. The machine, on the one hand, represents a "calculable programming of an automatic repetition" while the event "ought to keep, so we think, some nonprogrammable and therefore incalculable singularity" (Jacques Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)," *Without Alibi*, ed. Peggy Kamuf, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, California Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 72) Derrida explains, however, that repetition (or iterability) founds all signs. He thus concludes that "no text can be produced without this formal, grammatical, or machinelike element. No text and no language" (Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon", p. 153). The separation between the machine and the "event" of writing and of language cannot be rigorously maintained.

In spite of their humour, these moments remind us that the literary text is not spontaneously formed; no matter how ingenious the finished product may seem, the processes which contribute to its creation may be as boring as typing and finding a biro that works. The circumstances surrounding the composition of the text may in fact—in spite of the myths we cherish concerning artistic creation—be somewhat unexciting. Anya, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, informs us that Señor C "doesn't like typing (has an 'insuperable distaste,' as he puts it)".[48] Anya therefore types his manuscripts for him; she explains that "[h]e dictates great thoughts into his machine, then hands over the tapes over to me, plus a sheaf of papers in his half-blind scrawl, with the difficult words written out in careful block letters. I take away the tapes and listen to them on my earphones and solemnly type them out".[49] Anya points out that, although we finally read a single text, it is not created in a single act; instead, composition is a series of different processes: the text is first dictated and written by hand, then typed, and then returned once more to its author.

Moreover, the text does not remain the same at every stage. Anya tells us that she "[f]ix[es] [Señor C's texts] up too here and there where I can, where they lack a certain something, a certain oomph, though he is supposed to be the big writer and I just the little Filipina".[50] Anya draws our attention to a process in which correction and, by implication, error play a central role. Señor C also highlights this fact; he tells us that "[a]s a typist pure and simple, Anya from upstairs is a bit of a disappointment. She meets her daily quota, no problem about that, but the rapport I had hoped for, the feel for the sort of things I write, is hardly there. There are times when I stare in dismay at the texts she turns in. According to Daniel Defoe, I read, the true-born Englishman hates 'papers and papery'. Brezhnev's generals sit 'somewhere in the urinals'".[51] Anya, too, makes mistakes which need to be corrected. Señor C admits, somewhat wearily, that "we proceed in this error-strewn

[48] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 30.
[49] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 29.
[50] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 29; Anya's admission forces us to acknowledge that authorship may not be as singular as publishing and academic protocol suggest. She tells us that she, a mere typist, "corrects" the work of "the big writer". Anya will have influenced the work's creation; credit for its authorship will, however, be attributed solely to Señor C.
[51] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 25.

way".[52] *Diary of a Bad Year* sets out for us a process of composition governed by trial and error, by correction and re-correction, by drafts and revisions.

Roth's *The Ghost Writer* also alerts us to this fact. The protagonist of Roth's novel, Nathan Zuckerman, visits E.I. Lonoff, a writer whom he greatly admires. Zuckerman, looking around Lonoff's study, spots a quotation from Henry James's "The Middle Years": "'[w]e work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art'".[53] Zuckerman straight away sits down to read the story, which he does not know, and discovers that its hero, Dencombe, is a writer and, moreover, "'a passionate corrector' never able to arrive at a final form".[54] This addiction to correction is mirrored in a number of the *The Ghost Writer*'s characters. In one strand of the novel's narrative, Zuckerman informs us (or fantasises) that Amy Bellette is in fact the famous Anne Frank. The narrative tells of the process by which Amy/Anne learns of the publication of her teenage diary. When she finally gets hold of it she reads it through; we are then told that "she read the whole thing from the start again, making a small marginal notation – and a small grimace – whenever she came upon anything she was sure [Lonoff] would consider 'decorative' or 'imprecise' or 'unclear'".[55] Lonoff displays a similar perfectionism; he explains that "'I turn sentences around. That's my life. I write a sentence and then I turn it around. Then I look at it and I turn it around again'".[56] Each of these characters suffer from an almost-absurd desire to correct their work. They thus inform us that writing is neither glamorous nor spontaneous but labour-intensive and error-strewn; the repetition of Lonoff's ponderously simple sentences, in particular, suggests that turning around sentences is a particularly dull and infuriating affair. Lonoff thus invokes the lengthy and potentially painstaking process behind the creation of the literary work.

[52] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 32.
[53] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 56.
[54] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 82.
[55] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 97.
[56] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 13.

The work's gestation may be complex and lengthy. Neither Lonoff nor Zuckerman is entirely happy to discover this. Lonoff's dissatisfaction becomes especially apparent when, at one point in the novel, Amy addresses Zuckerman:

> 'I've just found twenty-seven drafts of a single short story,' she told me.
> 'Which story?' I asked eagerly.
> '"Life Is Embarrassing."'
> 'To get it wrong,' said Lonoff, 'so many times.'
> 'They ought to construct a monument to your patience,' she told him.[57]

Lonoff laments so much getting it "wrong"; he cringes at writing's "trial and error". His dissatisfaction is echoed later, in *Zuckerman Unbound*, by Zuckerman himself. Zuckerman tells us that he "thought he'd chosen the intensification of everything and he'd chosen monasticism and retreat instead. Inherent in this choice was a paradox that he had never foreseen. When, some years later, he went to see a production of *Waiting for Godot*, he said afterwards to the woman who was then his lonely wife, 'What's so harrowing? It's any writer's ordinary day. Except you don't get Pozzo and Lucky'".[58] Writing promises to be the "intensification of everything". It does not, however, fulfil this pledge, but is instead comparable to the painful inaction and repetitiveness of *Waiting for Godot*.[59]

Zuckerman's complaint in the second of my examples echoes that made in the first; Lonoff eschews the disorder of the "process", the "tempest" and the "rough draft". Both characters "[seek] the finished", privileging the fixed and the polished, and, as such, downplay composition, relegating it to a disposable and inconsequential moment on the way to the composed. However, the reactions of Amy and the Zuckerman of the first quotation suggest a very different attitude. Amy and the young Zuckerman express awe and excitement; for them, composition holds a certain fascination. Amy is in fact at Lonoff's house in order to collate the drafts of his work so that they might be deposited in an archive. She—like many academics—is intrigued by Lonoff's many drafts and by the errors he commits on his way to the final product.

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[57] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 19.
[58] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 425.
[59] The narrator of another Beckett text, *Worstward Ho*, neatly summarises the despair Lonoff feels: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Samuel Beckett, *Company; Ill Seen Ill Said; Worstward Ho; Stirrings Still*, ed. Dirk van Hulle (London: Faber, 2009), p. 81).

For Cixous and Wood, too, it is writing's very error-strewn nature which holds promise. Wood, unlike Lonoff, does not cringe at writing's unsteadying nature but privileges it. Cixous celebrates "[n]ecessary error, school mistress, faltering essential companion".[60] Somewhat counter-intuitively, Cixous asks us to favour "error". In "Post Word" she praises "all those, poets, who are *the prophets of the instant* and who, at lightning speed, want to write, write, write, *before*, in the still-boiling time before the cooled fall-out of the narrative when we feel and it is not yet called such-and-such, this, him or her. Tempest before the immobilisation, the capture, the concept. Where there is already the murmur of words but not yet proper-name-words".[61] Cixous encourages us to favour the "tempest" and the "murmur" and to relax our fixation on the "capture", the "concept" and the "proper-name-words". Her sentence, with its many short phrases and commas, performs the "unsteady" and the "faltering" movement of which it speaks and which it asks us to value. Cixous asks us to pursue a more "literary" or "deconstructive" course; Wood and Cixous echo Derrida's claim, which I quoted in my introduction, that we ought to look not for the fixed, but for the "trembling", of language.

But how to capture this trial and error? What might this before or instant look like? How might a not-yet-finished writing appear? I pointed out in my introduction that, according to Zimmerman, *Tristram Shandy* "makes the process of composition part of its narration". What does it mean to do this? Zimmerman suggests that "[Tristram] does not cover up the seams of his narration—the leaps in time, the alterations of voice, the digressiveness—but exposes them to scrutiny and comments on their weaknesses. As we are close to his consciousness, the book emphasizes presence and presentness".[62] Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*—as the one of my chosen texts in which the protagonist's authorship is most explicit—could also be said to do this. Phineas frequently draws our attention to his choice of words:

> Adumbrate is a good word, in this context; it sprang to the pen.[63]

[60] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 22.
[61] Cixous, "Post-Word", p. 211' italics in original.
[62] Zimmerman, "Tristram Shandy and Narrative Representation": 127.
[63] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 141.

> A man […] who records and respects his subject's desire to be buried (I avoid, as he did, the anthropomorphism, 'to rest'). [64]
>
> I do not, as Karl Pearson did not, use the words, 'at peace' or 'at rest'.[65]

He alerts us to what he ought to include, and what might be best left out:

> They showed pictures – both still and moving – of. I don't have to write down what they were of.[66]

He foregrounds the style of his narration:

> I am not writing an autobiography. I am writing in the first person for the sake of precision, because this procedure allows me to say certain things I am reasonably sure of.[67]

And he highlights decisions he must make concerning the order of his narrative:

> I am not quite sure in what order to recount the next few parts of my tale, as I find that my memory for exact sequences is faultier than I would wish. I feel a desire in myself – an aesthetic desire – to punctuate my assimilation of Destry-Scholes's shoeboxes […] with my encounters with the Strange Customer.[68]

All in all, the narrative appears to grant us access to the thought and logic behind its construction; we seem to witness its very unfolding. In the first three of my groups above, Phineas asserts positively the reasons for the choices he has made, making it clear that the words and style of his text are not unthinking or accidental but are the result of intentional decisions. In the final quotation, however, Phineas admits that he is "not sure" in what order to tell us about the events that have occurred.

For the most part, Phineas is uncertain more often than he is certain; the majority of his comments betray an extreme indecisiveness:

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[64] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 166.
[65] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 180.
[66] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 170.
[67] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 100.
[68] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 152.

> I would penetrate his surface compartments and lay bare his true motives. I then thought, how very nasty all these metaphors were, and one at least of them contained another word ('penetrate') I had vowed for ever to eschew.[69]
>
> The image doesn't really work […] I should never have made a real writer; I can't think my images through.[70]
>
> I start too many hares. (What *does* that mean? I have never seen a hare run. I am an urban animal. Ah, but in the mind's eye … And whose voice is *that*, with its plangent Ah, but …?)[71]
>
> (A mixed metaphor. Let it lie.)[72]
>
> (I am getting better at my lyricism, but am not sure that last sentence works. Let it stand. Who will ever read all this stuff, anyway. *And*, it's true)[73]
>
> The 'flavour of the moment'. (Can I perpetrate a phrase like that? Let it stand. Try anything once.)[74]
>
> That is an over-the-top sentence.[75]

As Hal Jensen points out, "Byatt's narrator is forever reconsidering his own choice of words" and is engaged in a "perpetual ruthless analysis of word and phrase".[76] Phineas inscribes a word, reconsiders it and contemplates whether or not to erase it. Cixous (or, rather, the "I" that "narrates" "Without End") represents a similar process when she writes "[i]t's like this: I grope. I try the word 'hesitation.' I taste it. No pleasure. No taste. I cross out. I try: 'correction.' I taste. No. I taste ten words. Finally I fall on the word: 'essay'. Before even trying I already sense a pretaste… I taste. And, that's it!"[77] Cixous, although less anxious than Phineas, also narrates the thought process underlying revision, presenting to us the "trial and error" of composition. The many parentheses and ellipses of Phineas's texts and the short sentences of Cixous' represent a syntax whose flow is impeded suggesting that these texts, instead of being finished, remain disjointed by this ongoing and "ruthless analysis".

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[69] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 23.
[70] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 99.
[71] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 168; italics in original.
[72] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 171.
[73] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 216; italics in original.
[74] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 250.
[75] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 260.
[76] Jensen, "Unexaggerated Lions": 23 Jensen suggests, moreover, that "[t]his incessant self-commentary enacts a flight from literature, from cultivated expression, that purposely prevents the reader becoming wholly involved in the writing". Jensen's claim that Phineas's writing "prevents the reader becoming wholly involved" suggests, perhaps, that this "writerly" text indeed subjects us to the different experience of reading to which Wood refers in the sentences I quoted in my introduction.
[77] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 22.

Cixous' text acquires a hesitant tone even as she tells us that it is her wish to represent in her work the "desire, trial, and error. Trial, that is to say, error. Error: progression" by which writing proceeds.[78] Cixous' halting syntax and revisionary "that is to say" maps a wary progression. She replicates this pattern in her essay's title—"Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off"—and again in her final postscript:

> N.B And now, what to call this essay?
> – 'Without End' – No. – 'The Executioner's Taking Off' – No. Rather: Oh no, enough already, it's time! No more repenting! Not another word![79]

Within her essay, too, she tells us "I wanted to call this text: 'For the Instant,' or 'At the Instant,' but I changed my mind".[80] The essay offers us a variety of possible titles; as they proliferate, it becomes clear that settling on one and rejecting the others is a difficult process, in which one may repeatedly change one's mind. Cixous' increasing desperation is captured by her multiple exclamatory sentences: "enough already, it's time!" "no more repenting!" and "not another word!" Moreover, the essay's very syntax captures this process of continual revision. In both the title and the postscript Cixous offers us a number of possible titles—"Without end", "State of drawingness" and "The Executioner's taking off"—punctuated and separated by three "no"s. Thus, we witness a process in which one might think of a title, then think "no" and choose another. The repeated "no"s interrupt the flow of the sentence; it is fragmented and disjointed by Cixous' "endless repenting".

Both the essay's supposedly rejected titles and the process by which it decides between them remain within the text. It is as though we have come across a draft of Cixous' not-yet-completed essay. In *The Biographer's Tale* Phineas also writes "[n]o, I am doing *too much writing* now. Cross that out? Leave it for the moment)" and "(beware cliché, PGN)".[81] Phineas addresses these comments to himself; they appear as authorial notes, intended to assist him when he comes later to

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[78] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 21; Adono, in his "The Essay as Form", argues that this halting progression is the condition of the essay *per se*. The essay, he argues, is "exposed to error" and "becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself, and not in a hoarding obsession with fundamentals" (Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian Patrick O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 101) As I mentioned in my introduction, however, this movement is not guaranteed; our reading may return the essay all too quickly to the "fundamental". The essay "escapes" this "hoarding obsession" only when subjected to a kind of reading I will attempt in the final section of my chapter.
[79] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 31.
[80] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 29.
[81] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 153 and p. 167; italics in original.

revise his text. We do not expect to read such comments in a composed and finished piece; again, we are left with a sense that we have encountered the text mid-way through its composition.

Wood, too, announces in "Edit" that she is "mid-riffing in mid-air, writing not out of the middle of the picture, nor out of some authentic heart of writing, but merely mediocrely and eccentrically and derivatively from my solar plexus, anatomically the complex of nerves situated at the pit of one's stomach".[82] The bodily words "midriff", "solar-plexus" and "stomach" evoke a writing originating from the gut; "Edit" presents us with an intuitive writing which proceeds without plan and improvises as it goes. As such, Wood's text offers us a "spaced-out or spacey writing" marked by a "tendency to play with sound", a "shared or divided writing".[83] The texts we read by Wood, Cixous and in *The Biographer's Tale* all give the impression that they are unfinished, that they are in the process of being composed and that the trial and error of this activity is still inscribed within them; they all purport to represent the composition which precedes the composed.

But can we truly call that which Cixous' text voluntarily publishes "error"? Can we really call a published text "unfinished?" These texts claim to represent writing as it takes place. Their declarations are, however, clearly untrue; the text is published and whole. We know that their assertions that the process of writing is ongoing are feigned. This is most apparent in *The Biographer's Tale*. The suggestions I have made imply that Phineas authors the work that we read. However, this cannot be true; a fictional protagonist cannot author the work. Thomas Jones, in his review of *Black Swan Green*, is especially conscious of this fact. He complains that "all too often, [Jason's] creator's hand is visible", explaining that "[t]he idea that a novel like this would stream out of a 13-year-old's pen isn't convincing […]: Mitchell may work fast – he's had four novels published in seven years – but that doesn't mean that the prose splurges out. The supposed naturalism of Jason's voice is highly artificial, and making romantic claims for its authenticity puts it under more strain that it is able to bear".[84] I am reluctant to dismiss this dilemma as Jones does; I am not sure that the novel *does* make "romantic claims" for the "authenticity" of Jason's voice and

[82] Sarah Wood, "Edit," *Mosaic* 39.3 (2006): 54.
[83] Wood, "Edit": 54.
[84] Jones, "Outfoxing Hangman": 34-5.

think perhaps that its "highly artificial" nature might be one of its more interesting effects. I cite Jones's criticism, however, because it makes clear the disjunction by which these texts are troubled. Writing does not actually "happen" as they claim; the actual writing by which they are composed takes place elsewhere. Jason is not the author of *Black Swan Green*; we remain conscious that the "creator's hand" is David Mitchell's. Equally, *The Biographer's Tale* is composed not by Phineas but by A.S. Byatt. The declarations these texts make are undone by the writing in which they occur and by the reading to which they are subjected. By representing writing within novels which are themselves composed by a similar process of writing, these texts deny it a single or stable appearance.

The references made by Phineas and Jason are made problematic by our awareness of another writing which lies behind them. The doubling of Phineas/Byatt, Jason/Mitchell forces us to read Phineas and Jason's claims provisionally. I will show, in my next section, that this effect, although more prominent in fiction than in the creative-critical genre in which Wood and Cixous write, in fact points to a disjunction or non-coincidence which applies to *all* attempts to capture writing. These novels "teach" us a sceptical reading which we must also employ in relation to Wood and Cixous' work if it is to continue truly to work. The moment of composition remains elusive, as I will show in the next section of my chapter before returning in my final section to the question of reading.

A "Fumbled Prophecy"

The texts I consider here propose to display the entirety of their composition, the truth of their very beginnings and the trial and error by which they are pieced together. These claims are, however, troubling, as the third novel in Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy, *The Anatomy Lesson*, suggests. Thomas Pughe explains that "*The Anatomy Lesson* is set more than three years after the publication of *Carnovsky*, and Nathan has not written a longer piece of fiction since".[85] The novel is framed as Zuckerman's battle with writer's block. The inability to write is painful, as the opening of Cixous'

[85] Pughe, *Comic Sense*, p. 105.

"Post Word" makes clear. Cixous writes "[t]hen I started thinking about how to inscribe 'myself' […] Then I sat early in the morning at my desk and I started trying to begin starting to write a something not unworthy of you".[86] Cixous is unable to begin; the more she thinks about beginning the more impossible it seems, as the repetition of the word "started" in the phrases "started thinking about" and "started trying to begin starting" suggests. Cixous captures the maddening stasis one feels when unable to write.

In *The Anatomy Lesson,* too, both Zuckerman and the novel's other characters become increasingly frustrated at his inability to begin another novel. Diana tells him "'[t]here's only one thing for you to do and that's *to get on with it.* WRITE ANOTHER BOOK. *Carnovsky* is not the end of the world […] It cannot stop you in your tracks like this'".[87] Zuckerman seeks desperately for the inspiration which would allow him to "get on with it". When he meets Jaga, for example, he interrogates her "thinking that if only she told him enough, he might find in what she said something to start him writing".[88] Fascinated by her plight, he proposes "*The Sorrows of Jaga*" as his next book. However, he is unable to transform his conversation with Jaga into a novel: "after Jaga he'd been unable to write even three words".[89] He admits that "he couldn't get anywhere" even with this idea.[90] *The Anatomy Lesson* tells us that *The Sorrows of Jaga* has not been written.

The reader of *The Anatomy Lesson,* however, encounters "three words" and more on "The Sorrows of Jaga"; her tale forms an episode within the novel. Her narrative is not as absent, or as unwritten, as Zuckerman professes. The novel undercuts its own complaint; it produces the writing whose absence it laments. Moreover, *Zuckerman Unbound* itself acknowledges the paradoxical nature of Zuckerman's predicament. At the end of one of Zuckerman's lengthy diatribes, for example, "[t]he doctor laughed" and asked "'You writing a book or what?'".[91] The doctor's comment reminds us that a book has indeed been written; writing has evidently taken place. Cixous' "I started thinking about how to inscribe myself" opening to "Post Word" is similarly complicated. The essay informs

[86] Cixous, "Post-Word", p. 209.
[87] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 370; italics in original.
[88] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, pp. 390-1.
[89] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 411.
[90] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 394.
[91] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 490.

us that Cixous has not yet started to write; she is still contemplating how to begin. However, the sentences which tell us of this fact produce—with increasing prolixity—this very (supposedly un-begun) writing.

I explained in my last section that *The Biographer's Tale* contemplates the decisions surrounding its composition; Phineas deliberates over what he ought to include in his text. He also, frequently, informs us of that which he has decided to exclude:

> I thought of saying, two complete revolutions of a roller, and then thought, I had got the roller from cricket, and needed the reference.[92]
>
> I was – I was about to write, ashamed, but that isn't true. I was embarrassed.[93]
>
> I was about to write, I knelt reverently because the adverb tripped off the pen. But that wasn't true.[94]
>
> I was going to write, we *fell* into the bed, but we didn't. And I am not going to describe what happened, though I am going to record that it *did* happen, because I am not that sort of writer. I think. It's becoming more difficult to know what sort of writer I *am*.[95]

The phrases "I was going to write", "I thought of saying" and "I was about to write" all gesture towards words or phrases which Phineas has considered using but which he has decided, ultimately, to leave out. Phineas alerts us to the words he has elected to exclude from his text. There is, however, an evident irony in this claim. The comments that Phineas makes grant these supposedly absent words and phrases a presence in the text. Phineas cannot announce "I was going to write, we *fell* into the bed" without writing "we *fell* into the bed". His denial accords the phrase a place in his text; his comments insert into the novel that which it claims to leave out.

Phineas announces "I have once or twice started a sentence in this last paragraph with a more or less automatic address to an imaginary reader. 'Have you noticed those billboards …' I wrote, and crossed it out. Worse, I ascribed opinions to this person. 'You might think everyone has to be interested in himself' I wrote, and scratched it out. Who is this 'you'? No one. Or me, and I know

[92] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 132.
[93] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 122.
[94] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 134.
[95] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, pp. 186-7.

what I think, I think".[96] Phineas again alerts us to a process of revision whereby he wrote, in the preceding paragraph, the phrases "you might think everyone has to be interested in himself" and "have you noticed those billboards" and then crossed them out. However, we do not read these phrases in the paragraph in question; we do not even see a phrase scratched out or the space in which they would have been inscribed. Their erasure is absolute. In the lengthy explanation Phineas offers, however, the phrases are inscribed in full and are not crossed out at all; Phineas's narrative un-erases the comments whose erasure it discusses.

These examples from *The Biographer's Tale* point towards an illogic; the claims Phineas makes concerning the composition of his text undo the very act or process to which he refers. Although they state that he has excluded or erased aspects of his text, these announcements perform the very opposite, including and presenting these moments to us. We witness a similar disjunction in Cixous' Beckettian "Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off".[97] As I explained earlier, the title of Cixous' text narrates the act of choosing between three different titles; it represents a process in which one thinks of a title, discards it and then chooses another. Paradoxically, however, the process of consideration and rejection to which Cixous' "no"s refer does not in fact occur. The supposedly discarded titles "State of Drawingness", "The Executioner's taking off", as well as the "For the Instant" and "At the Instant" mentioned within the body of the essay are published within and by Cixous' text. All five phrases are granted a presence by the work; moreover, all three of the phrases "Without end", "State of drawingness" and "The Executioner's taking off" function as the title of Cixous' essay. The "no"s do not revise the essay's title, but comprise it. The choice to which Cixous alludes does not take place; the essay fails to discard its supposedly rejected titles.

The words or phrases with which these examples present us are at odds with, and counteract, the processes—of erasure, exclusion and revision—to which they refer; we realise that we cannot announce the absence of a word or phrase without according it a presence. Cixous' "Post Word"

[96] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 100.
[97] This is not the first time my chapter has referred to Beckett (cf. Zuckerman's allusion to *Waiting for Godot* in my chapter's first section). This reappearance is telling; if the scope of my chapter were broader, Beckett's *Trilogy* is certainly a text I could have discussed here.

enacts this tension on a grander scale, subjecting the text as a whole to the dilemma. "Post Word", which appears in the collection *Post Theory*, is preceded by an editors' note which explains that "[t]he text presented here is a letter sent by Hélène Cixous in response to a request by the editors for a short epilogue to this collection".[98] The letter itself is an apology; Cixous explains that, hard as she has tried, she has been unable to compose the piece the editors have asked her to write as conclusion to their book; she announces that "I have done the work and I have judged it incompatible with the collection of dedicated and passionate essays you have gathered".[99] Cixous justifies her failure, and lists, in the past conditional, a number of points her ultimately rejected essay would have made; she writes "I would have called my 'contribution' *Avantposte*", "[i]t would have had four sections" and "[t]he fourth would have been a prosopopoeia of Theoria (I have not written it)".[100] Cixous' letter accounts for the absence of the essay "Post Word".

Somewhat counter-intuitively, the letter tells us that "Post Word" does not exist; it asserts that the piece commissioned by the editors of *Post Theory* has not been written. Moreover, it frames itself as a piece not intended for publication. Of course, neither of these claims is true; the letter we read as the conclusion to *Post Theory* has clearly been published and is, moreover, entitled "Post Word". The "editor's note" which precedes the letter registers this substitution from the outset; it declares that Cixous' letter "responds" to—and thereby fulfils—the request made by the editors. As such, we suspect (although we could of course never be certain) that this letter *is*, and always was, the piece Cixous intended to write. Cixous hints at this possibility; at the end of her letter she writes "[m]y dear friend, if you feel it would help you disentangle the situation with the press, you can show them (whoever they are) my letter".[101] Cixous' offer indicates that this letter, by justifying and excusing the absence of the expected piece, takes the place of the proposed work.

Moreover, the letter tells us that the essay "would have had four sections". The phrases "would have called" and "would have been", as well as Cixous' final "I have not written it" inform us that these intended sections are not present. Cixous then writes, however, that "[t]he first section runs

[98] Cixous, "Post-Word", p. 209.
[99] Cixous, "Post-Word", p. 212.
[100] Cixous, "Post-Word", p. 210 and p. 212.
[101] Cixous, "Post-Word", p. 213.

like this" and proceeds to detail its content.[102] The first section would not only have proceeded in this manner, but does, as the shift into the present tense indicates; the first section is inscribed and published here. Cixous' letter not only *would have had*, but *has* these four sections. The letter repeatedly attempts to assert the absence of the work, but fails; the work Cixous negates remains legible.

We thus become conscious of a non-coincidence between that which these statements enact and that which they constatively state; they do not refer unproblematically to an act or an event which has taken place in these texts' composition. As such, they gesture towards a deferral or errancy inherent in any attempt to represent writing and to which Wood's "Edit" also alerts us. Wood declares "I want to try and think about the spacing of this" and invokes its action time and again:[103]

> he writes, having just hit the space bar
>
> Time to press the space bar again.
>
> I just hit the space bar. Should I have kept that to myself?
>
> I press tab, for a change. And return.
>
> Fifty-two spaces. I hit the space bar. I go, I write. I hit return.
>
> I punch the space bar.
>
> Learn what? I press the space bar.
>
> Space bar again.[104]

The act of hitting the space bar is entirely banal; it is, quite obviously, an activity one practises repeatedly when typing any text. Wood evokes one of writing's most obvious facets. She discovers, however, that it is not possible to refer unproblematically to it. In her final declaration Wood admits that "I hit the spacebar. I keep doing that – far more often than I've admitted".[105] We can see, in the blank spaces throughout her essay, the product of Wood's spacebar-hitting. It is evident that she has been hitting the spacebar from the outset, even at the moments at which she does not admit it. Wood's confession is somewhat redundant; we know, before she has told us, that she "just

[102] Cixous, "Post-Word", p. 210.
[103] Wood, "Edit": 51.
[104] Wood, "Edit": 48, 49, 51, 52, 53, 53, 54 and 55.
[105] Wood, "Edit": 56.

hit the space bar". Wood asks, with decided irony, "should I have kept that to myself?" She could not possibly keep this act a secret; her writing betrays it. The confession Wood makes reveals nothing we did not already know.

Wood's admission is absurd because unnecessary and belated. By the time she writes "I just hit the space bar", the space her key-hitting has produced is already visible in her text. Moreover, she cannot declare "I just hit the space bar" without repeating the action further; in the singular "space bar again" declaration Wood hits the spacebar twice more. It would, therefore, never be possible for her to account for every spacebar-hit she makes; her admissions proliferate the action to which they refer.

Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* replicates this endless failure. Phineas writes, "I notice that my writing is becoming perhaps too impassioned. But then, what sort of a piece of writing is it, for what purpose, for which reader? I may be passionate or dispassionate as I choose, since this document has no importance anyway" and "([n]o, I am doing *too much* writing now. Cross that out? Leave it for the moment)".[106] Phineas comments upon his text's excess. However, Phineas's reflections occupy more space than the phrases upon which they comment. His concerns that he is writing "too much" themselves produce "too much writing"; they generate the very problem to which they refer. Phineas cannot express his anxiety for the text without exacerbating it.

We are caught in the dilemma represented most notably in a much earlier novel, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Tristram promises to narrate the entirety of his life but as he writes his account he engages in a further activity, writing, which he is bound, also, to narrate. Unable to catch up with himself, he realises that "at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write".[107] By writing about his writing, he generates yet more writing about which he must also write. The project is

[106] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 141 and p. 153; italics in original.
[107] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Penguin Classics, ed. Christopher B. Ricks (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 286.

endless and impossible; Tristram cannot escape or halt his life in order to narrate it. Cixous admits that "[w]e live more quickly than ourselves, the pen doesn't follow".[108]

In each of these examples, the novel's attempt to capture the moment of composition engages it in an inevitable proliferation. Behind each writing lies yet another act of composition for which, in turn, the novel must account. Composition's admission, always bound to take place again *in writing,* is not free from the logic it declares. The composition we would represent does not exist independently from the composed we would dismiss; an act of composition lies behind all writing, even the writing which attempts to reveal composition. Thus, we cannot refer to composition without composing yet more writing; the two cannot be separated and the moment of writing moves ever-further away.

Both *Black Swan Green* and *The Ghost Writer* demonstrate this inevitable regression. At the end of *The Ghost Writer,* Lonoff, leaving the house in pursuit of his wife, Hope, tells Zuckerman:

> 'you must have things to write down. There's paper on my desk.'
> 'Paper for what?'
> 'Your feverish notes.'[109]

Murray Baumgarten thus explains that "Lonoff tells [Zuckerman] […] to start writing about what he has witnessed" and that this moment "returns to the problems with which the novel began" concerning life and art, and their "inextricably intertwined" nature.[110] Alexis Kate Wilson points out that "Philip Roth ends the novel [*The Ghost Writer*] by playing with the idea of life becoming art".[111] Both of these writers suggest that Lonoff authorises Zuckerman to place him and Hope into a story or a novel; he permits Zuckerman to transpose this "real life" scene into writing and fiction.[112]

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[108] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 30.
[109] Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, p. 128.
[110] Murray Baumgarten and Barbara Gottfried, *Understanding Philip Roth*, Understanding Contemporary American Literature (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), p. 171.
[111] Alexis Kate Wilson, "The Ghosts of Zuckerman's Past: The *Zuckerman Bound* Series," *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, ed. Derek Parker Royal (Westport, Conn.; London: Praeger, 2005), p. 103.
[112] The scene thus alludes to a theme which recurs throughout Roth's novels. Time and again Roth's author-protagonists ask: to what extent ought one (is one able) to represent "real life" events in fiction? These questions, which are noted by Wilson and Baumgarten are, however, unsettled by their fictional framing. As I explained in my introduction, any

However, neither Baumgarten nor Wilson acknowledges the irony of Lonoff's offer. Lonoff tells Zuckerman he ought to begin taking notes about what he has seen so as to write about it later. In making this suggestion, Lonoff implies that the novel depicting these events has not yet begun or been written. However, the "events" which Lonoff permits Zuckerman to convert into fiction are, of course, those of which we have just read. The novel depicting them *has* been written and it is called *The Ghost Writer*. The fiction Zuckerman is meant to produce is the novel we are just completing.

We surmise that *The Ghost Writer* is the not-yet-written novel that Lonoff evokes*;* producing a kind of ghost-effect, he proposes that Zuckerman write the book we have just read. In order to read what Zuckerman writes, we conclude, we must return to the novel's beginning. However, this would once again bring us back to Lonoff's comment and its implicit claim that the novel has not yet been written; it commands us once again to return to the novel's beginning, and so on, *ad infinitum.* We are caught in an endless loop. Similarly, in *Black Swan Green,* Jason sits down at his desk intending to write a poem although the result, he admits, is more of a "confession".[113] A facsimile of a handwritten page then follows. This document opens: "[t]hat *ace* song Olive's Salami by Elvis Costello and the Attractions". We have read these words before. Jason's confession duplicates the opening of an earlier chapter entitled "Goose Fair".[114] Jones notes that we find "reproduced in facsimile, the 'manuscript', in 13-year-old handwriting, of the opening sentences of the previous chapter, verbatim".[115] The document continues for a few lines before Jason concludes "and on it went. When the bell went for morning break I found I'd filled three sides".[116] Jason's "and on it went" implies that his confession continues. If we want to read its entirety, we should reread the earlier chapter. But when does Jason's writing stop? Nothing marks its end. If we continue to read we return once again to the point at which Jason begins his

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statements made about fiction *in* fiction refuse to signify directly or constatively. In this case, Lonoff's suggestion retroactively confers all that has come before as "real life"; it tells us that the events of which we have just read have not yet been transposed into fiction. We know, however, that this cannot be true.

[113] Mitchell, *Black Swan Green*, p. 331.
[114] Mitchell, *Black Swan Green*, p. 307.
[115] Jones, "Outfoxing Hangman": 34.
[116] Mitchell, *Black Swan Green*, p. 331.

"confession". Jason writes his confession and, as he writes, he recalls the moment at which he began to write and thus begins once again to write his confession. And so on. We are caught in the infinite regression of the *mise en abîme* I outlined in my introduction.

Derrida, in "The Law of Genre", notes that Blanchot's *La Folie du Jour* employs a similar framing mechanism; it ends with an interrogation in which the narrator is asked to provide the *récit* we have just read. The effect is identical to that I noted in relation to *Black Swan Green.* Derrida explains that "if 'I' or 'he' continued to tell what he has told, he would end up endlessly returning to this point and once more beginning to begin, that is to say, to begin with an end that precedes the beginning. And from the viewpoint of objective space and time, the point at which he stops is absolutely unascertainable". Derrida's "beginning to begin" reproduces the "unarrestable, inenarrable and insatiably recurring" regress about which he writes.[117] This "*double chiasmatic invagination of edges*" means, for Derrida, that it is "[i]mpossible to settle upon the simple borderlines of this corpus, of this ellipsis unremittingly cancelling itself within its own expansion".[118] These texts attempt to isolate the moment at which their narrators begin to write, but cannot. They belatedly offer an account of their origins, but cannot grasp the instance to which they refer.

These novels behave like the "glass worm" Wood evokes in "Edit". Wood explains that "this shy, defenceless creature's tail breaks off easily, thus allowing it to escape from predators" and that "[s]ome words and texts also behave like this. We read them hungrily, as if to death, but they break and a portion, an envoi or concluding part, gets away".[119] We attempt to grasp writing, but it breaks away, escaping and leaving us no "concluding part". Wood therefore explains that writing is at once "directly familiar and teasingly unlocatable".[120] To state even the plainest of facts about writing—such as "I hit the spacebar"—is to involve oneself in a regression which loses what it

[117] Derrida, "The Law of Genre", p. 237.
[118] Derrida, "The Law of Genre", p. 238 and p. 239; italics in original.
[119] Wood, "Edit": 50.
[120] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 139.

states. We thus discover that "[t]o be plain about writing is to become elliptical, to escape or withdraw".[121]

We therefore find that Wood's "All the Way to Writing", rather than going "all the way" as its title proposes, seems mostly not to have gone very far towards writing at all. The essay repeatedly invokes this failed happening:

> Only something hasn't happened. Let me tell you.[122]
>
> I don't seem to have started. I'm still outside.[123]
>
> something has not happened.[124]

In "Edit", too, Wood writes "I digress, where were we, what are we in the middle of here?"[125] These essays repeatedly invoke their lack and failure; they start off thinking about writing only to confess that "something has not happened". Halting repeatedly before that which they do not know, they appear dangerously close to paralysis. "Edit" evinces a final, despairing, "I give it up, this thinking of the absolute mystery".[126] The "something" they seek gets away from Wood's essays; that which was meant to take place has not occurred. Cixous also admits that "I have the feeling that I always write from the perspective of what passes away".[127] Cixous fails to possess writing; she finds, instead, that it is forever passing away. We realise that "there is no moment of writing, no simple present or presence".[128]

Cixous, in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, tells us that "[w]riting is the delicate, difficult, and dangerous means of succeeding in avowing the unavowable. Are we capable of it? This is my desire […] though this doesn't mean I have succeeded. I make the effort. So far I haven't

[121] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 145-6.
[122] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 138.
[123] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 138.
[124] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 141.
[125] Wood, "Edit": 54.
[126] Wood, "Edit": 55.
[127] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 44.
[128] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 146.

succeeded".[129] Cixous makes it clear that there is something "unavowable" about writing. Thus, in order to capture it, we must succeed "in avowing the unavowable". Cixous admits "I haven't yet succeeded". We realise, however, that she will never succeed, no matter how much "effort" she expends. The unavowable can never be avowed. Once avowed, the supposedly unavowable would be no more; the very act of avowal is incompatible, in this case, with that which it would present. The project Cixous proposes is doomed to fail; writing cannot be captured.

Cixous still claims, however, that it is her "desire" to grasp the moment of writing; she continues to crave and to chase after it. Derrida asks,

> [d]issemination question: what is 'going on,' according to what time, what space, what structure, what becomes of the 'event' when 'I write,' 'I place beside me an open inkstand and a few sheets of unspitballed paper,' or 'I am going to write,' 'I have written': about writing, against writing, in writing […]? [130]

As Derrida's quotation marks imply, "I write" never conveys writing's pure "event" or happening. There is, however, still something "going on", even if it is not the "something" we had hoped for. Derrida therefore continues to wonder "[w]hat's the story with the autography of pure loss and without a signature? And how is it that this performance displaces such force in going without truth?" For him "[t]he structure of the feint describes here, as always, an extra turn".

In Cixous' essays, "[w]riting is not arriving; most of the time it's *not arriving*".[131] Writing does not arrive; we cannot recount it clearly. Similarly, Wood announces that writing is "something aporetic, unparaphraseable by those who believe in paraphrase".[132] Neither Wood nor Cixous can "paraphrase" writing. This is not to say, however, that nothing happens when we attempt to capture it. The aporia with which these essays' failures present us forces us to rethink our belief in paraphrase. Thus, we realise that although the comments these texts make do not refer directly and unproblematically to the moment or act of composition, something does occur in them. Cixous'

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[129] Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 53.
[130] Jacques Derrida, "Outwork, Prefacing," *Dissemination* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), p. 41.
[131] Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 65; italics in original.
[132] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 142.

emphatic repetition draws our attention towards an alternative possibility: even though writing does not arrive, it is not fully absent; its "not arriving" becomes apparent. Writing cannot be made fully present; nonetheless, as Wood tells us, it is "*about*. Outside. Around. In the offing".[133] We remain, as Wood writes, "[h]eld by a word, by something in a word that's beyond it, and beyond me".[134] Writing, although "beyond" us, nevertheless evokes its "beyond"; it refers us to the reading which occurs "beyond" or after it, as I will show in my chapter's final section.

Prophetic Fumblings

In the repeated failures of these works we realise, as Wood writes, that "[p]oetic writing is fumbled prophecy at best".[135] Composition cannot be captured; we fumble its prophecy. However, it is this very failure that renders writing prophetic; our fumblings refer us to writing's future—to reading—and thereby alert us to its very condition. The infinite regress or *mise en abîme* into which our attempts to capture writing places us render us conscious of our position as readers. *Black Swan Green* hints towards this situation when Jason asks "[d]o spirals end? Or just get so tiny your eyes can't follow any more?"[136] The uncanny quality of the spiral lies in this uncertainty; we cannot witness its increasing distance without questioning our own position. In this case, equally, our dilemma highlights our stance as readers. We cannot grasp writing, but in our failure reading becomes apparent. The impossible moment of writing refers us to our moment of reading.

Cixous, in "Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off", writes both that there "[t]here is not one single sentence in this text which I didn't write twenty times" and "I just wrote this sentence, but before this sentence, I wrote a hundred others, which I've suppressed, because the moment for cutting short had arrived".[137] Cixous points to a process of revision; behind any sentence lies twenty or a hundred rejected variations. However, we do not find twenty or a hundred versions of the above sentences in Cixous' essay; the process of revision

[133] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 146; italics in original.
[134] Wood, "Edit": 53.
[135] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": p.145.
[136] Mitchell, *Black Swan Green*, p. 231.
[137] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 31 and p. 20.

towards which Cixous gestures is not apparent to us. The revisions that occurred as Cixous composed her text are no longer legible.

The failure inscribed in this example opens questions of legibility and of reading; in particular, it alerts us to a discrepancy between the time of writing and the time of reading that *Diary of a Bad Year* also shows. I mentioned earlier that the novel's protagonist, Señor C, complains that "[a]s a typist pure and simple, Anya from upstairs is a bit of a disappointment […] There are times when I stare in dismay at the text she turns in". He lists her laughable mistakes: "[a]ccording to Daniel Defoe, I read, the true-born Englishman hates 'papers and papery'. Brezhnev's generals sit 'somewhere in the urinals'".[138] Señor C concedes that he and Anya proceed in an "error-strewn way".[139] Señor C alerts us to the fact that "Strong Opinions"—the text we read in the top section of the page and that Anya has supposedly typed—contains imperfections. However, we have already encountered the passages to which Señor C refers. We have read that "[o]ne recalls Daniel Defoe's comment on religious strife in England: that adherents of the national church would swear to their detestation of Papists and Popery not knowing whether the Pope was a man or a horse".[140] And, later, that "somewhere in the Urals an enemy watched and waited with a finger on a button".[141] In the text that we have read, the "errors" to which Señor C refers no longer exist; they have been erased or corrected. Señor C's comment does not refer to "errors" we find in the text, but creates them for us after the fact. The "errors" which would have *preceded* the final text, taking place in the process of its composition, are not referenced until *after* we have read it.

At the end of "Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off" Cixous asks "now, what to call this essay?"[142] The question, posed at the end of the text, accounts for the order in which Cixous' work is composed; she finishes the essay and then titles it. This is

[138] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 25.
[139] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 32.
[140] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 13.
[141] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 19.
[142] Cixous' question, in French—"[e]t maintenant comment appeler cet essai?" (Cixous, "Sans Arrêt, Non, Etat De Dessination, Non, Plutôt; Le Décollage Du Bourreau", p. 64)—employs the word "essai" which occurs repeatedly throughout the text. Elsewhere, however, it means "trial" or "attempt". The fact that Cixous' *essay* may in fact only be *an essay* (or attempt) alerts us to the readerly dependence I will outline in my following paragraphs; writing, always deferred until the time of reading, attains a provisional quality.

perfectly logical: although the title begins the text, it is not necessarily composed first. As we read, however, we do not share Cixous' dilemma. She poses it too late; we have already read the text's title, on its opening page. For us as readers the question carries no force. In reading, the time of writing is lost and what Cixous writes as present, we read as past.

We are "born for lateness".[143] We read the "perpetual present" of writing always as past. We do not read a present writing, but always that which has been written. By the time we read, writing is complete; the act of reading announces that writing is past. Our attempt to capture writing is thus thwarted by what Derrida terms the "passageway of deferred reciprocity between reading and writing".[144] We realise that reading and writing do not occur at the same time and that, therefore, neither is fully present to the other; each occurs in the absence of the other and they do not and cannot take place at the same instant. The moment of writing is always and inevitably resituated at and by the moment of reading. Yet without this compromising deferral, neither would be possible.

Wood therefore points out that "[w]riting-intelligence" is "both dyadic and promiscuous".[145] Writing, or "writing-intelligence", is activated only in relation to the reading which comes after it and which therefore deprives it of any pure presence. Thus, any reference to writing poses a dilemma to and for reading, as *Diary of a Bad Year* demonstrates. When we open Coetzee's novel we discover that the page is, unusually, divided into two sections. Its upper section contains Señor C's "strong opinions" while the lower section narrates his encounters with Anya and his attempts to hire her as his typist. Later, a third section is added which narrates the same series of events from Anya's point of view. Thus, the novel presents at once, but separately, the finished text of "Strong Opinions" and two narratives of the events surrounding its composition.

The three sections of the page are clearly related; the lower two refer both to each other and to the text we read above. "Strong Opinions" is supposedly composed in the time to which the lower two narratives refer. However, we cannot read them simultaneously. The novel's graphology poses a

[143] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 30.
[144] Derrida, "Force and Signification", p.11.
[145] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 139.

dilemma: in what order ought we best to read its sections? A number of possibilities present themselves. We might begin, for example, by approaching *Diary of a Bad Year* as we traditionally would a novel, reading the whole of the work's first page and ignoring the line across the middle. We realise, however, that the top of the next page follows on from the text interrupted in the middle of the last. As we resume Señor C's "Strong Opinions" at the top of each page, we struggle to remember where we left it before the break on the previous page. This method fragments our impression of the two narratives and soon becomes irritating, especially when the third section is introduced and even more so when the novel begins to break mid-sentence on page sixty. It is easier to read one section continuously until it reaches a natural pause and then return to do the same with the section beneath. And so on. Alternatively, we realise, we could read each narrative separately, perusing the novel from its first to last page three times over.

None of these methods is entirely satisfactory, however. As I explained already, a "normal" approach to the novel soon becomes awkward; equally, reading the top section continuously until it pauses and then returning to read the one below requires one to move backwards and forwards repeatedly and always to remember where one has stopped and started. To pursue the easiest course and read each section separately, however, leads one to miss many of the connections between them. Whichever course we choose, we suspect another may be better; at the most basic level, this novel-about-writing forces us continually to consider the way in which we read.

(An aside, before I begin the analysis of Wood's writing with which I wish to conclude my chapter. The attitude of Wood's text towards citation is, one might say, unorthodox. In "Edit", for example:

> If it were to be something like that, the Complete Works of Jacques Derrida would not exclude everything else – let's call it "the desire for everything + n" ("Strange" 35) or "this catastrophe" ("Che" 235) or "my chances" ("Chances" 2) or whatever it is that goes unnamed in *Of Grammatology*, curled up in a sentence about the "recognition" and "respect" that "has always only protected, […] never opened a reading" (158).[146]

[146] Wood, "Edit": 47-8.

This sentence patches together phrases from four different essays by Derrida. Abstracting them from their original sentences, it gives us no sense of their original meaning. Short phrases are excerpted so as to form a quotation-mosaic which makes no attempt to properly "read" "This Strange Institution Called Literature", "Che Cos'è La Poesia", "My Chances" or *Of Grammatology*. It's frankly irresponsible. But perhaps performs, for that very reason, as I suggested in my introduction, the highest form of responsibility. Wood's text mishandles Derrida's work. But in doing so leads us (if we are inclined to read it generously) to wonder: does not all citation do this? does Wood's work merely exaggerate a tendency inherent in all citation? Wood's essay, unlike others, does not pretend to tell us about Derrida's work; the deformations her citations perform are at least blatant. They make us conscious that the *only* way we can be sure whether or not the citation is "true" to Derrida's text is to return to it. Wood's essay refers us back to the original; it leaves it to be read. The reading which follows will attempt to re-produce this movement. It cites extensively from "Edit" and "All the Way to Writing", weaving together phrases from both essays, in order to construct its conclusion. How true this "conclusion" is to Wood's writing is a question which remains).

"All the Way to Writing" also challenges us. As I mentioned earlier, Wood's essay frames for us its many failures, announcing "I don't seem to have started", "something hasn't happened" and "something has not happened".[147] The difficulty Wood declares is patterned, too, in its very structure. After introducing Derrida's *jusqu'à l'écriture* Wood's essay announces "Donald Rumsfeld won an award". Specifically, it turns out, Rumsfeld has won the Plain English Campaign's "Foot in Mouth" trophy. Wood quotes Rumsfeld's "winning" comment but begs "[p]lease don't think that I am about to interpret this" before pointing out "I don't seem to have started […] While you wait for me to arrive, here's Jean-Luc Nancy".[148] Wood's essay appears equally disinclined to interpret Nancy; instead, it declares "I have just quoted Jean Luc-Nancy. Quotation is itself a way of saying something hasn't happened".[149]

[147] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 138 and 141.
[148] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 138.
[149] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 138.

Wood's text repeatedly re-starts itself (for reasons that I hope will become clear my chapter will, in its following paragraphs, enact a similar pattern). It represents this fact visually, dividing itself into sections separated by • • •. One of the essay's sections contains only one sentence; it states, in its entirety, "[t]he distance the words must cross begins by not existing".[150] The essay proceeds impatiently; it introduces an idea but soon abandons it, moving onto a new suggestion, as if lacking faith in its own project and disconcerted by its repeated failures.

It might look as though it is "merely lashing about".[151] The repeated "cutting short" of "All the Way to Writing" leaves us with the impression that it is thoroughly thwarted and close to despair. Wood tells us, however, that her essay is "content to hear what's understood, what's wanted, what matters most, get away. You don't write looking up to see what you have done".[152] The essay celebrates its cutting short and does not mind that it has failed to go "all the way to writing". It realises that writing is neither a "[form] of production" nor "reducible to knowledge". Wood therefore informs us that "[i]f you want to get to writing, you have to go about things a bit differently. You have to work with the openings, hollows and punctures that writing offers".[153] The "openings, hollows and punctures" of writing refuse to let it be known; we may, however, use these very impossibilities. By allowing writing to get away, Wood suggests, her text opens new and different possibilities. Wood announces that "[s]yncope, cutting short, contraction, condensation, editing, even the elision of a syllable from a word, can always be read as the promise that restarts what it thwarts".[154]

Reading Wood's essay is a disorienting experience, as my summary in the above paragraph aimed to suggest. "All the Way to Writing" forces us repeatedly to re-situate ourselves; we are not allowed to settle. Wood's essays disconcert their readers in other ways too. They change register suddenly from, for example, a lengthy and dense quotation of Freud to a breezy and colloquial "I

[150] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 140.
[151] Wood, "Edit": 52.
[152] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 139.
[153] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 138.
[154] Wood, "Edit": 52.

couldn't say".[155] They are, moreover, littered with "shards of words and splinter letters" and the "heaping and heaving of silent sounds".[156] Wood announces "Ango. Meditango. It's spoken to me, this harmless worm or wordbit, as if ça me dit, as if 'it speaks' as if the id were writing, speaking and speaking to me here, in me, a French-speaking id or il or elle or eel me dit".[157] Displaying a "tendency to play with sound", Wood's essays are, as the incongruous eel at the end of the sentence suggests, never far from a "collapse into syllarubble" ("syllarubble", making rubble of the word syllable, performs that which it conjures).[158]

Wood's work thus "counteracts certain inevitable contractual obligations".[159] The essay behaves like the "glass worm" I mentioned earlier. No matter how "hungrily" we read it, we are denied its "concluding part"; it presents us with "[t]hought-excrement, fractured suffix, God knows what, remains".[160] The text breaks, and gets away from us. It leaves us holding only the "snapped-off syllable" of a thought. We could easily become frustrated and despondent. Wood, however, wonders if "perhaps" these remains are "a gift"; we might read them as a present kindly given.[161]

The essay breaks away, seeming to free itself from its "contractual obligations". We might therefore think that we, too, are freed. However, we do not necessarily find that this is the case. We might discover instead that we are "caught up, tangled up, complicated, precisely by what cuts us loose".[162] We, as readers, find ourselves working to broach the essay's gaps; we assume that there is in fact a logic behind them, if only we could work out what it is. Wood's essay halts writing in order to get reading going. The gaps invite us to read all the more thoroughly; we realise that we must piece together the essay's writing.

Wood's essay fails to capture the movements of writing so that they might be restarted elsewhere. This scheme, in which "you stop it to set it going", is, however, risky. It would be easy enough to

[155] Wood, "Edit": 48.
[156] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 140-1.
[157] Wood, "Edit": 51.
[158] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 141.
[159] Wood, "Edit": 54.
[160] Wood, "Edit": 50.
[161] Wood, "Edit": 52.
[162] Wood, "Edit": 52.

miss what happens here. The text itself keeps going "as if nothing had happened, as one always continues, right up to the end, as if nothing had happened, that's what continuing is…".[163] Writing must continue, leaving its reader to notice what has or has not happened. S/he might, of course, simply follow, blindly, "to the end". His/her attention cannot be guaranteed. Writing depends upon a certain readerly patience and cooperation, a "kind of critical attention [which] will never simply be likely or possible".[164]

I began my chapter by invoking a dissatisfaction with the philosophical and the way in which criticism traditionally privileges it. Derrida also challenges us to rethink criticism's language; he declares that

> [e]mancipation from this language must be attempted. But not as an *attempt* at emancipation from it, for this is impossible unless we forget *our* history. Rather, as the dream of emancipation. Nor as emancipation from it, which would be meaningless and deprive us from the light of meaning. Rather, as resistance to it, as far as is possible.[165]

We cannot reject the language of criticism for another; such a gesture is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, we must pursue the "dream" of an inevitably failed attempt at "emancipation". Derrida and Wood invoke "writing" as this already-failed attempt. As I have shown, writing is by no means self-evident; it cannot be simply captured. By exhorting us to go "all the way to writing" they propose a more writing-centred mode of criticism knowing that the movements of writing do not present a simple or attainable alternative. We must engage ourselves in a writing always already conscious of its impossibility. It is fundamental to keep the movement of writing open; the writing Derrida and Wood laud must remain a productive dilemma with which we are never yet finished.

The texts I have examined here attempt to isolate a moment of writing, referring to acts of composition and claiming to tell the truth of the process from which they originate. However, this origin cannot be grasped; it cannot be separated from the product it composes. We repeatedly read

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[163] Wood, "Edit": 56.
[164] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 137.
[165] Derrida, "Force and Signification", p. 28; italics in original.

writing's presence as past. Equally, however, no product can deny its production. Even if we do not grasp composition, we "glimpse" it. And as we do so, our position is thrown into relief; the moment of reading becomes apparent. Our inability to read the moment of writing is not a failure, but a telling inevitability which reveals the very condition of a writing whose movements remain always to be read.

Or, to put it differently: my chapter began fascinated by what it might mean to be in the process of writing. At its inception, it glimpsed composition's trial and error as a writing whose movements remained. It thus set out in pursuit of writing, but never caught up with it; we repeatedly read writing's presence as past. However, the passage we cannot capture "luckily, leaves traces".[166] Wood declares that "[p]oetic writing brings the most surprising news: what we can't see and what can't be told".[167] These writings do not simply fail to "tell" us about writing but "bring the news" of what we can't be told: writing's movements always remain to be read.

Or: we began with the promise of a literary criticism, glimpsed in Wood and Cixous' essays, which, offering itself as an alternative to the composed and finished pretences of philosophical texts, would not "hypostatise" the movements of writing. But we must not be too hasty to laud Wood and Cixous' success. To read their essays as texts which definitively move writing would be to "hypostatize" them once more. We might do best to voice our claims for their writing in tentative terms. We must continue to read them as "compromise-formation[s]", which, unable to achieve their aim, await further (readerly) negotiations.[168] There is no "concluding part" – "[o]ne could tell this over and over".[169]

[166] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 144.
[167] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 139.
[168] Wood, "Edit": 53.
[169] Wood, "All the Way to Writing": 146.

Chapter Two
Traces

Writing, or composition, leaves only traces; I may trace, but cannot capture it. But what is the trace? What does it mean to trace? This chapter considers the trace in its own right; it is provoked by a novelistic trend Philip Hensher identifies in an article entitled "Short and Curlies" in which he groups Tim Winton's *The Turning,* David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* and Ali Smith's *Hotel World.* My chapter will add to the above list Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, Smith's *The Accidental* and J.M Coetzee's *Foe.* All of these books appear initially to be collections of short stories; they are formed by apparently discrete sections. Smith's *Hotel World*, Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and *Ghostwritten*, for example, contain six, six and nine sections respectively, each narrated by a different character.

Soon, however, we begin to notice that the individual narratives are subtly interconnected. One of the stories in *The Turning*, "Abbreviation", narrates Vic's encounter with Melanie, a girl with "a finger missing" whom he meets—and by whom he is subsequently kissed—when thirteen and on holiday.[1] The episode recurs in a later story, "Damaged Goods":

> Vic's first love was also older – in fact, quite a lot older – a farm girl whose ring finger ended at the first joint, the result of an accident with a hay baler. The finger that her wedding ring would have to slide on to ended in a stump. At thirteen he was enchanted. By the finger as much as by the girl herself. His first kiss. She let him touch her breasts. It only happened the once – the whole thing lasted less than a day, a holiday encounter – but the strange excitement lingered.[2]

The story is re-told by Vic's wife who situates the tale against that of "Strawberry Alison", another "damaged specimen" who "[caught] his imagination" and who, in turn, reappears in "Long, Clear View": "[f]or the school social you gargle with Listerine, spray your hair with VO-5 and try to work up the guts to speak to the girl with the spoiled face, the one you haven't stopped thinking about for weeks".[3] The stories intersect; the book gradually, through a series of brief instances,

[1] Tim Winton, *The Turning* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 25.
[2] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 58.
[3] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 58 and p. 194.

builds up a substantial narrative of Vic's life. Hensher explains that "the stories coalesce into a single main narrative and numerous subordinate ones".[4]

A similar process occurs in Mitchell's novels; they, too, Philip Griffiths explains, offer a "network of seemingly separate yet cleverly interconnected voices".[5] Equally, the first section of Morrison's *Paradise* recalls a massacre at a Convent just outside a town called Ruby. The account which follows, entitled "Mavis", offers a seemingly unrelated narrative in which a woman flees her violent husband. Eventually, however, "[w]hen the road ran out of trees, she saw ahead to the left a house".[6] Mavis arrives at the convent of the novel's first pages. This pattern is repeated; in each section the novel introduces a new character who finally ends up at the house outside Ruby. Some, like Grace, arrive brazenly—"'Hi.' She cracked her gum like a professional. 'Is this Ruby? Bus driver said this was it'"—and others more mysteriously: "[t]hey moved this way for more than a mile. The walker going somewhere; the hitcher going anywhere. The wraith and her shadow […] By the time they saw the Convent Sweetie was cozy".[7] The Convent—and its never entirely forgotten tragedy—forms a centre to which each account is drawn: "Mavis Albright left the Convent off and on, but she always returned, so she was there in 1976".[8] The novel's "variety of subplots" come together in a process Kubitschek finds "dizzying".[9]

Hensher is similarly disoriented; he describes *The Turning* as "a fairly disconcerting experience" and "an unfamiliar new animal". He suggests that it "starts to look like a new form altogether". He argues, specifically, that "the distinction between novels and short stories is becoming blurred".[10]

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[4] Philip Hensher, "Short and Curlies," *The Telegraph* 17 May 2005.
[5] Philip Griffiths, "'On the Fringe of Becoming' - David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*," *Beyond Extremes: Repräsentation Und Reflexion Von Modernisierungsprozessen Im Zeitgenössischen Britischen Roman*, eds. Stefan Glomb and Stefan Horlacher (Narr, Tübingen, Germany, 2004), p.83.
[6] Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 37.
[7] Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 55 and pp. 126-9.
[8] Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 49.
[9] Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Conneticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 164.
[10] Hensher, "Short and Curlies" ; The form is perhaps not as new as Hensher suggests. Nicholas Blincoe describes Mitchell's novels as "episodic" (Nicholas Blincoe, "Spirit That Speaks," *The Guardian* 21 August 1999). The label, which strikes me as valid, sounds somewhat less new than the analysis Hensher proposes. In fact, it recalls much earlier texts. In Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, for example, characters appear in certain episodes only to disappear when the perspective shifts before returning or passing by again much later. We could easily read it in light of the logic Mitchell's novels inspire. Or, to offer a perhaps less contentious example, Joyce's *Dubliners*, although written much earlier than the texts I have chosen to discuss, also forces us to consider the distinction between the short story and the

The critics of these novels concur; they are uncertain as to how best to classify these works: are they novels? Or short stories? Anderson points out that when Mitchell's "first book, *Ghostwritten*, was published, critics were undecided whether it was a novel or a collection of short stories".[11] Poole claims, similarly, that *Ghostwritten* "left some wondering how much of a novel it was".[12]

Sophie Ratcliffe suggests that *The Accidental* is "a work that explores the very idea of a novel as a contained form". For Ratcliffe, Smith's work displays a discomfort with its novelistic status: "Smith's parodic, patterned deliberacy reveals her suspicion of the ways in which the novel, in its attempt to comprehend or express the problem of particularity, might, accidentally, swamp the instances that it is trying to preserve".[13] For Ratcliffe, *The Accidental* incorporates short-story-like qualities in order to overcome the imperfections of the novel. Skidelsky, writing about Winton's work, identifies a similar discontent. In this instance, however, it lies in the opposite direction; for Winton, he claims, the short story is inadequate: "[i]n his novels, Winton has long been concerned to connect people and events in subtle and complicated ways, and short stories present an obvious difficulty for him, which he perhaps tries to solve here by establishing links between the tales".[14] All of these comments display a similar realization that, ultimately, these texts are properly neither novels nor short stories; they do not fit neatly into the categories available to us.[15]

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novel. Is it best contemplated as a singular text or as a number of discrete fictions? The trend Hensher identifies is not historically specific; the short story and the novel have been blurred before.

[11] Hephzibah Anderson, "Time and Emotion Study," *The Observer* 29 February 2004.

[12] Steven Poole, "I Think I'm Turning Japanese," *The Guardian* 10 March 2001.

[13] Sophie Ratcliffe, "Life in Sonnet Form," *Times Literary Supplement* 20 May 2005: 20 and 19.

[14] William Skidelksy, "Under the Shifty Shadow of God," *Times Literary Supplement* 25 March 2005: 21.

[15] Of course, the categories themselves are far from neat, as an examination of discussions surrounding the short story reveals. Maud Ellmann, in her essay "Drawing the Blind", notes that "[i]n 1960 Elizabeth Bowen gave a course on the short story at Vassar, in which she asked her students how a short story differs from a novel. The obvious answer is 'shortness'" (Maud Ellmann, "Drawing the Blind: Gide, Joyce, Larsen, and the Modernist Short Story," *Oxford Literary Review* 26 (2004): 31). Later, she mentions "[a]nother American writer, Edith Wharton," who "argues that the short story differs from the novel in subordinating character to plot" (Ellmann, "Drawing the Blind": 36). Both Wharton and Bowen attempt to define the short story by focusing on the way in which it *differs* from the novel; both writers, and Ellmann herself, consider short stories in terms of their *relation to* the novel. William O'Rourke, in his essay "Morphological Metaphors", again reveals this interdependence as he attempts to offer a definition of the short story. He writes that "[t]he greater the space, the more time it takes to comprehend, to see. To see all the parts of the novel requires great distance, therefore more time, but not so the short story: the reader is always close enough to see a short story whole" (William O'Rourke, "Morphological Metaphors for the Short Story: Matters of Production, Reproduction, and Consumption," *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 195). O'Rourke's "more" offers a definition whose basis is comparative; the short story is measured against the novel. The short story is not a wholly discrete form but finds itself haunted by the novel it is not. The two forms are far from mutually exclusive; the short story is—by its very definitions—inseparable from ideas of the novel.

These works resist easy categorisation; they are not easily understood. *Paradise* offers us a series of "partial testimonies" which, as Stephane Robolin explains, "trace out deeply disturbing contours of an atrocity".[16] The novel's main "atrocity" is not instantly accessible; it is "traced out" for us to piece together. Critics of these works stress their fragmentary nature; the "main narrative" of *The Turning* is, for Hensher "told in fragments, often inconclusively, through distinct short stories out of chronological order".[17] Eleanor Birne suggests that Smith's novels are "made up of incomplete fragments; different points of view" and that in *The Accidental* "things do not progress neatly; they circle and return".[18] Ratcliffe therefore describes *The Accidental* as an "allusive, ambitious and formally acrobatic work".[19] These texts are constructed via echo, repetition and changes in perspective; they play with and subject us to the trace.

As they do so, two inflections of the trace emerge. As my chapter will show, the trace functions, on the one hand and as I will demonstrate in my first section, as a marker of absence, as the uncanny remainder left over by any echo or repetition. Alternatively, as I will explore in my second section, it prompts a desire, which Derrida might call "archive fever", to gather and to collect.[20] In this case, it is adopted as a mark of presence. The trace thus sets us in pursuit of two contradictory spectres. We find, moreover, that neither of these possibilities can quite exclude the other. At the end of my first section, presence intrudes; the project prompted by the absent-trace fails. Similarly, in my second section, absence haunts the impulse engendered by the trace-as-presence. The presence and the absence the trace conjures alike remain elusive. My third section therefore proposes that we must work with the inseparability of the trace's two senses and wonders how we might better inscribe it—and our encounters with it in these texts—in light of their dependency.

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[16] Stephane Robolin, "Loose Memory in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (2006): p. 313.
[17] Hensher, "Short and Curlies" .
[18] Eleanor Birne, "The Day Starts Now," *London Review of Books* 23 June 2005: 31; the structure of *The Accidental* is slightly different to the other texts I discuss here. It is divided into three main parts—titled Beginning, Middle and End—each of which is composed of four accounts: given first by Astrid, then Marcus, Michael and finally Eve. Thus, each of its narrators is granted three sections in total rather than the one accorded to each character in *Hotel World, Cloud Atlas* and *Ghostwritten*.
[19] Ratcliffe, "Life in Sonnet Form": 19.
[20] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

The "Hong Kong" section of Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* narrates the disastrous day of a British businessman who is recently estranged from his wife, has sex with his cleaner and lives with a ghost. At the end of the section, he dies:

> Now I understand what this insane fucking day has been about!
> Hilarious!
> I am fucking dying.[21]

This narrative is not, however, wholly confined to the work's "Hong Kong" section; elements of it recur in the text's other accounts. The cleaner reappears in "Holy Mountain" as the protagonist's daughter; she writes to say "'[m]y employer died. A foreigner, a lawyer with a big company, he was extremely wealthy. He was very generous to me in his will'".[22] The businessman's wife also shows up elsewhere. She is, it transpires, the Katy Forbes next to whom Marco wakes up in "London"; asked about her husband, Katy remarks "'[w]e separated, then he went and died'".[23] Mo in "Clear Island" witnesses and re-narrates his death; she comments that "'[t]he peculiar thing was, he seemed to be laughing'".[24] And, finally (I think – there's always a chance there's yet another link that I've missed), Tim Cavendish in "London" receives a phone call telling him that the company formerly belonging to his brother (whom we assume to be the same Hong Kong businessman) has gone bust.[25] The businessman is not the only character to reappear in this way; repeatedly, as Hensher writes, "a central drama" in *Ghostwritten* "turns, in the next episode, into a casual mention".[26]

In Smith's *Hotel World*, too, protagonists from one section appear again as minor characters in another. The main character in "Present Historic", a homeless woman called Else, is offered a room in a hotel by one of its employees. The employee who performs this act of benevolence features at

[21] David Mitchell, *Ghostwritten: A Novel in Nine Parts* (London: Sceptre, 1999), p. 108.
[22] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 151.
[23] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 268.
[24] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 364.
[25] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 303.
[26] Hensher, "Short and Curlies"

the centre of the novel's next account, "Future Conditional". Both characters notice her name badge:

> Else sees that she's wearing a badge with four letters on it. L.I.S.E. She wonders what it's short for.[27]
>
> She looks down at her Name Badge, LISE backwards upside down.[28]

Else also reappears; she returns yet again in the "Perfect" section of the novel when she is met by its protagonist, Penny, who describes her as "one of the most interesting people she'd met in a long time" despite mistaking her for "some kind of druggy eccentric guest or maybe even a minor ex-rock star".[29]

The plot of *The Accidental* builds in a similar manner; a casual remark made in one section returns as a more substantial episode later. Magnus, for example, notes that "Amber is doing something to his mother's knee", but it is not until Eve's section that the novel elucidates: "[Amber] had come across the room and knelt down in front of Eve. Now she was holding Eve's knee with both her hands and pressing the muscles round it with her thumbs".[30] Again, the novel returns to the event we glimpsed—and perhaps barely registered—earlier in order to explain it more fully.

In all three of these novels the protagonist from one account returns unexpectedly in others; we encounter an echo of a previous instant or event. However, not all of the echoes we encounter in these works are major or integral to the main plot; there are inconsequential and subtle ones, too. Although I will consider the inconsequential echo more thoroughly later, it suffices to point out here that a comet-shaped birthmark appears in each of *Cloud Atlas*'s sections without any real explanation.[31] Similarly, in *The Turning* the narrator of "Aquifer" tells us "I was there when two-year-old Charlie lurched up between his father's legs and lost some toes in a bright pink blur".[32] The incident echoes Melanie's amputated finger but in fact bears no substantial relation to the

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[27] Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 70.
[28] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 101.
[29] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 139.
[30] Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), pp. 149-50 and p. 192.
[31] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 85, p. 122, p. 124, pp. 204-5, p. 319, p. 324 and p. 361.
[32] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 42.

narrative in which it appears. Equally, in both the "Hong Kong" and "London" sections of *Ghostwritten* a coffee machine overflows because "I'd used two filters instead of one".[33]

There is no obvious reason or explanation for these repetitions; Hensher therefore claims that Mitchell's work is marked by "unsuspected connections" and "remote, powerful influences".[34] Mo informs us in "Clear Island" that "[p]henomena are interconnected regardless of distance, in a holistic ocean more voodoo than Newton".[35] Mo's invocation of "voodoo" and a "holistic ocean" presents the work's interconnections as a mysterious and unaccountable phenomenon. This description is echoed in the critical responses to these fictions. Akoma claims that Morrison "directs her artistic vision to the unknown quality in African American experience" and towards "the 'trick' of life that defies any unitary narrative".[36] For Akoma, *Paradise* refuses unity in order to capture the "unknown" and that which defies explanation. Ruth Scurr celebrates *Hotel World* as "fragmented, tenuous, allusive, sparse" and the lives it depicts as "shadowy".[37] Poole views Mitchell's novels as "spectral patterns interleaved, ripples interpenetrating in a pond".[38] The "fragile chains of narrative connections between distinct stories" are, for Hensher, a "haunting idea".[39] These "spectral patterns" and "ghostings" are identified once again, and explained more fully, by Griffiths; he notes the "residual flickering of events as traces in the narrative system" of *Ghostwritten* and explains that "although the one narrative is not wholly present in the other, it is on the fringe of becoming, for the structure of the narrative implies what has been narrated before (or after)".[40]

All of these responses are marked by a vocabulary of spectrality and partial presence. Griffiths' "fringe of becoming", in particular, conjures a troubling sense of semi-absence, a never-quite-grasped echo by which novel and reader are haunted; these texts offer us what *The Biographer's*

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[33] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 70 and p. 288.
[34] Hensher, "Short and Curlies"
[35] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 375.
[36] Chiji Akoma, "The 'Trick' of Narratives: History, Memory and Performance in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Oral Tradition* 15.1 (2000): 23.
[37] Ruth Scurr, "A Ghost with Guests," *Times Literary Supplement* 23 March 2001: 7.
[38] Poole, "I Think I'm Turning Japanese"
[39] Hensher, "Short and Curlies"
[40] Griffiths, "Beyond Extremes", p.84.

Tale calls "a kind of ghostwriting, a ghost of writing".[41] The very title of Smith's *The Accidental* explicitly signals this relation to the non-essential and non-substantial, especially if we consider it in its Aristotelian sense. Aristotle opposes the "accidental" to the "substantial"; he uses the term in order to designate the qualities of an object which do not affect its essence.

The interconnections of these works invoke, for their critics, absence, the spooky and the uncertain; they conjure a "non-sense or insignificance" which, as Derrida points out in "My Chances", "we frequently associate with chance".[42] The traces of these novels invoke notions of coincidence and contingency. Ratcliffe describes *The Accidental* as a "novel about contingency and accidents".[43] Anderson claims, of *Cloud Atlas*, that "serendipities and coincidences ghost Mitchell's sextet" as well as "more tangible, equally thrilling connections".[44] Derrida also frames his essay in this way; he does not only speak of chance, but informs us that the analyses he performs, and the texts of which he writes, are the result of a series of "lucky finds".[45] He claims that his essay is itself the product of chance.

Mitchell's novels are, however, quick to remind us that these "coincidences" aren't in fact coincidental. Marco invokes the dilemma of fate and chance and asks, with a great deal of irony,

> does chance or fate control our lives? Well, the answer is as relative as time. If you're in your life, chance. Viewed from the outside, like a book you're reading, it's fate all the way.
> Now I don't know about you, but my life is a well and I'm right down there in it.[46]

Marco attributes the problem to a question of perspective and chance triumphs; it's obvious that his "life is a well" and that he's "right down there in it". His conspiratorial "I don't know about you" implies that we will agree. However, Marco's allusion to "a book you're reading" undoes the statement it precedes. His privileging of chance is, within the context of the novel, somewhat

[41] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 257.
[42] Derrida, "My Chances", p. 348; Derrida points out, moreover, that chance is inseparable from the idea of anticipation. Chance is "exactly what thwarts or undoes our *anticipation*" (Derrida, "My Chances", p. 348; italics in original). He therefore explains that "[t]o attempt to think chance would be in the first place to interest oneself in the *experience* (I emphasize this word) of what happens unforeseeably" (Derrida, "My Chances", p. 349; italics in original).
[43] Ratcliffe, "Life in Sonnet Form": 19.
[44] Anderson, "Time and Emotion Study"
[45] Derrida, "My Chances", p. 358.
[46] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 292.

disingenuous; Marco's chance is "viewed", by the reader and by the book's author, "from the outside".

The reappearances and traces of the novel are very much "fated". The novel, and its chance encounters, are the product of a design laid out in advance. The novel accedes to this fact when Marco announces "[t]his all seemed choreographed".[47] Equally, when Timothy Cavendish reads the manuscript of "Half-Lives" he tells us that "[o]ne or two things will have to go: the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated, for example. Far too hippie-druggie-new age. (I, too, have a birthmark, below my left armpit, but no lover ever compared it to a comet. Georgette nicknamed it Timbo's Turd)".[48] Cavendish disparages "backflashes, foreshadowings and tricksy devices" as tropes which "belong in the 1980s with MAs in Postmodernism and Chaos Theory".[49] These comments are clearly pertinent to the novel as a whole; Cavendish invites us to view its interconnections critically and to dismiss them as cheap novelistic tricks. The very fact that, for Cavendish, these things can "go" reminds us that they are the result of authorial, or editorial, decision.

That which is privileged by critics as fleeting and inessential is, paradoxically, the result of a highly structured and carefully constructed mode of writing. Anderson admits realistically that, in *Cloud Atlas*, "no detail seems accidental, no turn of phrase incidental".[50] The moments we privilege as odd and uncanny are in fact the result of a fastidious authorial design. Thought in this way, *Cloud Atlas* is not so much a novel which conjures the world's mysterious interrelation as a book in which all accident and coincidence has been effaced.

Derrida makes a similar point in relation to "My Chances". Although he informs us early on that his essay is constructed by a series of "lucky finds" he later admits that "[i]t would be possible to demonstrate that there is nothing random in the links formed by my lucky finds. An implacable

[47] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 315.
[48] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 373.
[49] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 152; Cavendish draws our attention to the fact that the "tricksy devices" Micthell's novel employs are not new; it risks appearing out-dated. Somewhat ironically, however, the very critical comment Cavendish offers inserts a scepticism which differentiates the novel from the confident tricksiness of "Postmodernism and Chaos Theory".
[50] Anderson, "Time and Emotion Study"

program is imposed by the contextual necessity that requires one to isolate [*découper*] solid sequences (stereonomy), cross and adjust subsets, mingle voices and proper names, and accelerate a rhythm, which merely gives the *feeling* of randomness to whoever does not know the prescription".[51] There is, Derrida concedes, an "implacable programme" and "prescription" at work; his essay has the "*feeling*" of randomness but is not truly random.

Although these novels appear to capture chance, the coincidental and the inessential, their attempt is undermined. The structure of the novel, and the decided inclusion of supposedly "chancey" traces, compromises the very coincidental quality it wishes to attain. The trace's determined inscription undermines its quality. The traces in these novels carry the force of chance, but are clearly not chance or the inessential *tout court*. Blanchot, in *The Infinite Conversation*, admits that those who wish to theorise the trace are faced with an insurmountable dilemma. *The Infinite Conversation* chases notions such as the impossible and the inessential. It discovers repeatedly, however, that, in their inscription, these strange terms become "petrified in a watchword".[52] In his book *Equals,* Adam Phillips explains that "we may wonder now what hope there is for the strange, the weird or the uncanny if we think we know what these words are referring to […] Strange, weird and uncanny, that is to say, are words peculiarly undone by definition. If they say what they mean, what could they possibly mean?"[53]

Phillips makes it clear that we use these words—strange, weird, uncanny and trace—to conjure that which resists name or explanation. Yet every word fails; there could be none which did not name or explain. Cavendish, in *Cloud Atlas,* points to a similar disjunction between the uncanny and language; he writes that "[s]ometimes the fluffy bunny of incredulity zooms round the bend so rapidly that the greyhound of language is left, agog, in the starting cage".[54] Cavendish's metaphor is bizarre; the notion of a "greyhound of language" itself provokes incredulity. However, this comic statement also conveys a more serious point; for Cavendish, incredulity (at the uncanny) leaves

[51] Derrida, "My Chances", p. 358; italics in original.
[52] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 23.
[53] Adam Phillips, *Equals* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 116.
[54] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 170.

language behind. It would thus, we infer, be disingenuous to re-appropriate it linguistically.[55] Blanchot writes that "instead of leaving the empty part empty, one can name it and, in a word, fill it by obscuring it with the strongest, the most august and most opaque name that can be found".[56] By presenting the trace, by returning our incredulity to language, we betray the very inessentiality which intrigues. In the very act of labelling and fixing moments such as those we encounter in these novels as traces (or with any other classification, for that matter) we risk their uncanny quality.

Phillips concludes that our "usage" of these words "can never be unknowing enough. As words they may be more like gasps or exclamations. It is as though these are the words that have to be taken on their own terms, or as their own terms. Words to refer to things that words can't refer to; words that refer to other words, but only disingenuously".[57] Blanchot explains similarly that "if the thought of the impossible were entertained, it would be a kind of reserve in thought itself, a thought not allowing itself to be thought in the mode of appropriative comprehension. This is a dangerous direction, and a strange thought".[58] In order to properly think the trace we must, for Blanchot, manage not to think it; we must avoid "appropriative comprehension". The trace, if it is to retain its status *as* trace, bears only tracing; we must offer it without asserting it. We would need an entirely un-word-like word, a name about whose naming abilities we remained uncertain.[59]

Phillips encourages us to think "strange", "weird" and "uncanny" in this less name-like manner when he suggests that we read them as "gasps or exclamations". Such a shift is legible, too, in Hensher's article. At its end, Hensher, having grouped these novels by their common structure, announces "[n]ow, all we need is a name for it".[60] We can, however, also read in his article a reluctance to name the strange trope it has identified. It declares, twice, that we need a new name;

[55] It is, of course, ironic that Cavendish invokes the problem with particular linguistic flair.
[56] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 119.
[57] Phillips, *Equals*, p. 116.
[58] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 43.
[59] Derrida, in his work, employs the word trace precisely because, conjuring the idea of animal tracks and suchlike, it offers itself as such an un-word-like word. Nonetheless, it does not and could not *entirely* escape naming; as I have shown in this section, the thought of the trace may return us once again to the essential. This risk is not, however, an inconvenience but a productive inconsistency with which Derrida's notion of the trace wishes to work, as will become clear later.
[60] Hensher, "Short and Curlies"

in addition to the conclusion I have cited already, it decides, earlier, "[w]e almost need a new word".[61] Yet it does not provide one. The *need* for a name is thus unresolved and becomes itself a disconcerting trace within the article.

However, this reading leaves us with yet another "strange thought". I believe I have identified a trace in Hensher's article but perhaps, in naming it, I have "petrified" this movement too. We believe we have identified a trace but perhaps, by naming it, we have once again compromised its moment. How might we guarantee that its strangeness remains open? We cannot. The demand is impossible, failure inevitable. Blanchot suggests that "[f]orgetting this non-thought might be the most appropriate measure" and proposes "[l]et us forget it, then, so as to remember it only through forgetting".[62] And so we shall, moving instead in the next section to a very different sense of the trace. But the question of memory will never be far away—I will return to it more explicitly in my final section—and the sense of strangeness will no doubt return.

Gathering and Synchrony

Derrida, in *Of Grammatology,* outlines a concept, borrowed from Rousseau, which he labels the "supplement" and which is, in many respects, identical to the notion my chapter calls the trace. Derrida formalizes the sense we get in the above section of the trace as uncanny when he writes that "the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void […] As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness".[63] He admits, however, that the supplement "harbours within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary".[64] We have already, in the final paragraphs of the preceding section, begun to glimpse such a contradiction. Derrida glosses the second sense thus: "[t]he supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the

[61] Hensher, "Short and Curlies"
[62] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 119.
[63] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 145; italics in original.
[64] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 144.

fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence".[65] In addition and in contrast to the impulse already outlined, the trace impels us toward a project preoccupied with presence – a project of gathering and archiving which I will consider more fully in my next section. It will soon return us, however, to a sense of trace-as-absence; the project fails, bringing us back to the trace's other inflection. The trace is notable in both cases because of what it claims to, but cannot, do. Neither signification can be separated from the other, as Derrida points out; the trace is marked by a double movement. My chapter's third section will attempt to think these two significations together in order to more accurately trace the uncanny moments with which these novels present us.

For academics in particular but, I suspect, for other readers too, the impulse when reading these novels is to make a list of all the connections, to collect them together.[66] They provoke a project of "gathering and synchrony" you may have noticed in my previous analyses whose imperative, as Levinas writes, is to "[l]eave nothing lying around! Let nothing be lost!"[67] We are gripped by what Derrida calls "archive fever". We begin, when we first read works such as Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*, to notice the novels' many connections. We note them (either mentally or on paper); a list starts to form. The list becomes a challenge; we read wishing to record *all* of the novel's correspondences. Our reading is driven by a "highly compelling tracing and exposure project" which Sedgwick aligns with a paranoid stance.[68] Clare Birchall, in her analysis of conspiracy theory, quotes Jodi Dean in order to point out that conspiracy-thinking—like the fervent search these fictions provoke—is characterised by a belief that "'things are not what they seem and everything is connected'".[69]

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[65] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 144; italics in original.

[66] We might align this practice with structuralist approaches to intertextuality (undoubtedly the concept by which my chapter is underpinned). As Graham Allen explains, intertextuality is not a stable term, but has been understood in radically different manners. A structuralist approach, such as that represented by Genette in *Palimpsests*, facilitates a mode of reading in which one actively seeks the work's "intertextual relations". My chapter will eventually take us closer to a very different approach to intertextuality, which Allen terms poststructuralist (Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2000).

[67] Emmanuel Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, Studies in Continental Thought (London: Athlone Press, 1991), p. 4.

[68] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Series Q, ed. Adam Frank (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 124.

[69] Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, Culture Machine Series (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p. 34.

We begin to note the connections in Mitchell's work, but soon realise, however, that we do not (and could not) account for all of them in a single reading. Griffiths points out that the "conglomerate of virtual chapters" in *Ghostwritten* "[creates] a potential virtual text. This virtual text is dynamic in the sense that it is never completed but always open to revision as new input is continually injected to enrich the virtual dimension"; the novel's "circular structure constitutes the text's invitation to the reader to reread the novel and to revise the virtual text now in place".[70] The novel demands re-reading. This second reading will, however, provoke more echoes and repetitions; it thus demands yet another reading which will again discover more traces.

Our conspiracy-driven "archive fever" provokes an excessive and potentially endless reading; "over interpretation" and "conspiracy theory" are, Birchall points out, closely bound.[71] Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* thematizes this problematic outcome. The first section of the novel, "The Pacific Journal" ends mid-sentence and the next section, "Letters from Zedelghem", begins. This narrative appears entirely unrelated to the first until in one letter, Robert Frobisher writes:

> Poking through an alcove of books in my room I came across a curious dismembered volume, and I want you to track down a complete copy for me. It begins on the 99th page, its covers are gone, its binding unstitched. From what little I can glean, it's the edited journal of a voyage from Sydney to California by a notary of San Francisco named Adam Ewing […] The journal seems to be published posthumously, by Ewing's son (?)[72]

"The Pacific Journal" resurfaces in the apparently unrelated account by which it is interrupted. As it does so, Frobisher offers an alternative perspective on the novel's previous account; he revises what we have already read. The pattern continues; each of the novel's texts is read or viewed in the section by which it is followed. In "An Orison of Somni~451", for example, the novel's previous section, "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish" reappears as a film "made before the foundation of Nea So Copros in a long-deadlanded province of the abortive European democracy".[73]

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[70] Griffiths, "Beyond Extremes", p. 97.
[71] Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, p. 75.
[72] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 64.
[73] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 243.

In Coetzee's *Foe*, too, the text we read in one section of the novel reappears in that which follows; Dominic Head describes the novel as a "densely allusive work which insists on the primacy of textuality".[74] We find, in the novel's first section, a narrative in which a man, Cruso, is stranded on an island with his servant, Friday, and a woman, Susan Barton. In the second section, the narrative shifts to London. Soon, however, Susan refers to the narrative we read previously; she writes to Foe in order to tell him "'I have set down the history of our time on the island as well as I can, and enclose it herewith. It is a sorry, limping affair (the history, not the time itself) – "the next day," its refrain goes, "the next day … the next day" – but you will know how to set it right'".[75] The novel's first section is reframed as Susan's unsuccessful attempt to record "the history of our time on the island". We are invited to reread it as "sorry" and "limping". In the third section the perspective shifts once more. Again, however, the text we read in the second section resurfaces: "'(I wrote you letters on the Bristol road, I have them with me, I will give them to you)'".[76] The text of the previous section becomes an object to be read in the subsequent one.

The patterns established by both *Cloud Atlas* and *Foe* could, we realise, continue indefinitely; given that each of the novel's sections provokes another, the novel might potentially never end. However, they do of course contain a finite number of sections; "Sloosha's Crossin'"—the "last", most central section of *Cloud Atlas*—is allowed to conclude, provoking the return, and subsequent completion, of each of the novel's previous texts. The novel itself alludes to the complex structure which results when, in "Letters from Zedelghem", Frobisher describes the sextet he has composed: "[i]n the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued, in order".[77]

Even at the end of "Sloosha's Crossin'", however, a voice interrupts Zachry's narrative to announce that "Zachry my old pa was a wyrd buggah, I won't naysay it now he's died".[78] Zachry's son intrudes in order to "read" the section's narrator and to offer an interpretation of the narrative

[74] Dominic Head, *J.M. Coetzee*, Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 115.
[75] J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 47.
[76] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 114.
[77] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 463.
[78] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 324.

we have just read. Although the novel refrains from dedicating a further section to his reading, "Sloosha's Crossin'" alludes to the reader "behind" the text. The novel indicates the arbitrary imposition of its conclusion; it signals its infinite regression even at its limit.

Cloud Atlas thus flags re-reading's potentially infinite nature. The re-reading to which our "archive fever" sets us does not end. It is always possible to read the text again and therefore to notice further connections. There might always be one more reading and one more previously unrecorded correspondence. The text cannot be wholly determined. We realise that the archive will never be complete. Derrida points out that "[o]ne will never be able to objectivize [the archive] with no remainder. The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future".[79] The present archive is inadequate and looks to a completion which is always deferred. Derrida therefore admits that "if we want to know what" the archive "will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps".[80] The archive is never present.

The inevitably infinite nature of the project is recognised, too, in the analysis Sedgwick offers of paranoia. Sedgwick notes that "*you can never be paranoid enough*".[81] There is no end to paranoid thought. Both Sedgwick and Birchall signal this aspect of paranoia through their choice of titles. Sedgwick subtitles her essay "you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you" (alluding to a Carly Simon song) while Birchall heads one of her chapters "just because you're not paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get you". The thought of conspiracy informs us that we do not know what we think we know or that what we think we know is wrong. Conspiracy theories attempt to tell us this; they offer an alternative knowledge. However, their very premise threatens to thwart this corrective move. The knowledge they offer is vulnerable, too, to a paranoid reading, as Sedgwick and Birchall's titles show. Birchall explains that "conspiracy *theory* can suggest that all knowledge is only ever 'theory'".[82] Paranoia is all-encompassing. The thought which inspires conspiracy reading does not go away, but undermines the "corrective" interpretation offered.

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[79] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 68.
[80] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 36.
[81] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, p. 142; italics in original.
[82] Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, p. 73; italics in original.

The archive is subject to a similar disturbance. Susan, in Coetzee's *Foe*, is rendered anxious by the realisation that "'surely, with every day that passes, our memories grow less certain, as even a statue in marble is worn away by rain, till at last we can no longer tell what shape the sculptor's hand gave it'". She therefore presses Cruso to compose a written record of his time on the island: "'Is it not possible to manufacture paper and ink and set down what traces remain of these memories, so that they will outlive you; or, failing paper and ink, to burn the story upon wood, or engrave it upon rock?'" Despite Susan's plea, Cruso, however, "'was unmoved. "Nothing is forgotten," said he; and then: "Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering"'". Cruso's dismissal renders Susan desperate: "' "You are mistaken!' I cried. 'I do not wish to dispute, but you have forgotten much, and with every day that passes you forget more!"'"[83]

Although Cruso at first declares that "nothing is forgotten" he quickly revises his statement in order to announce more moderately that nothing he has forgotten is "worth the remembering". The alteration implies, somewhat aptly, that he has initially forgotten even that forgetfulness is possible. Ultimately, both Susan and Cruso acknowledge that forgetfulness is inevitable. For Susan it is therefore necessary that Cruso preserve his story in some way. We must find a way to store or to record our memories if they are to last. We are, as Derrida writes, "*en mal d'archive*: in need of archives" *because* forgetfulness—and absence—are possible.[84]

Derrida points out that "[t]here would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression".[85] A perceived absence causes us to search fervently for the completed archive, for presence. The archive is conditioned by the forgetfulness it would deny. It therefore finds that it cannot get away from forgetfulness; every archive reminds us of the absence by which it is informed. Thus, to be *en mal d'archive* "is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives

[83] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 17.
[84] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 91; italics in original.
[85] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 19.

itself".[86] Every archive is haunted by absence; the desire for presence for which the archive stands is betrayed by the very act of archiving.

The trace cannot be wholly gathered or made fully present; we thus realise, as Derrida explains, that "[t]races […] produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of their erasure. From the beginning, in the 'present' of their first inscription, they are constituted by the double force of repetition and erasure, legibility and illegibility".[87] The trace cannot be made present without admitting its "erasure" and "illegibility". Birne, for example, notes that all three of Smith's novels take place at holiday sites and explains that "[t]hese are comprehensible repetitions and correspondences. But there are odder ones. Smith is interested in clocks and stopped watches".[88] Birne's "odder ones" is apologetic; it promotes the link she has identified anxiously. Would anyone else have noticed? Is the correlation perhaps "odd" because it emerges from her preoccupations, not the novel's? I am left with a similar feeling in *Ghostwritten* when, for example, the noncorpum announces "[h]ad I transmigrated at that time, everything would have been different".[89] The noncorpum alludes to an earlier announcement made by Satoru in "Hong Kong": "if I hadn't taken the decision to go back and answer it, then everything that happened afterwards wouldn't have happened"[90] Or does he? Is this really a deliberate allusion, worthy of note? Attridge, reading *Foe*, notes single word echoes of *The Tempest* and the Book of Common Prayer's Version of Psalm 45 but admits "the allusiveness remains uncertain because these *are* single words. How can a single word be a quotation?"[91] In all three of these examples the writer expresses uncertainty; the trace does not appear definitely for him/her but is, even at the moment it is identified, marked by the possibility of its disappearance. They all fear that their claims may be

[86] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 91.
[87] Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing", p. 226.
[88] Birne, "The Day Starts Now": 30.
[89] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 198.
[90] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 54.
[91] Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 66; the uncertainty Attridge expresses here is telling. It forces us to wonder; what would a deliberate allusion be? How could these not be quotations? A mark that could not be cited would not be legible, is unthinkable; language is by nature citational. For Derrida "[t]he call of the supplement is primary" (Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing", p. 211-2). "Derrida's notions of *trace* and *supplement*" are, Wood explains, "necessary to understand how something happens for *the first time*" (Sarah Wood, *Derrida's Writing and Difference: A Reader's Guide* (London; New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 112; italics in original). The echoes we encounter in these texts are not exceptional but force us to "[b]e alert to these invisible quotation marks, even within a word" (Jacques Derrida, "Living on - Border Lines," *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 76).

dismissed and that others might assert that the trace they identify is not *really* an allusion. Sarah Wood, describing *Of Grammatology*, but with equal pertinence here, writes of "the experience of a trace whose movement is hidden from us and which only becomes describable as a kind of drifting-off".[92] The trace appears haunted by its possible illegibility.

Just as the absent-trace was thwarted by presence, the model of trace-as-presence is marked by a notion of absence. The very different responses these texts provoke—conspiracy and contingency—are problematic in the same way. We've been patterning this point for a while in ever-decreasing turns. I will now expound the dilemma one final time, in an even tighter circle, before moving, in my chapter's final section, into a discussion of memory which will, ultimately, allow us to think the trace's two inflections together.

The two impulses I have outlined are not necessarily confined to one analysis of these texts or another; in fact, they often appear side by side in the same essay or review. Many critics *both* praise the inessentiality of the work *and* attempt to archive its traces (although none explicitly indicate the contradiction they thereby present). Akoma, for example, celebrates *Paradise* for its "unknown quality", as I mentioned earlier. In the same essay, however, he offers in an unproblematic and straightforward manner the instances that gradually coalesce as we read the narrative; he provides a linear summary of its plot.[93] Similarly, Birne writes that "[a]fter the various false starts of *The Accidental*, it gradually becomes possible to establish what's going on" and proceeds to elucidate exactly what is "going on" in the novel.[94]

In Birne's summary, we lose the "false starts" and gradual realisation for which she lauds the text. The formulations Birne and Akoma provide of the books' content iron out their "contingent" and "perplexing" natures. The narrative is no longer strange. Hensher admits in relation to *Ghostwritten* that "[i]t would not do to bring the whole cast […] within spitting distance of each other; it would

[92] Wood, *Derrida's Writing and Difference: A Reader's Guide*, p. 107.
[93] Akoma, "The 'Trick' of Narratives: History, Memory and Performance in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*": 8.
[94] Birne, "The Day Starts Now": 30.

do a lot to destroy the thesis of the book".[95] By collating the connections within the novel—by archiving them—we risk effacing the spectral quality which initially fascinates us.

In such conspiracy readings, "contingency is dismissed", as Birchall explains.[96] Conspiracy-thought, in its quest to find an interpretation and an explanation, effaces whatever is odd and uncanny about the trace. Derrida admits this in the second section of "My Chances". As I explained earlier, Derrida aligns chance with "non-sense or insignificance". Later in his essay, however, he contemplates the notion of superstition through a reading of Freud's "The Forgetting of Names and Sets of Proper Words". Superstition (another form of conspiracy-thought) attempts to locate in an instance of chance a significance; it thus returns chance to the sense with which it claims to be incompatible.

Derrida explains that the archive "keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion".[97] In Smith's *Hotel World* Lise attempts to recall Sara Wilby, the girl who died in the hotel in which she works and whose ghost narrates the novel's first section:

> But though she's tried, she can't even remember what Sara Wilby looked like that night, two nights before she died. It is much easier to picture her from the photographs in the papers and on TV than to try to remember. The photographs in the papers and on TV seem to have wiped Lise's memory of the real Sara Wilby even cleaner.[98]

Lise is able to picture Sara from the "photographs in the papers and on TV" but senses that these records are not the same as the "real" Sara or a "real" memory (although, as the only record Lise is now able to conjure, they are not without worth). These printed archives are insufficient. The archive "will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and eternal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory".[99] Both Derrida and Lise note a disjunction between the experience of memory (or

[95] Hensher, "Short and Curlies"
[96] Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, p. 46.
[97] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 7.
[98] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 110.
[99] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 11.

reading) and those practices, such as the archive (or criticism), which claim to enshrine these experiences.

Derrida, following Freud, is therefore determined

> to exhume a more archaic *impression* […] to exhibit a more archaic *imprint* than the one the other archaeologists of all kinds bustle around, those of literature and those of classical objective science, an imprint that is singular each time, an impression that is almost no longer an archive but almost confuses itself with the pressure of the footstep that leaves its still-living mark on a substrate, a surface, a place of origin.[100]

Derrida invokes an archive which would inscribe the moment or act of remembering. Rejecting the solidified and finished product which betrays, he desires the instant of archiving itself. We realise, however, that this moment is not easily attained. It exists, of course, only if we continue to archive. We may experience it only fleetingly on our way to composing the problematic finished product. We may glimpse the absent trace *through* the presencing-project the archive proposes.

We cannot choose between our two inflections of the trace; we cannot decide between our desire to gather and the necessity to leave these traces be. Each project returns us to the other. *Cloud Atlas*'s Timothy Cavendish invokes this double bind when he muses

> What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable?
> To possess, as it were, an atlas of the clouds.[101]

Cavendish's desire to map the ineffable is, of course, paradoxical. A map, unlike the ineffable, is "never-changing"; it is not possible to compose a fixed and stable atlas of the ever-changing clouds. Equally, however, Cavendish realises how easily the ineffable gets away; he desperately desires a map in order to preserve it. The desires these novels provoke are, ultimately, contradictory and irreconcilable; the trace subjects us to a "strange cohabitation", as I will now show in my chapter's final section.

[100] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, pp. 97; italics in original.
[101] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 389.

Memory and forgetting underscore both approaches to the trace. The archive, as we have seen, relies on memory as a tool lending itself to a process of positive and infinite accumulation. It depends upon a model of memory, identified by Ann Whitehead, in which "forgetting is merely incidental". Whitehead explains that, according to this conceptualisation (which she allies with classical and early-modern thought), "memory is a system used for storage and retrieval, and the object to be located is precisely that which was initially laid down. Forgetting, in this system, results either from a fault in the storage system or from a decay in or misrecognition of the memory traces".[102] The absent trace, on the other hand, demands forgetfulness and assumes it to be absolute. The works I am considering show us, however, as I will demonstrate in this final section, that neither of these assumptions is correct. They offer us a more sophisticated thinking about remembering which moves us closer to an analysis which takes into account the "strange cohabitation" of contingency *and* conspiracy in our response toward these texts; it shows the way in which the trace "occupies the middle point between total absence and total presence" in our reading.[103]

Forgetting, in our model of the trace-as-absence, "easily assumes the appearance of a simple lacuna, a lack, uncertainty". Derrida explains that "[i]t is habitual to consider that to forget, to be forgetful, is exclusively 'to omit'".[104] The characters in Mitchell's novels reveal, however, that the process is not quite so simple. In *Cloud Atlas* Zachry thinks, "[b]ut I cudn't forget that ghost-girl neither, nay, she haunted my dreams wakin'n'sleepin'",[105] while the narrator of *Ghostwritten*'s Petersburg section announces, "I shoved whatever it was that I mustn't think about upstream, but it kept floating down".[106] Both characters experience an inability to forget; memory returns. *number9dream* offers a more sustained exploration of this dilemma as Eiji tries to forget the death of his sister, Anju. He announces triumphantly "[a] whole evening without thinking about Anju,

[102] Anne Whitehead, *Memory*, New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 48.
[103] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 157.
[104] Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles = Éperons: Les Styles De Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 141.
[105] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 278.
[106] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 256.

until now".[107] Eiji's achievement is undone by its recognition; he cannot successfully forget but points out that "once you try to forget something you already remember it".[108] Astrid in Smith's *The Accidental* also realises that "sometimes things like faces or memories come into your head on their own and you can see things so clearly that you couldn't not see them if you tried. It is insane".[109] Sedgwick—in a passage I find peculiarly memorable—captures this infuriating logic especially well; she writes that "[t]he injunction to forget, of course, to forget something-in-particular after its jolting anamnesis, as you know if you've ever tried to do it—four in the morning, haplessly alert, knowing you'll never get back to sleep if you can't stop thinking about a certain X—opens an interminably self-defeating involution".[110] To *attempt* to forget is to engage oneself in an act of memory; in order to decide to forget, we must first remember that which we intend to erase. Our forgetting is undone at the outset. There is, Eiji and Sedgwick realise, no forgetfulness that excludes memory absolutely.

The model of forgetting as absolute and as a lack is inadequate; a presence continues to haunt the omissions forgetfulness would perform. The notion of memory as positive is similarly suspect. In Smith's *Hotel World,* for example, the characters struggle to remember; their attempts echo persistently across their accounts. Sara Wilby's ghost thinks

> I climbed into the, the. The lift for dishes, very small room suspended over a shaft of nothing, I forget the word, it has its own name.[111]
>
> Their beady . The things they see with. The things we see with, two of them, stuck in a face above a nose. The word's gone. I had it a moment ago.[112]
>
> a slight squint in the, the. The things she saw with.[113]
>
> the season after winter, I forget the word for it, the season when the flowers will push their heads regardless out again.[114]
>
> (That's the name, the name for it; *that's* it; dumb waiter dumb waiter dumb waiter.)[115]

[107] David Mitchell, *Number9dream* (London: Sceptre, 2001), p. 108.
[108] Mitchell, *Number9dream*, p. 69.
[109] Smith, *The Accidental*, pp. 227-8.
[110] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 58.
[111] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 6.
[112] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 8.
[113] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 12.
[114] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 14.
[115] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 17; italics in original.

> I want to ask her the name again for the things we see with. I want to ask her the name for heated-up bread.
> I have already forgotten it again, the name for the lift for dishes.[116]

> I will miss mist. I will miss leaf. I will miss the, the. What's the word? Lost, I've, the word. The word for. You know. I don't mean a house. I don't mean a room. I mean the way of the .
> Dead to the . Out of this . Word.
> I am hanging falling breaking between this word and the next.[117]

While Lise recalls

> There was something she had to write down. She was waiting to remember it.[118]

> So there was a story after all, somewhere, insistent, strung between this place and the last and the next, and she was trying to remember it.[119]

> There was something Lise had to write down, again. What was it?[120]

> What if she remembered and then had to write it down before Deidre came in case she forgot it?[121]

Each of these accounts displays a certain vagueness; Lise refers to "something" and "it" while Sara's ghost leaves a series of blanks.[122] Sara's ghost presents us with a series of false starts, pauses and trailings-off through her incomplete ("I climbed into the, the") and fragmented syntax ("lost, I've, the word"). Language drifts-off, forgets itself. At the same time, however, there is a persistent sense of something almost grasped. The repetition of "again", here, and "the", in the earlier account, maintains an "insistent" tone.[123]

The "something" functions at once as an absence and as that which the section promises to reveal. In Lise's account, a long sentence builds toward the "something" she must remember: "so there

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[116] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 26.
[117] Smith, *Hotel World*, pp. 30-1; this inability to remember the word repeats itself, even, past the end of the section. Else "has looked it up once already, but has forgotten" (Smith, *Hotel World*, pp. 36-7) and in Penny's account, "[i]t is a, I forget the word for it, the woman said. She put her arms out, as if holding something too big for her" (Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 169).
[118] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 83.
[119] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 84.
[120] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 85.
[121] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 85.
[122] The blanks left by Sara's ghost might, at first sight, appear to be absolute absences; we soon realise, however, that we are able to fill them with the "correct" word. The novel alludes to this ability: both the advert Else reads in the newspaper—"F y cn rd ths msg y cd bcm a scrtry n gt a gd jb" (Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 45)—and her repeated "spr sm chn?" invoke our ability to interpret the strange and to render it once again intelligible. Although these "half words" appear, initially, incomprehensible, we are able to hear and to read them. Else "imagines the pavement littered with the letters that fall out of the half-words she uses (she doesn't need the whole words)" (Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 47). We, the readers, re-insert the dropped letters. Perhaps *too* easily. After all, nothing in the text validates our assumptions; we may be wrong. Moreover, what gaps might we have filled without even realising we've done so? Anxieties such as these will trace my readings in the following pages.
[123] Repetition is allied, too, with the act of committing to memory; Sara's ghost thinks "dumb waiter dumb waiter dumb waiter". The echo is at once determined and anxious; she attempts to remember, but the necessity renders us conscious of the possibility that the word will be forgotten again (as indeed it has been by the end of the section).

was a story after all, somewhere, insistent, strung between this place and the last and the next and she was trying to remember it". The repeated "and"s of this sentence progress toward the "story" promised by Lise's "after all" only to end on the downbeat "she was trying to remember it" – the story once again recedes. This pattern is repeated again when the question "what was it?" suddenly and anticlimactically interrupts "there was something Lise had to write down, again". Similarly, in the novel's first account, the repeated "the"s take us at once closer to and further from the word which ought to come next.[124]

The difficulty which *Hotel World*'s characters experience, and to which the novel subjects us as readers, shows that memory is not perfect; its efficacy is not guaranteed, as the work of Freud most famously admits. Freud points out in "Childhood Memories and Screen Memories", for example, that if we were to "subjected to analytic enquiry" "the memories that a person has retained" from childhood "it is easy to establish that there is no guarantee of their accuracy. Some of the mnemic images are certainly falsified, incomplete or displaced in time and place".[125] Freud admits the obvious—yet nonetheless unsettling—fact that our memories may be false, incomplete or displaced. There are, frequently, occasions in which "what the memory reproduces is not what it should correctly have reproduced, but something else as a substitute".[126]

Mitchell's novels frequently reiterate this point. We are told in *Ghostwritten* that "[m]emories are their own descendants masquerading as the ancestors of the present", that "access to memories does not guarantee access to truth. Many minds redirect memories along revised maps" and that "'[t]he act of memory is an act of ghostwriting'".[127] Mitchell's characters emphasise, through a series of aphorisms, that memory effects a number of transformations. It does not preserve the past perfectly, but ghostwrites, redirects and transforms it; our remembrances are not truly, but merely masquerade as, the "ancestors of the present". The aphoristic form of these assertions is a

[124] There is, moreover, an oscillation in the first list of examples between naming and not naming. Sara's ghost calls the dumb waiter "the lift for dishes" and we know by this what she means. For a moment, it has been named. However, it is soon withdrawn; she tells us once again "it has its own name" – the name previously offered is inadequate.
[125] Sigmund Freud, "Childhood Memories and Screen Memories," trans. Alan Tyson, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, ed. Angela Richards, vol. 5, Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 87.
[126] Freud, "Childhood Memories and Screen Memories", p. 85.
[127] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 326, p. 175 and p. 295.

particularly apt way in which to present this point. Aphorisms offer themselves as succinct phrases we might wish to commit to memory. All too often, though, they are soon forgotten.

Astrid, in Smith's *The Accidental*, suggests that "[i]t is amazing how quick you forget, even something you think you know, even something you really want to remember. It is amazing how memory works and won't work. A face can be just a blank".[128] Freud therefore admits that I have "every reason" to "distrust my memory".[129] Timothy Cavendish in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* thinks wryly, "if memory serves ('Memory Serves.' Duplicitous couplet)".[130] Memory refuses to cooperate, seeming instead to work against those who attempt to employ it. Astrid in Smith's *The Accidental* also frames memory as an independent entity with a volition of its own: "[w]hen Astrid thinks of the village the weirdest details come into her head like the lamppost next to the field on the road from the house into the village and all the high grasses growing round its base. Why would anyone's memory want to remember just seeing a lamppost like that?"[131] In Astrid's final sentence, memory is the subject of the verb; it, not she, remembers.

Astrid is, moreover, incredulous that her memory would want to remember "just seeing a lamppost" and that when she thinks about the village she recalls only the "weirdest details". Astrid does not explicitly say, but implies, that there might be better details and more useful images she could have retained. In order to store the image of a lamppost, we realise, Astrid's memory has had to exclude other things. It would not be possible to remember everything; some things must be forgotten. Whitehead explains that forgetting does not "only [form] the shadowy underside of memory but, more precisely, shapes and defines the very contours of what is recalled and preserved".[132] Forgetfulness inscribes memory from the outset; every memory is haunted by the thought of that which it has had to leave out. The "error" of forgetting is not coincidental but internal to memory.

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[128] Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 227.
[129] Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic-Writing Pad'," *On Metapsychology*, ed. Angela Richards, Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 429.
[130] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 165.
[131] Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 233.
[132] Whitehead, *Memory*, p. 14.

No memory can wholly shake mis-remembrance or forgetfulness. This becomes especially apparent in the series of essays Freud writes on forgetting. At one point, for example, Freud recalls the time he forgot the name Singorelli. He realises, after some contemplation, that this forgetfulness is not without cause. He admits that, at the time, he was trying to forget the death of a patient, Trafoi. He thus explains that "I forgot *the one thing against my will*, while I wanted to *forget the other thing intentionally*".[133] Forgetting, Freud argues, is "motivated by repression".[134] Elsewhere, he traces the "*substitute names*" which "force themselves upon us with great persistence" in order to identify similar repressions in his patients.[135] The act of forgetting points to a memory which has been concealed or hidden; it therefore offers the clue to a memory which might, through the investigative work employed by Freud, now be uncovered.

The omissions forgetfulness performs return us once again to memory. However, the process does not end there. The repressed memories Freud reveals cannot elude the spectre of another forgetting or mis-remembrance. There is, of course, no proof that the memories Freud extracts are indeed true or the repressed memories responsible for the forgetting in question. In all of Freud's accounts memories are revealed with an ease at odds with his claim that they are repressed. He could in fact be creating a series of "false memories" of the type he identifies in "Childhood Memories and Screen Memories". The truly repressed memory might still be forgotten. We occasionally glimpse this possibility when reading Freud's work. He writes, for example, that "I shall however certainly not venture to affirm that all cases of name-forgetting are to be classed in the same group. There is no question that instances of it exist which are much simpler. We shall, I think, have stated the facts of the case with caution if we affirm: *By the side of simple cases where proper names are forgotten there is a type of forgetting which is motivated by repression*".[136] Cautious formulations such as this one recur throughout Freud's essays. They betray an anxiety; is there something Freud's analysis misses? Are there instances in which Freud's determined claim that forgetting is "motivated by repression" might mislead? Might his interpretation, in these cases, cover up that which truly motivates forgetting? What, in other words, might Freud's work have forgotten?

[133] Freud, "The Forgetting of Proper Names", p. 40; italics in original.
[134] Freud, "The Forgetting of Proper Names", p. 43.
[135] Freud, "The Forgetting of Proper Names", p. 38; italics in original.
[136] Freud, "The Forgetting of Proper Names", p. 44; italics in original.

Forgetting and memory are interrelated; one refers us to the other. Memory and forgetting are closely bound and one is always haunted by the other. At one point in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* Somni is involved in a car crash which "shook free an earlier memory of blackness, inertia, gravity, of being trapped in another ford; I could not find its source in my own memories".[137] Somni's reference to "an earlier memory" encourages us to read this moment as another of the novel's connections. The invocation of "blackness, inertia, gravity" and "being trapped" remind us (remind me, anyway (there will, in this final section, be a certain emphasis on the first person, for reasons which will become clear)) of the end of "Half Lives", when Luisa, in her car, is forced off a bridge into a river. However, Somni has not read "Half Lives"; she is related to it only indirectly, via Timothy Cavendish's narrative. The incident has no obvious "source" in her memory. Perhaps, I think as I read these sentences, I will be offered an explanation later in the novel. I finally discover, of course, that this hope is misplaced. No explanation is offered; I am never told whether Somni has read Luisa's text.

Am I therefore correct to read this as an echo? Does Somni's car crash truly recall Luisa's? These texts subject our reading to a number of anxieties which *The Turning*, in particular, refuses to assuage. In "Abbreviation" Vic is asked

> From the city?
> He shook his head. Not anymore, he said. We just moved down south. Angelus. It's pretty crap.[138]

In the book's previous story, "Big World", the protagonist announces "[m]e, I love the city, I'm from there originally".[139] At another point he reminisces, telling us, "I get to thinking about the last night of school and the bonfire at Massacre point".[140] The bonfire, too, is echoed in "Abbreviation": "[u]p the beach a little way, out in front of the big old army truck and the striped

[137] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 330.
[138] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 25.
[139] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 5.
[140] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 12.

circus tent, there was a fire burning twenty feet high. It was a real monster".[141] It occurs to me, momentarily, that the characters may be the same. But nothing else lines up. It isn't the same bonfire and the protagonist of "Big World" isn't Vic, although I make the mistake again reading "Damaged Goods" when I learn that "[i]n his last year of school Vic did what all the country boys did. He rode around in cars and saved for one of his own".[142] I'm reminded of the road-trip narrated in "Big World" before I remember that Vic features there only marginally – he isn't either of the main characters who save up to buy a car.

The text is littered with such false echoes. The opening paragraphs of "Aquifer" announce

> Very late one evening not long ago I stirred from a television stupor at the sound of a familiar street name and saw a police forensic team in waders carry bones from the edge of a lake. Four femurs and a skull, to be precise. The view widened and I saw a shabby clump of melaleucas and knew exactly where it was that this macabre discovery had taken place.[143]

Angelus reappears repeatedly as the location of the stories in this novel; it thus becomes "familiar" to its reader. When the narrator notes a "familiar street name" I expect to share the recognition he inscribes; I suspect we're about to return to Angelus once more. But I'm wrong: "[b]efore dawn and without waking my wife or even leaving her a note, I rose, made myself coffee and began the five-hour drive back from Angelus to the suburbs where I grew up".[144] Angelus appears only to disappear – it is not, in this case, the place to which the narrative is drawn, but the town it leaves behind.

Again, in "Cockleshell" "[h]e wonders if the Larwood kids still wet the bed" and I wonder if he's referring to the kids who wet the bed in "Aquifer".[145] But when I go back to check I discover those children were the Boxes.[146] I begin to feel a bit like Vic in "Long, Clear View":

> The things you hear solve nothing; they're just nasty bits of information you could have done without, specks and splashes of dirt that puddle and pool in your head, things about the parents of

[141] Winton, *The Turning*, pp. 29-30.
[142] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 63.
[143] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 37.
[144] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 38.
[145] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 117.
[146] Winton, *The Turning*, p. 41.

> kids you know, news of teachers, things you aren't meant to hear, stuff you shouldn't be listening to.[147]

The description Vic offers of his life in Angelus serves also to summarise my experience of reading the book. I, too, find "bits of information [I] could have done without" – false allusions which only confuse. I am, I realise, hearing "things [I'm not] meant to hear".

In Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* Hae-Joo completes a code with the words "'[t]ravel far enough, you meet yourself'".[148] The phrase sounds as though it's a reference from another novel, a case of Mitchell citing his own words. This isn't in fact the case. It looks like a quotation, but isn't one. I have perhaps begun to notice echoes where there are none.

Or, then again, perhaps the sentence from *Cloud Atlas is* a quotation. In which case I admit defeat – I can't find its source. But perhaps someone else can. I read conscious of the possibility of another, more knowledgeable, reading which would reveal my failures. My reading is haunted by the possibility of another.

Mitchell's work is dense with the repetition of tiny details: Luisa Rey's mother in *Cloud Atlas* lives in a town—Ewingsville—whose name echoes the Adam Ewing of the novel's first section.[149] The quotation at the beginning of *Ghostwritten,* from "The Bridge of San Luis Rey", recalls the name Luisa Rey in *Cloud Atlas*. Luisa Rey "the writer" calls into the radio show of "Night Train" later in the novel.[150] *Ghostwritten*'s Katy Forbes, like each of *Cloud Atlas*'s protagonists, has "a birthmark shaped like a comet".[151] Tim Cavendish of "The Ghastly Ordeal" appears as Marco's editor in *Ghostwritten*'s "London" section. *Ghostwritten* repeatedly echoes *Cloud Atlas.* These allusions are, however, frail. Even as I notice them, I know that not every reader of *Ghostwritten* will; s/he may not have read *Cloud Atlas,* and might never do so.

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[147] Winton, *The Turning*, pp. 195-6.
[148] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 336.
[149] Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 431.
[150] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 385.
[151] Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*, p. 305.

We notice many of the more subtle references in these texts with a sense of how easily they might be missed. Hensher admits that "only a very alert reader will make the connection" he notes between the first and second stories in *The Turning.*[152] The verbal allusions we find within *Foe,* for example, are sparse, limited to a word or a phrase:

> 'At last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard'.[153]
>
> '"Then at last I could row no further. My hands were raw, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard and began to swim towards your island'".[154]
>
> 'I am not a story, Mr Foe. I may impress you as a story because I began my account of myself without preamble, slipping overboard into the water and striking out for the shore'.[155]
>
> 'I presented myself to you in words I knew to be my own – I slipped overboard, I began to swim, my hair floated about me, and so forth, you will remember the words – and for a long time afterwards, when I was writing those letters that were never read by you, and were later not sent, and at the last not even written down, I continued to trust in my own authorship'.[156]
>
> Bringing the candle nearer, I read the first words of the tall, looping script: 'Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further.'
> With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard.[157]

And forming a different strand:

> The staircase was dark and mean. My knock echoed as if on emptiness.[158]
>
> The staircase is dark and mean. On the landing I stumble over a body.[159]

The repetitions of this novel, contained in the brief phrases "I slipped overboard" and "dark and mean", are eminently miss-able (or, at least, they would be had I not listed them so comprehensively).

We might, moreover, read the novel as a whole in an intertextual mode. Attridge explains that "it was in *Foe* that Coetzee made canonic intertextuality a fundamental principle: its manner of

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[152] Hensher, "Short and Curlies"
[153] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 5.
[154] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 11.
[155] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 131.
[156] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 133.
[157] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 155.
[158] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 113.
[159] Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 153.

proceeding is to rewrite, and fuse together, the biography of Daniel Defoe and those of several of Defoe's fictional characters".[160] We could level *Foe* against our knowledge of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.[161] It is, however, equally possible to read *Foe* without this knowledge. The novel signifies differently in this case. Nonetheless, it remains legible. It is not necessary, we realise, to notice the echoes in order to comprehend these fictions. We read the trace of *Robinson Crusoe* conscious of a reading in which it does not figure. Our reading is traced by another.

The multiple sections and shifts in perspective that these novels employ show us that "[p]oint of view is always more than one".[162] However, this fact is not simple. It means, for Royle, that point of view "is always other than, more or less than, itself. Which is to say that it is spectral and blind".[163] These works attune us to the possibility that a further shift may always take place and that there always remains a revelation we have not yet witnessed. We realise that "[t]here is no epiphany, no moment of revelation that is not at the same time a moment of blinding or blindness, a blindness that has to do not only with privation of vision but also with speech or voice".[164] Every point of view entails an exclusion; there is no perspective which closes down all others, no perspective which is not haunted by unknowing. This awareness haunts my reading; my interpretation—my perspective on these works—is not, and never will be, complete. But neither will any other. I offer my reading anxiously, but not hopelessly.

The traces we encounter in the texts I have examined divide our response. We want, on the one hand, to celebrate them as a sign of uncanny interrelation or interconnectedness, of contingency and of an absence in excess of any two marks. At the same time, however, we are driven to archive them – to collect, list and gather. This gathering effaces the inessentiality we wished to privilege, returning it to essence. Then again, the inessence still haunts; the archive is never complete, the

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[160] Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, p. 69.
[161] Its statements inflect weirdly in this light. Susan announces, for example, "'[l]et it not by any means come to pass that Cruso is saved, I reflected to myself; for the world expects stories from its adventurers, better stories than tallies of how many stones they moved in fifteen years, and from where, and to where; Cruso rescued will be a deep disappointment to the world'" (Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 34). Susan's statement signifies ironically in relation to our knowledge of Defoe's novel whose very premise is, of course, that Crusoe has been saved and can therefore relate what the novel promotes as his "surprising adventures".
[162] Nicholas Royle, "Spooking Forms," *Oxford Literary Review* 26 (2004): 158.
[163] Royle, "Spooking Forms": 158.
[164] Royle, "Spooking Forms": 157.

void opened by the trace is never filled. Thus, neither of these two contradictory projects can fully exclude the other. Turning to the concept of memory which underpins both notions my chapter pursued, in its final section, a reading—both paranoid and forgetful—which kept both notions of the trace in play.

Chapter Three
Deconstruction and Ethics

"(but one ought to say *but* for every word)".[1]

This suggestion (of Derrida's) will provide the motif, or guiding principle, of this chapter as it explores the thought of alterity. The theme is not new – each of my chapters pursues it under a different name: reading, writing, trace, tact, you. And there are other labels, too—*différance*, force, the other, queer—many of which derive from the work of Derrida and Levinas, to whom my thesis returns time and again as alterity's "best" thinkers. We may surmise, from this reliance, that Derrida and Levinas provide *the* theory (it's often called deconstruction, or ethics) from which the work is drawn.

It might seem that Derrida's "deconstruction" or Levinas's "ethics" provides the "answer" – alterity's thought *par excellence.* But, they tell us, alterity—if it is to be thought properly—allows no final thought. Both Derrida and Levinas remain wary of any term which appears to name their work and which would designate it a definition and a method. This chapter interrupts the others (its opening quotation is abrupt, not the gentle introduction one might expect to a chapter) in order to echo this suspicion, wondering explicitly whether alterity's thought could ever become a theory or a thesis.

And in style, too, it is more a series of interruptions than a coherent and unified whole. Hence the opening quotation from Derrida (which both proposes interruption and marks itself as (bracketed) rupture).[2]

[1] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 149; italics in original.
[2] The notion of interruption does not sit comfortably with the idea of a thesis. As I outlined in my introductory chapter, we typically define a thesis in terms of position and placing. We thereby align it with a sense of permanence and immovability which is at odds with the re-positioning interruption demamds. Unlike the thesis, that which anticipates interruption "delights in being without defense" (Derrida, "Punctuations: The Time of the Thesis", p. 128).

There's a problem with my introductory chapter: Derrida and Levinas are too close. I blithely introduce the "saying" of Levinas as a notion which equates with Derrida's concept of the "literary". Their similarities serve my argument. But can such radically different thinkers really be so simply equated? As "Violence and Metaphysics" shows (or, properly, as its *reputation as* a critique of Levinas suggests), Derrida isn't even sure that he agrees with Levinas.

And elsewhere, too, he cautions, "[i]t is thinkers such as [Levinas, Heidegger and Blanchot] to whom, strangely enough, one may consider oneself closest; and yet they are, more than others, other. And they too are alone".[3] Given Derrida's effort to assert his separation from Levinas, I probably shouldn't lump them together (or at least not without justifying myself). I need to pull them apart.[4]

But doing so will take time. It's not as simple as adding a couple of sentences to my introduction; "Violence and Metaphysics" is a formidable and complex essay. It will take a whole chapter, this chapter, to elucidate the many differences between Levinas and Derrida.

Yet, to be honest, I am still not convinced that these differences are as fundamental or as important as many have argued. Derrida cautiously permits us to elide them: "faced with a body of thought like that of Levinas, I never hold any objection. I am prepared to subscribe to everything that he says. That is not to say that I think the same thing in the same way; but that the differences at issue are very difficult to determine".[5] This chapter might, again, be about the ways in which Derrida and Levinas are, in many respects, the same.

This oscillation between sameness and difference isn't as equivocal as it sounds; we often realise both at once. When writing about Heidegger and Levinas, Derrida outlines a "schema" which

[3] Derrida, "The Principle of Reason", p. 120.
[4] Shane Weller cautions, moreover, that for deconstruction there is "nothing more debilitating, nothing more speech-robbing than a certain kind of affinity" (Shane Weller, "When the Other Comes Too Close: Derrida and the Threat of Affinity," *Kritikos: An International and Interdisciplinary Journal of Postmodern Cultural Sound, Text, and Image* (2006), no pagination).
[5] Jacques Derrida and Pierre-Jean Labarrière, *Altérités: Jacques Derrida Et Pierre-Jean Labarrière: Avec Des Etudes De Francis Guibal Et Stanislas Breton*, eds. Stanislas Breton and Francis Guibal (Paris: Osiris, 1986), p. 74; translated in Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 109.

"accentuates their opposition but, as is often the case", he admits, "also permits one to conjecture about their proximity".[6]

Robert Smith establishes the Levinas/Derrida "debate" along these lines in *Derrida and Autobiography*. His aim is "*both* to make *and* dispense with distinctions".[7] As such, he writes,

> Derrida shares with Levinas an emphasis on the relation with the other that comes about before existence, and, consequently, an interest in re-elaborating concepts of time. But where Derrida situates repetition, Levinas situates ethics – although this should not be taken as a significant divergence between the two, and the said 'situating' barely belongs to a taxonomy.[8]

Smith first delineates a broad split between Levinas and Derrida, noting their radical difference in "situation": one works with and within ethics, the other in terms of repetition. But what is the fundamental difference between the way in which Derrida thinks repetition and the way in which Levinas thinks ethics? We would be hard pressed to formulate a "taxonomy" (moreover, Levinas and Derrida propose ethics and repetition alike as concepts resistant to such taxonomic projects). With this thought, Smith brings the two closer together again. This double move characterises, too, both Derrida's response to Levinas and Levinas's response to Derrida.

Breaking with Philosophy, and Bringing us Back Again

Derrida discusses Levinas's work in two essays: "Violence and Metaphysics" and "At this Very Moment in This Text Here I Am", as well as in his book, *Adieu: to Emmanuel Levinas.* Levinas, too, wrote an essay about Derrida. It is called "Tout Autrement", translated as "Wholly Otherwise" (there are two versions: one appears in *Proper Names*, the other in *Re-reading Levinas.* I will be using the translation in *Re-reading Levinas* which is, in my opinion, closer in tone to Levinas's French).[9] I want first, and mainly, to think about it alongside Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics".

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[6] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 149.
[7] Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 109; my italics.
[8] Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 109.
[9] For example, the final three sentences of the first paragraph of "Tout Autrement" read "[n]ouvelle coupure dans l'histoire de la philosophie? Elle en marquerait aussi la continuité. L'histoire de la philosophie n'est probablement qu'une

I will argue that "Violence and Metaphysics" offers a "critique" of Levinas which is, in many ways, *the same* critique we find in "Wholly Otherwise". Derrida identifies the same "fault" in Levinas's work as Levinas finds in Derrida's. And, as my graphological caution implies, these similarities will force us to re-think what "critique" and "fault" might be.

Both essays begin by hailing the end of philosophy. Derrida portentously invokes a "philosophy" which "died yesterday"[10] while Levinas wonders whether we might be "at the end of a naïveté".[11] For Derrida/Levinas, the thought of Levinas/Derrida signals a new beginning within philosophy's history.

According to Levinas/Derrida, Derrida/Levinas proposes a thought which would break away from the Western tradition of a metaphysics of presence. Levinas writes that "[a] new style of thinking is dawning on us in reading these exceptionally precise texts which are yet so strange". Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon,* he suggests, "overthrows logocentric discourse".[12] With exclamatory drama, he declares "[h]enceforth [i.e. after Derrida], significations do not converge on the truth—truth's no great matter!"[13] "Suspension of truths! Strange epoch!"[14]

Derrida, too (but more calmly), introduces a notion of rupture, identifying in Levinas "[a] thought which […] seeks to liberate itself".[15] He claims,

> It is at this level that the thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble.

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croissante conscience de la difficulté de penser" (Emmanuel Levinas, "Tout Autrement," *Noms Propres*, Essais (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976), p. 65) Critchley translates this as "A new break in the history of philosophy? One that would also mark its continuity. The history of philosophy is probably only a growing awareness of the difficulty of thinking" (Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 3) Michael B. Smith, on the other hand, renders it as "[i]s this a new break in the history of philosophy? It would also show its continuity. The history of philosophy is probably nothing but a growing awareness of the difficulty of thinking" (Emmanuel Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," trans. Michael B. Smith, *Proper Names* (London: Athlone Press, 1996), p. 55) Smith turns Levinas's two opening questions into full, grammatical sentences, thus losing the fragmented quality which Critchley, on the other hand, preserves.

[10] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 79.
[11] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 3.
[12] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 3.
[13] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 5.
[14] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 3.
[15] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", pp. 82-3.

> At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession.[16]

Derrida links Levinas's thought with the possibility of "dismantling and dispossession".

Even as he does so, however, he points out that this "process" is "inconceivable".

Levinas explains why. He emphasizes that "[w]hat remains constructed after the deconstruction is, certainly, the stern architecture of the deconstructing discourse which employs the present tense of the verb 'to be' in predicative propositions".[17] We cannot deconstruct philosophy without constructing a philosophical "architecture" with which to do so. Derrida's work is bound to use the very "logocentric language" it is supposedly against and, even after the deconstruction, this "architecture" remains intact.

Derrida—employing the term "Greek thought" in order to designate the metaphysical tradition dating back to the Ancient Greeks—explains that

> Levinas exhorts us to a second parricide [of Greek thought] […] But will a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek in this case could not do, except by disguising himself as a Greek, by *speaking* Greek, by feigning to speak Greek in order to get near the king? And since it is a question of killing a speech, will we ever know who is the last victim of this stratagem? Can one feign speaking a language?[18]

In order to get close enough to Greek thought to destroy it, Levinas must impersonate the Greeks. In impersonating them, however, he renders himself indistinguishable from them. Levinas is brought back to the philosophy he would move beyond; the break, impossible, is but a dream conjured by and implicated within the tradition it would reject.

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[16] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 82.
[17] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 5.
[18] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 89; italics in original.

Paul Davies explains that "[t]he words that mark the limit of the philosophical horizon […] are names, philosophical names, asserting the possibility of philosophy's continuing to name whatever confronts it".[19] The break is compromised from the outset.

Thus, no philosopher will ever step outside philosophy.

Levinas asks again, "[a] new break in the history of philosophy?" and answers in the negative. The "break", he admits, "would also mark [philosophy's] continuity".[20]

The project is flawed. And, for Levinas, "[o]ne might well be tempted to infer an argument from this use of logocentric language against that very language, in order to dispute the produced deconstruction".[21] Spurred by this contradiction, we could reject deconstruction *tout court.*

But this remains merely a temptation; "in following this path, one would risk missing one side of the signification which this very inconsequence bears".[22] The contradiction is too productive to dismiss.

Derrida writes, "Levinas's metaphysics in a sense presupposes—at least we have attempted to show this—the transcendental phenomenology that it seeks to put into question. And yet the legitimacy of this putting into question does not seem to us any less radical".[23]

The project is flawed but, both Derrida and Levinas tell us, necessarily so. Derrida explains, "[w]e are not denouncing, here, an incoherence of language or a contradiction in the system. We are

[19] Paul Davies, "A Fine Risk: Reading Blanchot Reading Levinas," *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, Studies in Continental Thought (London: Athlone Press, 1991), p. 210; Davies points out a further ambiguity of these words: despite their use and origin within philosophy, they continue nonetheless to point beyond it.
[20] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 3.
[21] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 5.
[22] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 5.
[23] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 133.

wondering about the meaning of a necessity: the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it".[24]

It is, for Levinas/Derrida, in this already-compromised attempt that Derrida/Levinas's work is most interesting.

In both cases, we both agree and disagree. The movement Levinas and Derrida identify is "correct"; these works are most productively read with this tension (between a move-beyond and an always-within) in mind.

However, we may still want to object. Levinas/Derrida proceeds as though Derrida/Levinas were not aware of the tension within his work. Yet, as many have pointed out, Levinas/Derrida is fully conscious of the "objection" Derrida/Levinas proposes. Bernasconi makes this point "for" Levinas. He explains that "[w]hat Derrida records in 'Violence and Metaphysics' are certain necessities which appear to impose themselves on discourse. But can they be described as Derrida attempts to do, in terms of a betrayal of Levinas's intentions by his philosophical language as if Levinas had somehow been defeated?"[25] Derrida implies that Levinas did not "[know] that that was what he was doing".[26] But Bernasconi reckons he did. An awareness of the "limitations" is already there in Levinas's work: "[a]lready in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas shows himself to be fully aware of the difficulty of rupturing a tradition".[27]

Equally (although not responding explicitly to Levinas), Derrida's best readers point out that he has never claimed to reject metaphysics or presence outright. My (current) favourite explanation is offered in a footnote by Jonathan Tiplady who points out that "whatever the deep questions

[24] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 111.
[25] Robert Bernasconi, "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida," *Derrida and Différance*, eds. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 38.
[26] Robert Bernasconi, "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics," *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 127.
[27] Bernasconi, "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics", p. 129.

deconstruction puts to it, presence does not just disappear after Derrida".[28] The effects of presence "[seem] to pre-survive whatever is said about them in a more critical or deconstructive vein".[29]

Presence, deconstruction realises, does not go away. We realise that there could be no deconstruction which did not reaffirm presence; Derrida declares that "[o]ur discourse irreducibly belongs to the system of metaphysical oppositions".[30]

Deconstruction is not distinct from and does not break with metaphysics; instead, it "recognises the irreducibility of metaphysics".[31]

For Tiplady, deconstruction attempts "to think *with* and not just against" presence. He therefore suggests that it "might even be described as a type of reinvented falling in love with presence. Which is also to say, a taking account of, an ethical and failing becoming-conscious of what that falling in love might entail. Be attentive to the consequences of love, but also its inevitability".[32] Tiplady, moving rapidly from the notion of presence to the thought of falling in love, emphasises both the "inevitability" and the "failing" of this falling in love, an inevitable failure of a "never altogether avoidable falling in love. Metaphysics is always falling in love, and falling in love always metaphysical".[33]

Derrida, too, writes that "[m]etaphysical transcendence is *desire*",[34] encouraging us to think a desire for presence which remains always a desire, always *falling* but never *in* love.

Blanchot (who, as a philosopher who writes about Levinas and whose work is often conflated with Derrida's, is well suited to marshal this debate) explains,

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[28] Jonathan Tiplady, "Good Air, My Only Friend, Believe," *Angelaki* 12.2 (2007): 160.
[29] Tiplady, "Good Air, My Only Friend, Believe": 160.
[30] Derrida, "Force and Signification", p. 20.
[31] Tiplady, "Good Air, My Only Friend, Believe": 160.
[32] Tiplady, "Good Air, My Only Friend, Believe": 160.
[33] Tiplady, "Good Air, My Only Friend, Believe": 160.
[34] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 92; italics in original.

> [t]he desire that one might call metaphysical is a desire for what we are not in want of, a desire that cannot be satisfied and that does not desire union with what it desires. It desires what the one who desires has no need of, what is not lacking and what the one who desires has no desire to attain, it being the very desire for what must remain inaccessible and foreign – a desire of the other as other, a desire that is austere, disinterested, without satisfaction, without nostalgia, unreturned, and without return.[35]

We desire a presence which "presents itself but cannot be seized" and we desire it only so long as it "slips away from every grasp".[36] Made present, it would no longer be the presence we desire.

The metaphysics of presence includes already its own deconstruction. The moment with which "deconstruction" is aligned is inscribed within presence; it has "always already *infiltrated*" it.[37]

Deconstruction is not an identifiable "movement" distinct from the "metaphysics of presence"; it takes place within the metaphysics of presence and, as such, could never take place without it.

We cannot think presence and deconstruction apart; Derrida suggests that "[d]econstruction is also the idea of—and the idea adopted by necessity of—this *différantielle* contamination".[38]

Deconstruction *is* not. Rather, it "[inhabits]" structures "*in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it".[39] We cannot forget that "all the defining concepts, all the lexical significations, and even the syntactic articulations, which seem at one moment to lend themselves to this definition, or to that translation, are also deconstructed or deconstructible, directly or otherwise".[40] No single concept of deconstruction could conclude the thought which inspires it.

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[35] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 53.
[36] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 61.
[37] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 163; italics in original.
[38] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), p. 39.
[39] Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing", p. 24; italics in original.
[40] Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend," *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 274.

The word deconstruction, Derrida therefore admits in "Letter to a Japanese Friend", "has never appeared satisfactory to me".[41] "I am not sure", he confesses elsewhere, "that such a thing as 'Deconstruction', in the singular, exists or is possible".[42] Deconstruction, he stresses, "is not a method and cannot be transformed into one".[43]

We return again to "Violence and Metaphysics" and "Wholly Otherwise". By stating that Derrida/Levinas intends to break with the metaphysics of presence but fails, Levinas/Derrida misreads Derrida/Levinas's intentions. But he does so for the sake of his argument (the "his" is deliberately unclear, by the way. Derrida, similarly keen to pose a dilemma of ownership, also plays this trick when he writes that "Levinas confirms Heidegger in his discourse".[44] I'll return to Derrida on Levinas's reading of Heidegger shortly).

In an echo of the above argument, Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, outlines Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche; Heidegger reads Nietzsche's work as "a breakthrough" which, although "[attempting] a step outside of metaphysics", "still [utilizes it] in a certain way".[45]

Derrida stresses that this limitation is not an "'incoherence'" but a "trembling", a necessity rather than a fault.[46] Nonetheless, he resists the urge to defend Nietzsche's work: "rather than protect Nietzsche from the Heideggerian reading, we should perhaps offer him up to it completely".[47] In order to best read Nietzsche one must "*accentuate* the 'naïveté'" of such a project even, perhaps, beyond the naïveté with which Nietzsche pursued it.[48]

In a similar manner, the notion of (failed) intention employed by both "Violence and Metaphysics" and "Wholly Otherwise" keeps open the notion of desire, of an impossibility we could never

[41] Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend", p. 272.
[42] Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", p. 56.
[43] Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend", p. 273.
[44] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 142.
[45] Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing", p. 19.
[46] Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing", p. 24.
[47] Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing", p. 19.
[48] Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing", p. 19; italics in original.

simply *not want*. It plays out this most fundamental of realisations despite (or perhaps because) falsely ascribing to Levinas/Derrida a naïveté not properly his own.

We therefore suspect that the misreading is both conscious and deliberate. Derrida and Levinas do not offer a critique *per se*; Derrida/Levinas seems (although we can't be sure), rather than directly to misread Levinas/Derrida's work, to be ventriloquizing those who misinterpret it. The exclamatory sentences with which "Wholly Otherwise" is strewn parody the reading it offers; the interpretation of Derrida's work as "[s]uspension of truths!" hailing a "[s]trange epoch!" is strained and over-wrought. Levinas, we suspect, does not sincerely believe the interpretation he offers.

Why, then, does he not say so? What does this tell us about ethics and deconstruction? And about their relationship with misreading?

Misread Intentions

In a second strand of thought in "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida plays out this theme of misreading.

Levinas, reading Hegel, Heidegger and Husserl, posits a series of insights which, he implies, arise from his own reading. Levinas positions himself against these philosophers and claims to move beyond their thought. Derrida, however, repeatedly points out that his thesis is already there to be read in their work:

> Levinas is very close to Hegel, much closer than he admits, and at the very moment when he is apparently opposed to Hegel in the most radical fashion.[49]
>
> Did not Hegel say this too?[50]
>
> This last question, which indeed could be Levinas's question to Husserl, would demonstrate that as soon as *he speaks* against Hegel, Levinas can only confirm Hegel, has confirmed him already.[51]

[49] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 99.
[50] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 98.
[51] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 120.

> Levinas henceforth will move toward a thought of original difference. Is this thought in contradiction with Heidegger's intentions?[52]

The objections Levinas claims to derive from these thinkers do not, Derrida shows, properly belong to him. The critique Levinas performs cannot stand as such.

And neither can Derrida's "critique" of Levinas. In a third strand to "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida accepts that the questions he poses are already given to him by Levinas. The "objections" he voices are already there to be read *in* and as Levinas's own work: "we will attempt to ask several questions. If they succeed in approaching the heart of this explication, they will be nothing less than objections, but rather the questions put to *us* by Levinas".[53]

Again, the point is repeated:

> if our commentary has not been too unfaithful, it is already clear that there is no element of Levinas's thought which is not, in and of itself, engaged by such questions.[54]

> let it be said, for our own reassurance: the route followed by Levinas's thought is such that all our questions already belong to his own interior dialogue, are displaced into his discourse and only listen to it, from many vantage points and in many ways.[55]

Levinas performs a similar return at the end of "Wholly Otherwise". His aim, he writes, has been to underline "the primordial importance of the questions posed *by* Derrida". He rejects "the ridiculous ambition of 'improving' a true philosopher", attempting instead to "express the pleasure of a contact made in the heart of a chiasmus".[56]

The reading Levinas/Derrida offers is not his own but is to be found already in the work of Derrida/Levinas. Derrida formalizes this situation in "Force of Law" and wonders what it might mean. He offers a reading of Walter Benjamin's *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* only to admit that his deconstruction is effected already by Benjamin's text: "this deconstruction is in some way the

[52] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 90.
[53] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 84; italics in original.
[54] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 109.
[55] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 109.
[56] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 8; my italics.

operation or rather the very experience that this text, it seems to me, first does itself, by itself, on itself. What does this mean? Is it possible? What remains, then, of such an event? Of its auto-hetero-deconstruction? Of its just and unjust incompletion?"[57] Benjamin's text "deconstructs" itself. What injustice might Derrida have performed by claiming such a reading as his own?

This concern is echoed by Paul de Man (but now directed against Derrida) in his review of *Of Grammatology*. He states (responding to Derrida's claim that "the concept of the supplement is a sort of blind spot in Rousseau's text")[58] that "Rousseau's text has no blind spots".[59] For de Man, "[w]hat happens in Rousseau is exactly what happens in Derrida: a vocabulary of substance and of presence is no longer used declaratively but rhetorically, for the very reasons that are being (metaphorically) stated".[60] Rousseau is fully aware of the supplement and its workings: "Rousseau was not deluded and said what he meant to say".[61] De Man gives back to Rousseau the reading Derrida performs.[62]

He thus poses what Bernasconi identifies as a "question of ownership": with or to whom does this (deconstructive) reading belong?[63] And to whom do we attribute the "non-deconstructive" approach?

I've just instituted a division between a "deconstructive" and "non-deconstructive" reading which, I'm sure you can see, is bound to be problematic. But I also think it's useful, to an extent, to illustrate our dilemma. I'll be employing it, contingently, for a little while yet. Using it, but remembering it's flawed; ready already to let go of it.

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[57] Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", p. 30.
[58] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 163.
[59] Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 139.
[60] De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, pp. 138-9.
[61] De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 135.
[62] In defending Rousseau, however, de Man portrays Derrida's reading as an attack or critique, thereby misreading Derrida, who is careful to claim that the supplement is only a "*sort of* blind spot": "[t]he concept of the supplement is a sort of blind spot in Rousseau's text, the not-seen that opens and limits visibility. But the production, if it attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight, does not leave the text" (Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 163). Derrida isn't out to critique or oppose himself to Rousseau; he does not, in fact, accuse Rousseau of blindness. And I have a feeling de Man maybe knows this too. He wonders "[d]oes it matter then whether we attribute the final statement to Rousseau or to Derrida since both are in fact saying the same thing?" (De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, pp. 137-8). The question not only challenges Derrida's "appropriation" but also the "return" de Man performs.
[63] Robert Bernasconi, "Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, Studies in Continental Thought (London: Athlone Press, 1991), p. 155.

(Not everyone is. Simon Critchley, to pick a victim at random, is perhaps guilty of holding too tightly onto it when he writes that "a moment of blindness in a logocentric text becomes the trace of an alterity that exceeds logocentrism".[64] For Critchley, certain texts are *inherently* logocentric. The "trace of…alterity" is posited as its opposite value which belongs, presumably, to a privileged few: to Derrida, or to Critchley).

The distinction arises, I expect, from *Of Grammatology*, in which Derrida sets up two moments of reading. First, there is "what [the writer] commands", which Derrida calls "doubling commentary". The first moment, for Derrida, "should no doubt have its place" but "this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading".[65] We therefore need, secondly, a move beyond or outside. Derrida explains that "the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses".[66]

Derrida writes that "[t]o produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language".[67]

We are invited to identify (as de Man and Critchley do) the first moment as the dominant (or logocentric) interpretation. The second moment of "what [the writer] does not command" is aligned with a notion of "deconstruction" and established as the reading more "properly" Derrida's.

However, the seemingly simple dominant notion of "what [a writer] commands", the first moment of reading, is more complex than this schema allows. Derrida *seems* to say that it would be possible

[64] Simon Critchley, "The Chiasmus: Levinas, Derrida and the Ethical Demand for Deconstruction," *Textual Practice* 3.1 (1989): p. 94.
[65] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 158; italics in original.
[66] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 158.
[67] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 158.

to reproduce the "conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes". But, knowing Derrida's work, we read this claim cautiously.

If we turn to *Limited Inc* Derrida qualifies his claims. The term "doubling commentary" was, he admits, "perhaps" applied "clumsily".[68]

He writes, "I used these words [doubling commentary] to designate what, in a very classical and very elementary layer of reading, most resembles what traditionally is called 'commentary'".[69] The phrases "most resembles" and "what is traditionally called" are much more cautious, and more convoluted, than the statements made previously.

The text continues in this vein: "the concept that I was aiming at with the inadequate expression of a 'doubling commentary' is the concept of a reading-writing that, counting on a *very strong probability* of consensus concerning the intelligibility of a text […] *seems* only to paraphrase, unveil, reflect, reproduce a text, 'commenting' on it without any other active or risky initiative".[70]

He adds, "[w]hat must be understood is not what this or that French word means to say *naturally* or *absolutely*, beyond all possible equivocation, but rather, first, what interpretations are probabilistically dominant and conventionally acknowledged to grant access to what Rousseau thought he meant and to what readers for the most part thought they could understand, in order, second, to analyze the play or relative indetermination that was able to open the space of my interpretation, for example, that of the word *supplément*".[71]

The phrases "very strong probability", "seems", "probabilistically dominant and conventionally acknowledged" render Derrida's language equivocal and hesitant. A doubling commentary is by no means self-evident; it is very strongly probable, but by no means certain, that a reading performed as such represents the "consensus". There remains a possibility of error even at this first level of

[68] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 143.
[69] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 144.
[70] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 146; first italics mine, second italics in original.
[71] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 144; italics in original.

reading. Derrida explains that even "[w]ith the best intentions in the world (and this is why one must be careful in assigning responsibilities and culpabilities) a 'codifying' theoretician can fail in this *duty*".[72]

Thus, "the essential and irreducible *possibility* of *mis*understanding or of '*in*felicity' must be taken into account in the description of those values said to be positive".[73]

The doubling commentary is "not a moment of simple reflexive recording that would transcribe the originary and true layer of a text's intentional meaning, a meaning that is univocal and self-identical, a layer upon which or after which active interpretation would already begin" but is "*already* an interpretation", a "*quasi*-paraphrastic interpretation".[74]

And, as "already an interpretation", it "belongs" as much to Derrida and to deconstruction as the second moment. It cannot be simply attributed to "logocentrism" or "the metaphysics of presence", to "Rousseau" or "the dominant tradition of Rousseau commentary" but is always (at least in part) an interpretation forwarded by Derrida in the interests of his second moment of reading.

This realisation perhaps poses a problem to the way in which academic discourse often proceeds. It is customary, in academic work (and in a thesis especially), to legitimize what one does in opposition to someone else (who is "wrong"). Derrida, on the other hand, forces us to consider the way in which we might "own", and be responsible for, both moments of reading.

For example, in my composition chapter I wanted to show that "the act of 'ourselves writing' remains elusive" even in those texts which privilege it. Writing is not an isolated moment and cannot be rendered purely present.

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[72] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 138; italics in original.
[73] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 147; italics in original.
[74] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, pp. 143-4.

Barthes, for example, lauds the "perpetual present of ourselves writing". I, on the other hand, can show that there is no such present; writing's presence is always compromised by the moment of reading.

The thing is, I can only show that writing's presence is compromised if I first imply that there is such a presence. I conjure this pure presence already knowing I'm going to disprove it; my first reading is determinedly blind. It is somewhat feigned, constructed in the service of the second moment of reading which is to follow. But there can be no second reading without it.

I could no doubt attribute this first reading to someone else. To Barthes, perhaps. Or to one or another of his readers. My chapter would then be more coherent, less contradictory.

But this would be disingenuous. The first reading is also my own. And it is only because I'm able to read this first moment that the second becomes available to me.

Sedgwick considers this dilemma explicitly, and illuminates it further, via her theorisation of strong and weak reading. In her essay "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading", Sedgwick delineates a sort of divide between paranoid, or strong, reading and reparative (weak) reading. The first section of her essay outlines "the present paranoid consensus" of a "monopolistic program of paranoid knowing".[75] Under this the paranoid "regime", she argues, "[t]he vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it's no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives".[76] Sedgwick invites us to challenge these assumptions; she believes "there are important phenomenological and theoretical tasks that can be accomplished only through local theories and nonce taxonomies".[77] Sedgwick asks us to reject a strong or paranoid reading and to favour the weak or reparative instead.

[75] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, p. 144.
[76] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, p. 150.
[77] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, p. 145.

This summary is, however, a "strong" reading of Sedgwick's essay. Accordingly, it suffers from the very "tautology" with which Sedgwick aligns a paranoid stance. I just claimed that Sedgwick privileges weak reading. Yet if we too eagerly propose a weak reading as "better" than the strong one, it, thanks to the very logic it would contest, "wins"; it becomes strong.

Yet it's not exactly wrong to propose this reading. It is there to be read and Sedgwick acknowledges it when she admits that "the preceding section of the present chapter" may fairly be characterised as "[a] strong theory (i.e., a wide-ranging and reductive one)". However, she also suggests that we might see it differently from other strong theories, reading it as an approach "not mainly organised around anticipating, identifying, and warding off the negative affect of humiliation". It "[resembles] paranoia in some respects but [differs] from it in others".[78]

Sedgwick's essay contains a strong stance, but it also asks us to think about the function of that stance, and about the way in which it might differ from other instances of paranoia. Its paranoid outlook exists in order to pose a dilemma to our reading, to invite a reparative response.

Sedgwick's text invites both a strong and a weak reading. Writing about Miller's *The Novel and the Police,* Sedgwick, having identified its paranoid argument, admits,

> the very breadth of reach that makes the theory strong also offers the space […] for a wealth of tonal nuance, attitude, worldly observation, performative paradox, aggression, tenderness, wit, inventive reading, obiter dicta, and writerly panache. These rewards are so local and frequent that one might want to say that a plethora of only loosely related weak theories has been invited to shelter in the hypertrophied embrace of the book's overarching strong theory.[79]

Sedgwick's work, too, is far more rewarding on a local level than in the strong reading I identified above. Even so, it cannot disqualify such a response. A weak theory is, and must somehow remain, weak by virtue of its dependence upon a strong one. It is not a case of banishing one to usher in the

[78] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, p. 145.
[79] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, pp. 135-6.

other, but an ongoing matter of "changing and heterogeneous relational stances" in which the stance we adopt is always to some extent constituted by (and constituting) the other it is not.[80]

This brings us back—from a detour led by my own particular desires and interests—to "Violence and Metaphysics" and an observation made by Bernasconi. "In order to generate a double reading", Bernasconi explains, Derrida "tends to concern himself with certain reductive readings offered by various commentators".[81] "Violence and Metaphysics", notably, does not do this:

> when Derrida wrote 'Violence and Metaphysics' it was the first major discussion of Levinas; he could find no foil for 'another reading'. Derrida's reading of Levinas might therefore seem artificial, as if he had to place Levinas 'within metaphysics' in order to develop his own reading which would generate another text 'outside'.

There is no one, Bernasconi points out, to whom Derrida can attribute the first reading; it also appears to be his own. This results in an "irony": "Derrida's readers tend to opt for the former reading, which […] they then identify as Derrida's".[82] By voicing both readings, Derrida's essay opens itself to misreading; its readers may opt for the "wrong" interpretation, identifying the "former reading" as Derrida's. Such readers misconstrue Derrida's intentions (but again, how can we be truly certain what Derrida intended?).

However, Bernasconi continues and points out that

> this attempt to divorce the two readings and set them up in opposition to each other would be to mistake what it means to give a double reading. The second reading is not Derrida's own; it is not opposed to a disowned reading. Derrida's reading is always a reading which embraces duplicity and this is a consequence of the collapse of the notion of a 'text in itself' and the emergence in its place of the notion of the text as the history of its operation, its readings.[83]

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[80] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, p. 128; Derrida, in "By Force of Mourning", points out this "reciprocal convertibility of the strongest or most forceful and the weakest" (Jacques Derrida, "By Force of Mourning," *The Work of Mourning*, eds. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 163). Force, he explains "must thus now be on intimate terms with what is not force, with its opposite, with the 'without force,' a domestic and paradoxically necessary commerce being established between them". He informs us counter-intuitively that "[t]he greatest force is to be seen in the infinite renunciation of force, in the absolute interruption of force by the without-force" (Derrida, "By Force of Mourning", p. 147).

[81] Bernasconi, "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida", pp. 35-6.

[82] Bernasconi, "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida", p. 36.

[83] Bernasconi, "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida", p. 36.

The first reading cannot be fully "disowned" or entirely "opposed" to the second reading. Both moments are fundamental to Derrida's work.

Derrida offers us a first and a second reading and asks us to read their relationship. This strategy is, however, risky. We all too easily opt for *either* the first *or* the second reading and fail to take both into account. Derrida's work remains open to misreading.

But therein lies its value; without this risk, there would be no chance of success.

This possibility of misreading is not coincidental but inherent in "double reading". The "error" the readers of "Violence and Metaphysics" commit points to deconstruction's very condition.

Derrida writes, "[l]anguage must be allowed this freedom to betray so that it can surrender to its essence, which is the ethical. The essence for once, and this is unique, is delivered over to probability, risk, and uncertainty. On this basis, the essence of essence remains to be rethought beginning with responsibility for the other, and so forth".[84] As I will explain in my next section, the essence of ethics for both Derrida and Levinas is resituated; the essential has not yet happened and is not guaranteed. We might call it reading. As such, the *possibility* of misreading remains fundamental. As does the notion of intention, as clumsy as it may seem.

A Philosophy of the Future

As I explained in my first section, the qualities we're after—the supplement, the break with philosophy conjured by the beginning of "Violence and Metaphysics" and "Wholly Otherwise", the trace, ethics, deconstruction—place us in a double bind. They would lie outside or beyond language and, as such, all language betrays them. Derrida explains, "[a]s soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude (one pole of Levinas's nonnegative transference), the other

[84] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 158.

becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable".[85] We cannot definitively summon the "unthinkable-impossible-unutterable".

Wittgenstein, in a letter to Ludwig von Flicker, muses on his *Prototractatus* and claims that "[t]he book's point is an ethical one". He continues, "I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: my work consists in two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one". He concludes, "[i]n short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into play by being silent about it".[86] Somewhat abruptly, Wittgenstein reiterates the realisation Derrida and Levinas offer: ethics cannot be conceptualised; is not that which we could *mean.* Our writing will always miss ethics and is therefore as effective only as silence.

Wittgenstein's preference for silence is, however, articulated with a great deal of irony; it functions only once broken. We are not aware of his silence (in its specificity) until he points it out.

Levinas points out, "[o]ne can see nothing without thematization, or without the oblique rays which it reflects back, even when it is a question of the nonthematizable".[87] The "nonthematizable" for which we quest will occur only *through* thematization, appearing in it as an uncertain or undecidable presence. We must work with thematization's inevitable betrayal.

This is, Blanchot claims, a "game of thought" which "cannot be played alone".[88]

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[85] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 114; my italics.
[86] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Prototractatus: An Early Version of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 16 quoted in Jean Greisch, "Face and Reading: Immediacy and Mediation," *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, Studies in Continental Thought (London: Athlone Press, 1991), p. 73; italics in original.
[87] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 6.
[88] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 216.

Derrida writes, "[t]he trace of this interruption in the knot is never simply visible, sensible, or assured. It [*Elle*] does not belong to discourse and only comes to it from the Other".[89] Levinas's ethics relies for its presentation upon another reading. His philosophy is subject to the other. Ethics cannot be written or guaranteed.

Deconstruction and ethics alike require a particular reading if they are to work. Levinas points out in "Wholly Otherwise" that "[t]he path toward these pathless 'places' ('*lieux*'), the subsoil of our empirical places, does not, in any case, open itself to the vertigo which we get from those who—dreadfully well-informed, prodigiously intelligent, and more Derridian than Derrida—interpret his extraordinary work with the assistance of all the key-words at once, without having or leaving time to return to the thinking of which those words are contemporary".[90] The value of Derrida's work lies not in the words it uses (in its said), but in the never-quite-inscribed thought "of which those words are contemporary" (its saying).

Derrida explains in "At this Moment" that

> one must, even though nobody constrains anybody, read his work, otherwise said, respond to it and even answer for it, not on the basis of what one understands by *work* according to the dominant interpretation of language, but according to what *his* work says, *in its manner*, of the Work, about what it is, otherwise said, about what it will have had (to be) as work in the work.[91]

Blanchot writes that Levinas creates

> – A speech that is other than any speech already said and thereby always new, never heard: to be precise, a speech beyond hearing and to which I must nonetheless respond.
> – Such, then, would be my task: to respond to this speech that surpasses my hearing, to respond to it without having really understood it, and to respond to it in repeating it, in making it speak.[92]

We must respond to a speech other than speech which does not permit understanding. We must locate whatever in this speech cannot appear.

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[89] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 164.
[90] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 6.
[91] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 177.
[92] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 65.

Admitting "[y]ou don't even know how, at this moment, *one must* hear this 'one must' [*il faut*]",[93] Derrida writes, "[h]ow difficult, probably impossible, to write here, to describe what I seem to be on the verge of describing".[94]

Derrida admits that "[y]ou are never forced to read or recognize this trace".[95] It is fundamental that we read the work of Derrida and Levinas in the spirit of its saying, yet nothing could impel us.

Derrida must work out a way "to give to [Levinas] the very giving of giving, a giving that would no longer even be an object or a present said".[96] He writes, "[*p*]*erhaps* Levinas calls us toward this unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond (tradition's) Being and Logos. But it must not be possible either to think or state this call".[97] Derrida's "perhaps" guards against the betrayal of uttering, thinking or making possible the other as "positive plenitude". *Perhaps* Levinas "calls us toward" the other, but nothing could mark this call.

Derrida writes "[*n*]*early always with him*, this is how he fabricates the fabric of his work" and "in his text there is, *perhaps*, a supplementary nodal complication, another way of retying without retying".[98] Derrida poses a series of questions implying, but never stating, that Levinas writes the other:

> How, then, does he write? [...] What does he do, for example and par excellence, when he writes in the present, in the grammatical form of the present, to say what does not present itself and will never have been present, the *present said* only presenting itself in the name of a Saying that overflows it infinitely within and without, like a sort of absolute anachrony of the wholly other that, although incommensurably heterogeneous to the language of the present and the discourse of the same, nonetheless leaves a trace there, a trace that is always improbable but each time determinate, this one, and not another?[99]

[93] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 171; italics in original.
[94] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 173.
[95] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 165.
[96] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 148.
[97] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 114; my italics.
[98] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 152 and p. 165; my italics.
[99] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 150.

The second of these sentences is so long we almost forget its interrogative opening; the question answers itself only to re-pose itself as a question at its close. It almost but does not quite state that Levinas's writing traces the other.

Tempted though he is, Derrida knows he must not state the "unthinkable-impossible-unutterable" he detects in Levinas's work. We cannot, without betraying it, ascribe to the work the "unthinkable" for which we so much want to praise it; it must remain undecidable.

Critchley is again too certain. He writes that "Levinas's writing *enacts* what was called above a 'spiralling movement' (*AE* 57/*OB* 44), in which language oscillates enigmatically, or undecidedly, between the Saying and the Said".[100] For Critchley, Levinas's writing *does* what Derrida is careful to suggest it is possible only *to read* in his work.

Derrida's reading, if it is to remain faithful to Levinas's work, cannot simply present the trace. It still remains to be opened by yet another reading; it depends once more upon the "critique exercised by *another* philosopher".[101]

Quite simply, the deconstruction has never yet happened:

> the most rigorous deconstructions have never claimed to be […] possible. And I would say that deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible; and also that those who would rush to delight in that admission lose nothing from having to wait. For a deconstructive operation *possibility* would rather be the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches. The interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible.[102]

Yet to come, deconstruction and ethics are "'inherently' nothing at all". Rather, they call into question the inherent.[103]

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[100] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 123; my italics.
[101] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 20.
[102] Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", p. 30; italics in original.
[103] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 141.

They realise that "[p]hilosophy (in general) can only open itself to the question, within it and by it. It can only *let itself be questioned*".[104]

Derrida, even as he interrupts Levinas, begs "[i]nterrupt me".[105]

(Sedgwick echoes this imperative. Contemplating the way in which a reader might respond to one's work she points out that it is, in this respect, "realistic and necessary to experience surprise".[106] The unanticipated response best activates the work.)

Levinas explains that "[t]he truth of truths would not therefore be capable of being gathered into an instant, nor into a synthesis where the supposed movement of the dialectic comes to a standstill. The truth of truths lies in the Said, in the Unsaid, and in the Otherwise Said—return, resumption, reduction: the history of philosophy or its preliminary".[107] "Truth" is a desired but always-deferred moment. Deconstruction and ethics cannot be claimed but lie in the hands of the other falling, as Derrida writes in *Spurs,* in the "interval between several styles".[108]

One is "[s]peaking, finally, only to interrupt oneself and to render possible the impossible interruption".[109] Theory is not masterful; deconstruction and ethics remain to be read.

I suppose we have to concede that it is, rather, up to you.

No, I'm not particularly happy about it either. I've spent a lot of time thinking this through. And now, it seems, I have to relinquish control to you without a single guarantee you'll get it right.

[104] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 131; italics in original.
[105] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 188.
[106] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, p. 146.
[107] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise", p. 6.
[108] Derrida, *Spurs*, p. 139.
[109] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 79.

I *can't* leave it to you, not yet. I'm not sure you're ready. I won't ever be, of course, but it can't hurt to explain myself a little more. Two more chapters. First, to enjoin you to tact and, finally, to think "you" a little more. And then you will, I hope, defy my distrust (you're right – how dare I doubt you?), outdoing me in ways I could never have anticipated.

Surprise me.

Chapter Four
Tact

We will never be done with ethics; we must continue to engage with the "ethics of reading" even while knowing that we cannot formulate a fixed code for its practice. We must keep re-formulating it. This chapter opens the question once more, in terms of tact. This chapter will show that in questions of reading tact is fundamental. When we wonder how best to read we ask what the most tactful—touching, respectful—approach might be. In *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* Derrida suggests "[p]erhaps the law is always a law *of tact*. This law's law finds itself there, before anything. There is this law, and it is the law itself, the law of the law. One cannot imagine what a law would be in general without something like tact".[1] Derrida identifies tact as the first imperative we must obey; it and the law are inseparable.

Derrida's announcement does not, however, explain how we might identify or determine tact. Val Cunningham is, in his book *Reading After Theory*, more specific. He describes tact as "gentle touch, caring touch, loving touch".[2] Tact is allied with contact, intimacy and proximity. Cunningham also argues, however, that tact is

> proper tactility; the gentle touch of the right-minded communicant. Tact as proper behaviours before the tended, the offered sacrament; tact as due attention, a proper attending to; a tenderness of touch; tender attention. Tact as that approach with the right hands, the attentively tendered hand of the attentive body, of the body tending towards, the body approaching near, coming carefully close up to the object to be received.[3]

In this quotation, the phrases "tending towards", "approaching near" and "coming carefully" all imply an inclination to touch which never, in fact, makes contact. Cunningham's language demands reservation and restraint; tact's "proper behaviour" commands distance.[4]

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*, Meridian (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 66; italics in original.
[2] Valentine Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 155.
[3] Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, p. 156.
[4] John Kerrigan, in his review of Cunningham's book, alerts us to the fact that this "proper behaviour" "can be derived only from immersion in shared values". As such, tact "has genteel associations that are worrying and not incidental": "it is inherently conservative, and in practice it falls to elites to determine what tact is" (John Kerrigan, "Touching and Being Touched," *London Review of Books* 19 September 2002: 21). It is an "anti-intellectual, a not-rocking-the-boat insiderish business, a way of distinguishing the polite from the oiks" (Kerrigan, "Touching and Being Touched": 21). We must continue to theorise tact—as I shall do here—remaining conscious of its "worrying" inflections.

Tact thus attains, in Cunningham's work but also elsewhere, two contradictory senses; its exact quality remains unclear. In order to consider the dilemma in which it therefore places us I will examine three novels in which proximity and distance are thematized and considered: A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. In the first section of my chapter I will consider tact as touch by examining a distrust of distance and a desire for proximity which is expressed in all three of my chosen texts. A longing for intimacy is repeatedly expressed. I will show, however, that this wish remains unfulfilled; distance is never fully banished. Noncontact persists at contact's heart. In the second section of my chapter I will consider an inverse desire, also displayed in these texts, *for* a proper and respectful distance. This wish conjures tact in the second sense I outlined above. This desire is, however, also thwarted; the potentially seductive power of distance threatens always to return it to the intimacy it would banish. Each of tact's senses is undone by the other; we can declare neither as its proper sense.

Tact's demand is impossibly contradictory. Derrida gestures toward this fact in the passage I quoted above. By arguing that tact precedes the law Derrida alludes to the bind in which it places us: we will remain unable to formulate a law *of* it. Cunningham's *Reading After Theory* never acknowledges the contradiction by which it is beset. In *On Touching*, on the other hand, Derrida accepts and works with this impossibility, as I too will attempt to do in my chapter's third section.

I have already pointed out that Roth's *The Human Stain* and Coetzee's *Slow Man* employ the themes of intimacy and distance on which I will focus in my first two sections. They are, in addition, lauded for their discussion of the "ethics of fiction" – a category closely aligned with my notion of tact. Jens Martin Gurr argues that the appearance of the author-character, Elizabeth Costello, in *Slow Man* poses an "ethical issue" which begs the questions "what about the human costs of writing fiction, what about the *ethical* status of the writer?"[5] John Lanchester, too, suggests that the novel presents us with "a question of ethics, touching on the morality of making people up, and then devising trials and torments for them, designed to expose and test their deficiencies. Is

[5] Jens Martin Gurr, "Functions of Intertextuality and Metafiction in J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*," *Anglistik* 18.1 (2007): p. 104; italics in original.

there anything of ethical content to be said about the fortunes of these imaginary people? Does making things up have an effect on the maker, and on the reader?"[6] Van der Vlies declares that "Costello is the embodiment of a writer's conscience, voicing Coetzee's questions about the formal, aesthetic and ethical demands of fiction".[7] For all three of these critics, the novel, and Elizabeth Costello in particular, demand that we ask what the "ethics" of fiction might be. In relation to *The Human Stain*, too, Debra Shostak argues that Zuckerman has to "confront […] the ethical consequences of his choices".[8]

These formulations inform us implicitly what "ethics" is and is meant to be; Lanchester invokes an "ethical *content* to be *said*" whilst for der Vlies Costello "[voices] questions". For both of these critics, ethics are spoken – a constatively delineated and formal code thematized by the text; these formulations posit "ethics" as a realm demanding explicit answers and formulations. The first and second sections of my chapter will, however, challenge the assumption that such thematization is possible; they will show that the statements that these novels make concerning distance and contact are undone by and in our experience of the text. My chapter's final section will therefore suggest that the "ethical" possibility of these novels cannot be confined simply to that which they would say; we must (in line with a shift proposed by Levinas) rethink "ethics" as a "saying" or in terms of that which happens when we read these texts. John Kerrigan points out that "[b]eing interested in tact would involve more than noticing just how inappropriate Mrs Bennet's [*sic*] behaviour is in *Pride and Prejudice*. It would mean thinking about the conventions that shape the interaction between authors, narrators and characters, and deciding how far critics should respect them".[9]

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[6] John Lanchester, "A Will of His Own," *New York Review of Books* 17 November 2005: 6.
[7] Andrew van der Vlies, "The Novelist Has Entered the Room," *Times Literary Supplement* 2 September 2005: 9.
[8] Debra B. Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), p. 264; the question of ethics emerges too via the censure Zuckerman attracts from many of the novel's critics. Debra Shostak argues, for example, that "Nathan has experienced a long history in an at times dubious moral position with respect to others. As a writer, he engages in manifold exploitation. He is perhaps forced to imagine, to fill in the blankness of others, but he thereby enjoys the intense pleasure of creation, of bending the other invisibly to his own predispositions" (Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives*, p. 264). Tim Parrish applies a similar judgement to the novel as a whole, claiming that "[i]n the novel's eerie conclusion, Roth himself acknowledges that his narrative, like Coleman's story, requires a kind of will to transgression" (Tim Parrish, "Becoming Black: Zuckerman's Bifurcating Self in *the Human Stain*," *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Writer*, ed. Derek Parker Royal (Westport, Conn.; London: Praeger, 2005), p. 221). Although Shostak and Parrish do not explicitly invoke "ethics", their invocation of "exploitation" and "transgression" recall the questions (in particular those of John Lanchester) posed in relation to *Slow Man.*
[9] Kerrigan, "Touching and Being Touched": 21.

Tact as Touch: A Desire for Proximity

In order to elucidate tact's quality, I will begin by examining an example of supposed tactlessness: literary theory as it is portrayed in both Cunningham's *Reading After Theory* and in many of the responses to Byatt's *Possession*.[10] Cunningham contends that tact is "the missing element in Theory's misconstruings and misreadings" and accuses it of "tactile failures".[11] By examining more closely the terms of this critique—which is expressed, too, by *Possession*'s readers—I will, in this first section of my chapter, outline a concept of tact which, opposing itself to a too-distant theory, relies upon notions of touch, intimacy and proximity.

Byatt's *Possession* juxtaposes two interrelated narratives. The first revolves around two theoretically savvy twentieth-century academics, Roland and Maud, who study the (fictional) nineteenth-century poets Randolph Henry Ash and Isabel LaMotte. At the beginning of the novel, Roland discovers a letter written from Ash to LaMotte; the document, by linking these two previously unrelated figures, demands further investigation and explanation. Roland and Maud embark upon a quest to discover the particulars of Ash and LaMotte's relationship and gradually piece together the novel's second narrative strand. As they do so, they too fall for each other.

These parallels invite us to compare the periods represented by the novel's two narrative strands. In most accounts, the twentieth century fares poorly. Jackie Buxton claims that "[i]n comparison to the engaged Victorian poets, the contemporary academics appear not only anaemic, but also decidedly repressed".[12] Maud and Roland are, for Lundén, unable "to feel, to understand love as a feeling".[13] The cause of this repression and anaemia is, it transpires, theory. Roland and Maud are, unlike Ash and LaMotte, "theoretically knowing".[14] They do not however benefit from but are,

[10] The critique I will outline in the following paragraphs derives from responses to *Possession* and not from the novel *per se* which, as I will show later, is more ambivalent concerning the notion of theory than many of its critics suggest.
[11] Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, p. 155.
[12] Jackie Buxton, ""What's Love Got to Do with It?": Postmodernism and *Possession*," *Essays on the Fiction of A.S. Byatt: Imagining the Real*, eds. Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble, Contributions to the Study of World Literature (Westport, Conn.; London: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 98.
[13] Bo Lundén, *Reeducating the Reader: Fictional Critiques of Poststructuralism in Banville's Dr Copernicus, Coetzee's Foe, and Byatt's Possession*, Gothenburg Studies in English (Göteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1999), p. 118.
[14] A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 423.

according to Tim Gauthier, "hampered" by this knowledge;[15] their lives are, for Lundén, "emotionally deficient" as a result.[16] The protagonists of *Possession* display, for Buxton, an "unwillingness to become passionately involved" because burdened by "a sexualized knowledge so devoid of passion that it has only produced a kind of sexual exhaustion".[17] These critics express a belief, formulated explictly by Cunningham's work, that "Theory has done its very best to deny and obliterate" "the human relationship".[18]

This critique of theory intersects with an anxiety which recurs throughout Byatt's work concerning academia in general. Jacqueline in *A Whistling Woman* echoes the above assertions when, for example, she worries that "her choice of work [as an academic] had deflected or distorted her unthinking life".[19] At one point she announces to her friend Luk, "'I must be mad, I should have listened to you, I don't know how I got myself so cocooned in my *self*, I want to be able to do the things – people do – I want to live, not just to think'".[20] Jacqueline's exclamation suggests that too much thinking has prevented her from doing. Tim Gauthier argues that Byatt's work "contends that the over-intellectualization of our existence has moved us progressively away from the 'real'. In fact, Byatt reserves her most damning criticism for academic writing and theory, whose shallowness and artificiality have contributed to literature's growing distance from anything concrete, or 'things' or 'facts' as she often labels them".[21]

A similar belief is expressed by those who write about Byatt's work; Kathleen Coyne Kelly declares that

> Byatt's characters have always been introspective, couching their very real dilemmas in the language of literary allusion and philosophical musings. Readers of her earlier novels who have criticized Byatt for creating such characters feel that too many intellectual layers distance readers from her books and insulate her characters from a real engagement with their lives.[22]

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[15] Tim S Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations: A.S. Byatt, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie*, Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), p. 25.
[16] Lundén, *Reeducating the Reader*, p. 97.
[17] Buxton, ""What's Love Got to Do with It?"", p. 99.
[18] Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, p. 141.
[19] A. S. Byatt, *A Whistling Woman* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), p. 414.
[20] Byatt, *A Whistling Woman*, p. 169; italics in original.
[21] Tim S. Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations: A.S. Byatt, Ian Mcewan, Salman Rushdie*, Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.
[22] Kelly, *A.S. Byatt*, p. 80.

Kelly argues that the "intellectual" language in which Byatt's characters couch their "dilemmas" impedes the proper engagement of the reader. We find, both in and in relation to Byatt's work, an assumption that thought and intellectualism act as a barrier to sympathy and understanding.

This belief is thematized, too, in Coetzee's *Slow Man*. The novel's author-figure, Elizabeth Costello, enters in order to inform its protagonist, Paul Rayment, that he, like Jacqueline, has distanced himself too much from "life". She tells him, for example, that "'[l]ife is not an exchange of diplomatic notes. *Au contraire*, life is drama, life is action, action and passion!'"[23] Costello echoes Jacqueline's belief that excessive thought ought to be avoided. She dismisses Paul's ponderings as tactics of avoidance and declares that "'one does not need to understand before one takes action, not unless one is excessively philosophic'".[24] Paul's desire to "understand" is, she implies, "excessive". It is, moreover, hopeless and will lead only to paralysis or inaction. Intimacy and contact are distinct from, and cannot be grasped by, "the theoretical apparatuses".[25]

Each of the above examples proposes two categories—the theoretical (or academic) and the emotional, or "real"—and presents them as both discrete and incompatible; thinking and living are separate and mutually exclusive pursuits.[26] "Life" or the "real" is composed of "desire, emotions and intuitions" which are immediate and intimate; it "cannot be theorized, or intellectualized, only felt".[27] Theory, on the other hand, is aligned with distance; Cunningham disparages theory for its "unclose, its distant, railed-off reading".[28] He argues that *theoros*, theory's etymological route, means spectator and that "theory becomes spectator work, what onlookers and audiences do".[29] Theory is performed from afar, by those who are outside, not involved in, the "action". Derrida, in

[23] J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2005), p. 227.
[24] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 137.
[25] Lundén, *Reeducating the Reader*, p. 92.
[26] The division is of course problematic, as my chapter will shortly demonstrate. We are conscious straight away, however, that the "real" is, of course, not immune to theory. It is repeatedly its subject and is discussed, for example, both by Lacan and by Kant, to name but two (very different) thinkers who have considered it.
[27] Lundén, *Reeducating the Reader*, p. 119.
[28] Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, p. 157.
[29] Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, p. 16; the meaning of *theoros* is not in fact as unequivocal as Cunningham suggests. Francis Cornford points out, for example, that it was used by the Orphics to mean "passionate sympathetic contemplation" (Francis Macdonald Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation*, Mythos, 1st paperback ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 198).

his essay "Some Statements and Truisms About Neo-Logisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms", also contemplates the term theory and acknowledges Cunningham's interpretation as the word's "ideal" meaning (unlike Cunningham, however, he proceeds, as I will show later, to highlight the impossibility of this ideal). Derrida's essay was given originally as a paper at a conference entitled "The States of 'Theory'". Derrida wonders why it is that the conference's organizers have placed quotation marks around the word theory; the gesture, he suggests, signals an almost excessive caution. He concludes, however, that the word ought always, in its "proper sense", to be bounded in this way.

To place a word between quotation marks, Derrida explains, is to attempt to mention it without using it.[30] The quotation marks, he notes, "function as small clothespins meant to keep at a distance, without really touching them, clothes which, whether dirty or still wet, won't be freed from their clothespins and really touched until they are properly clean and dry".[31] He conjures similar images elsewhere. In *On Touching*, for example, he speaks of "discretely and silently approaching the word as if it were contaminated in advance, touching it with the quotation marks as if they were tweezers"[32] whilst in *Spurs* he writes of suspending "truth" "between the tenter-hooks of quotation marks".[33] The images Derrida employs all imply an attempt not to touch; quotation marks are compared to objects such as tweezers which interpose themselves between the object and s/he who would (not) touch it. Quotation marks touch "without *really* touching"; they ensure that the word (in this case "theory") is held at arm's length. Derrida makes it clear that this distancing is apt; theory, too, ought only to mention and never to touch. The operation applied *to* theory by the conference's organisers is also theory's proper operation.

[30] I will return to question the distinction between use and mention, which is particularly important in analytical philosophy, later. I will note here, however, that for Derrida quotation marks *attempt* to mention a word without using it. They do not necessarily succeed; the terms in which Derrida describes these marks hints at a contradiction: the ongoing touch of their not really touching.
[31] Jacques Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms About Neo-Logisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms," *The States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll, Irvine Studies in the Humanities (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 77.
[32] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 304.
[33] Derrida, *Spurs*, p. 57.

The examples above show us, moreover, that intimacy and distance are not equal categories. Distance infuriates; the distance for which theory and thought are by-words is presented as damaging. LaMotte's cousin Sabine asserts this view forcefully when she announces "I do not believe all these *explanations*. They diminish".[34] This is evident as Roland and Maud begin to read Ash and LaMotte's letters. Roland finds that Maud "had decided that they should each read the letters of the poet who interested them, and that they should agree conventions of recording their observations on index cards according to a system she was already using in the Women's Resource Centre". Roland dislikes this idea; he "objected to this, partly because he felt he was being hustled, partly because he had a vision, which he now saw was ridiculous and romantic, of their two heads bent over the manuscripts, following the story, sharing, he had supposed, the emotion".[35] Roland longs for an intimate reading experience in which he might experience the "emotion" of the letters while Maud, on the other hand, argues for a rigorously scholarly approach.

Roland finally dismisses his idea as "ridiculous and romantic". The novel, however, continues to privilege it. Maud is curt: "[h]e pointed out that by Maud's system they would lose any sense of the development of the narrative and Maud retorted robustly that they lived in a time which valued narrative uncertainty, that they could cross-refer later, and that anyway, they had so little *time*, and what concerned her was primarily Christabel LaMotte".[36] Maud's dismissal of Roland's proposal is brash and pragmatic. The reader, on the other hand, sympathises with (and most likely shares) Roland's "romantic" desire to experience the narrative of the letters.

We long to touch. *Possession* again makes this point in the scene in which Lady Bailey reads Maud and Roland one of LaMotte's letters. The experience is unsatisfactory: "Lady Bailey's reading was slow and halting; words were miscast; she stumbled over *hoc genus omne* and Arachne. It was like frosted glass between them, Roland and Maud, and the true lineaments of the prose and the feelings of Ash and LaMotte".[37] The stumblings of Lady Bailey's reading interpose a barrier, described as "frosted glass", between the academics and a "true" understanding of LaMotte's prose. They long

[34] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 355.
[35] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 129.
[36] Byatt, *Possession*, pp. 129-30; italics in original.
[37] Byatt, *Possession*, pp. 87-8.

instead to get closer to the letters and to lay their hands on them so as to read them "properly". These moments establish the "real" as a privileged category. In light of the comments Elizabeth makes in *Slow Man* John Lanchester asserts that "Coetzee insists on the primacy of feeling".[38]

Proximity is desired. In order to achieve this moment of contact, these texts suggest, they must transcend theory absolutely; they must abolish the distance which endangers this longed-for touch. According to its critics, *Possession* is successful in its transcendence of distance and indeed offers us access to this non-rational realm. Towards the end of the novel, for example, Roland abandons his scholarly pursuits and instead sits in Maud's house composing lists of words: "[h]e was writing lists of words. He was writing lists of words that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory".[39] This moment, for Gauthier, indicates "Roland's transformation […] from textual critic to poet" and "is Byatt's most explicit rejection of the current theoretical propensities of academe".[40] At this point, Gauthier argues, "words have (re)gained their potency in the sense that they mean something to Roland emotionally. He can feel the language without necessarily having to intellectualize it".[41] Gauthier compares this scene to another of Byatt's novels, *The Biographer's Tale*, in which its protagonist-academic also abandons the scholarly for a more artistic writing pursuit: "I have become addicted to writing – that is, to setting down the English language, myself, in arrangements chosen by me, for – let it be admitted – pleasure. I have become addicted to forbidden words, words critical theorists can't use and writers can".[42] Here, too, Gauthier contends that "we are dealing with the concept of language as pure communication, pure correspondence between the word and the thing being described, something clearly out of the reach of theoretical language".[43] The suggestion that Roland is able to "feel" the words he writes implies a physical and emotional proximity. Gauthier celebrates both of these scenes as instances at which "theoretical language" is overcome and a greater intimacy achieved.

[38] Lanchester, "A Will of His Own": 6; I would stress, on the other hand, that the insistence belongs more properly to Elizabeth Costello. *Slow Man,* as I will show shortly, does not concur unquestioningly with the attitude she expresses.
[39] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 431.
[40] Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations*, p. 34.
[41] Lundén, *Reeducating the Reader*, p. 110.
[42] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 250.
[43] Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations*, pp. 30-1.

Jackie Buxton makes a similar claim with respect to *Possession*'s final chapter. At this point in the novel, the narrative switches; rather than hearing about Ash and LaMotte from the perspective of their twentieth-century interpreters, the novel offers us an omniscient third-person account of the moment at which Ash meets his daughter, Maia. Buxton claims that "[w]hat Byatt presents here is not a textual construction, but a living human being, a materiality as opposed to a discursive trace. Maia Thomasine Bailey is something of the past that is not merely an inscription, but is emphatically corporeal, an undeniable product of her parents' (literary) liaison".[44] Buxton, like Gauthier, lauds this scene as a moment of the "real" at which the distances of "inscription" and "discursive trace" are suspended in favour of the concrete and "corporeal".

The claims made by Buxton and Gauthier for *Possession* are echoed in *The Human Stain*. In this case, however, they are voiced by a character within the novel: Nathan Zuckerman. At the end of the novel, Zuckerman claims (in phrases which invoke Kant) "[t]his was not speculation. This was not meditation. This was not the way of thinking that is fiction writing. This was the thing itself".[45] Zuckerman aligns the episode with the "real"; he does this also at an earlier point in the novel. When Coleman loses his temper with his lawyer, Primus, in *The Human Stain* and calls him "lily-white", Zuckerman announces "[h]ow one is revealed or undone by the perfect word. What burns away the camouflage and the covering and the concealment? This, the right word uttered spontaneously, without one's even having to think".[46] Zuckerman, much like Roland in *Possession,* links the "perfect word" uttered "spontaneously" to the "truth"; Coleman is, he declares, "revealed" at this moment.

Zuckerman's assertion is, however, undermined by Primus' reaction. For Primus, who is unaware of Coleman's history, there is no revelation, only confusion; to him, Coleman's accusation is absurd and meaningless. He exclaims to his wife "'why *white*?'"[47] When compared directly to this reaction, Zuckerman's statement appears naïve and overstated; a disjunction emerges between Zuckerman's declaration and the reader's understanding.

[44] Buxton, ""What's Love Got to Do with It?"", p. 100.
[45] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 350.
[46] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 84.
[47] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 82; italics in original.

The claims made for the other moments I just outlined are equally dubious. These episodes are not as unequivocally "real" and immediate as their critics claim but are undercut by an irony which is most apparent in *The Human Stain*. The final scene of the novel—when Zuckerman announces "[t]his was not speculation. This was not meditation. This was not the way of thinking that is fiction writing. This was the thing itself"—is problematic. Zuckerman (a fictional character) declares, in fiction, "this wasn't fiction writing". The irony is compounded shortly after the comment I cited above when Les Farley asks

> 'What's the name of one of your books?'
> '*The Human Stain*.'
> 'Yeah? Can I get it?'
> 'It's not out yet. It's not finished yet.'[48]

In contrast to Zuckerman's claim that this is "the thing itself", this conversation possesses, for the reader, an eerily unreal quality; the book we are reading is cited within its covers; one of its characters purports to be its author. Zuckerman's assertions are possible only as and within fiction; his claim to the real is undercut.

I noted earlier the way in which Elizabeth Costello in *Slow Man* admonishes Paul, telling him that his excessive contemplation has removed him from the real of "life". Lanchester, I pointed out, reads this as an advocation for the "primacy of feeling". The novel, however, encourages us to read Costello's remarks sceptically. These opinions are, importantly, voiced by the novel's author-figure and are, as such, subject to a similar irony to that I just outlined in relation to *The Human Stain.* Elizabeth decides "'[n]o, the more I listen the more convinced I am that the key to your character lies in your speech. You speak like a book'".[49] Paul, of course, is the "slow man" and so *is*, indeed, a book, as is *Elizabeth Costello*. Elizabeth offers her comment as a criticism of Paul's character; the reader, however, realises that neither she nor Paul could speak any other way. Paul makes this

[48] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 356.
[49] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 231.

clear: "[h]e presumes these remarks about the real are in some sense aimed at him; he presumes they are made with irony. What their point might be he cannot guess".[50]

The irony is less explicit in the final chapter of *Possession*; nonetheless, the scene is equally troubled. As I have already pointed out, the novel offers us a third-person omniscient view of its nineteenth-century protagonists which contrasts with most of the rest of the novel. For most of *Possession* we learn about Ash and LaMotte via their poems and letters as they are read and interpreted by Maud and Roland; the nineteenth century is revealed to us through the twentieth. However, this revelation is not absolute; the academics point out time and again that interpretation has its limits. Our understanding is tainted by twentieth-century concerns; we will never fully or objectively know the nineteenth century. Gauthier points out that Byatt "protests, through her characters and their necessary blindness, that the past can never be entirely known".[51]

Given these comments, the third-person narration with which the novel concludes is clearly problematic. Gauthier highlights the issue, writing that

> Byatt attempts to have her historical incompleteness and eat it too. She protests, through her characters and their necessary blindness, that the past can never be entirely known. At the same time, however, she presents a second plot, one available to her readers only, in which history is presented as a coherent and entirely comprehensible entity.[52]

Possession, Gauthier points out, conditions us to suspect any account in which history appears "coherent" and "entirely comprehensible". The novel's final episode presents us with a version of events in which all seems, however, "entirely known". It is, Gauthier notices, at odds with the rest of the novel; it too neatly fulfils our desire to know. Gauthier accuses Byatt of attempting "to have her historical incompleteness and eat it too". But perhaps this scene cannot be so easily dismissed. *Possession* shows that we cannot fully know the past. However, it also demonstrates, through Roland and Maud, that a strong desire *to know* persists, even when we cannot. Their investigations are driven by a longing to know what happened and we, too, share this desire. The book's final

[50] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 242.
[51] Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations*, p. 56.
[52] Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations*, p. 56.

chapter appears at first to fulfil this craving for knowledge. However, it's *too* neat; it strikes a false note. Gauthier certainly spots it, and I'm sure other readers would too. This scene, we realise, could not possibly derive from the evidence known by Roland or Maud; only fiction could invent it. The chapter is at odds with the claims made by the rest of the novel, but this is clear to the reader; the novel does not get away with it. We become conscious of its impossibility; the reader soon realises the impropriety of its omniscient view.

A closer examination of Roland's word list also reveals the flaw in the assertions made by the novel's critics:

> He wrote: blood, clay, terracotta, carnation.
> He wrote: blond, burning bush, scattering.
> He annotated this, 'scattering as in Donne, "extreme and scattering bright", nothing to do with scattergraphs.'
>
> He wrote: anemone, coral, coal, hair, hairs, nail, nails, fur, owl, isinglass, scarab.
>
> He rejected wooden, point, link, and other ambivalent words, also blot and blank, though all these sprang (another word he hesitated over) to mind. He was uncertain about the place of verbs in this primitive language. Spring, springs, springes, sprung, sprang.[53]

I noted earlier Gauthier's claim that Roland transcends academic concerns at this moment. Even on the most obvious textual level, however, Gauthier's assertion is inaccurate; as scholarly as ever, Roland "annotate[s]" his list with a reference to Donne. The passage undermines Gauthier's declaration in more subtle ways, too. The tone of the passage is sombre; the repetition of the simple phrase "he wrote" is portentous. Roland creates his word lists seriously; he appears to share Gauthier's belief that this is an important and transcendent moment. For the reader, however, the product of Roland's labours is laughable. Roland links words on the basis of their sound. Hence, Donne's "scattering bright" reminds him of the word "scattergraphs" and he feels bound to point out that the quotation does not in fact have anything to do with them. For the reader, the qualification is redundant. It never would have occurred to us that "scattering bright" *was* to "do with scattergraphs". The very possibility strikes us as absurd; Roland's project is, for the reader,

[53] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 431.

somewhat ridiculous. Roland's serious attitude towards his task therefore contrasts with the reader's experience of it; the discrepancy lends the scene a comic quality.

For the reader, words do not become pure and potent; Roland does not unequivocally occupy a non-theoretical realm or achieve a moment of pure contact. He aspires to such a touch, but does not achieve it. Roland's lists do not imply a moment of transcendence; instead, the novel gently mocks his attempt to achieve such spontaneity, pointing toward the ultimate naivety of any desire to occupy unequivocally the "real".[54]

In each of these examples distance interposes itself, tainting the pure proximity we desire. Touch, as I have outlined above, emerges in opposition to distance and is figured as its death. Contact would thus be the reduction of distance to zero; it is the "death of *between*".[55] The paradoxes of Zeno and Aristotle inform us, however, that no matter what distance we begin with this absolute cancellation is impossible. J.M Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* explains this point neatly; its narrator points out that

> Before the arrow can reach its target, says Zeno, it must get half-way there; before it can get half-way it must get a quarter of the way; and so forth: 1, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, … $\frac{1}{2^N}$, $\frac{1}{2^{(N+1)}}$, … If we grant that the series of markers it needs to pass on its way to the target is infinitely long, then how can the arrow ever get there?[56]

The series never reaches zero; the distance between the objects becomes infinitely small but they would, in theory, never touch.

This model thus admits what Derrida describes as the "hiatus of noncontact at the heart of contact". Derrida continues, arguing that "this spacing makes for the trial of noncontact as the very condition or experience *itself* of contact".[57] Both Roland in *Possession* and Zuckerman in *The Human Stain*

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[54] John Kerrigan alerts us to a similar paradox in Cunningham's *Reading After Theory*. "[W]hether Cunningham manages to slay the dragon of theory with the sword of tactility is", he writes, "doubtful" (Kerrigan, "Touching and Being Touched": 19). He explains that "Cunningham's elevation of tact over Theory is unpersuasive. What we mean by the former owes so much to how it is conceived and socially constructed that it cannot stand free of the latter" (Kerrigan, "Touching and Being Touched": 22). Tact cannot abstract itself fully from theory; it finds itself theorised, brought back.
[55] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 2.
[56] Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 94.
[57] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 221.

note this inevitable and paradoxical failure; the closer we get, the more acute distance becomes. In *Possession* Roland "thought about Randolph Henry Ash. The pursuit of the letters had distanced him from Ash as they had come closer to Ash's life".[58] Similarly, once Zuckerman uncovers Coleman's secret he finds that "I couldn't imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than this unmasking. Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing, and instead of what I'd learned from Ernestine unifying my idea of him, he became not just an unknown but an uncohesive person".[59] Both Roland and Zuckerman stress that they have become closer to their subjects' lives than ever before; however, these moments emphasise a gulf. Roland finds himself "distanced" from Ash while Coleman becomes for Zuckerman an "unknown" and "uncohesive person".[60] Michal Ben-Naftali explains that "[t]here will always be, there has always already been, a space left untouched, untouchable, the recognition of which may be even more intensely felt during the very rare graceful moments of encounter".[61] Noncontact, or distance, always persists at the heart of contact; touch, which begins with the thought of distance, can never transcend it completely.

By presenting this always-compromised contact, the texts I discuss here provoke a number of questions. The impossibility of absolute touch and of intimacy forces them to wonder, for example, what the "real" might be. In *Slow Man* Paul Rayment wonders "[w]hat would it take to make Marijana see him as the real thing? What is the real thing? Physical desire? Sexual intimacy? They have been intimate, he and Marijana, for some while now – for longer than some love affairs last, start to finish. But all the intimacy, all the nakedness, all the helplessness has been on one side".[62] In its traditional sense, intimacy cannot be all "on one side"; the "side" implies the continued existence of the very between to which intimacy opposes itself. If, however, this between is never overcome, Paul's one-sided intimacy is perhaps as good as any. The reader makes realisations such

[58] Byatt, *Possession*, pp. 469-70.
[59] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 333.
[60] Sarah Wood describes this touch which does not touch in and in relation to Raymond Carver's "Cathedral". She writes, "[t]he fingers are passive, 'touched to every part'. But they are also a little cut off. It is not, in any sense, a synechdocal touch; not that the whole man touches the whole woman. It is the tracing of a boundary, a figuration, and at the same time an intense sensation which fragments the individuals concerned: fingers, face, nose, neck. As this touch passes across the surface, it is not clear what the fingers are reaching for other than the surface itself, in a partial and addressed touch, which perhaps also takes time to arrive" (Sarah Wood, "Optic Nerve," *The Oxford Literary Review* 26 (2004): 144).
[61] Michal Ben-Naftali, "Deconstruction: Derrida," *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*, ed. Simon Glendinning (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 663.
[62] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 172.

as this one as a result of—although not necessarily in concordance with—the determined, yet compromised, statements these novels make concerning the "real". I will show in more detail in my final section that, through their failure, an alternative possibility (which is all the more touching because identified by the reader) is indirectly gleaned.

The ongoing interdependence of distance and contact has implications, too, for the model of close reading to which I alluded above. The examples I examined from *Possession* and *The Human Stain* demonstrate that attempts to isolate the real are both problematic and naïve. Close reading cannot, therefore, be the moment of perfect feeling Cunningham claims; we cannot separate from thought and theorisation a "pure" and intimate experience of the text. Isobel Armstrong argues that "[t]he task of a new definition of close reading is to rethink the power of affect, feeling and emotion in a *cognitive* space. The power of affect needs to be included within a definition of thought and knowledge rather than theorized as outside them".[63] We must accept that, just as distance and proximity remain bound, so too do thought and feeling; close reading—and the thought of tact on which it relies—must be reconsidered on this basis. I will return to this challenge too in my chapter's final section. First, however, I will examine the concept of distance in order to subject it to a similar scrutiny to that I have already applied to touch, thus reiterating and reinforcing the logic I have already outlined whilst revealing the way in which tact also occupies an entirely contradictory sense to the one just shown.

Leaving the Other Space: Tact as Proper Distance

As I explained above, Cunningham criticizes theory for its too-distant, railed-off stance. However, this is not the only charge he levels against it; he accuses it too of "interpretative excess, excess of readerly kindness, the too-heavy readerly embrace that smothers, the too-freely heaped-up load of interpretation that just buries the text it's built on".[64] Theory foists upon the text an unwanted intimacy; contradicting his earlier claims, Cunningham now argues that theory is dangerous

[63] Isobel Armstrong, "Textual Harassment: The Ideology of Close Reading, or How Close Is Close?," *Textual Practice* 9.3 (1995): 403; italics in original.
[64] Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, p. 79.

because too close. Again, however, Cunningham suggests tact as the solution: "[t]rue readers don't paw and mammock, don't abuse, the text. True readers are tactful".[65] Tact, in this case, implies a respectful distance; it suggests a hands-off approach that avoids uncouth pawing and mammocking. I will, in this second section of my chapter, consider this alternative sense of tact as distance. I will show that it, like the model of tact as touch discussed above, is problematised and undone by the ongoing interrelation of proximity and distance. Finally, in the third section of my chapter, I will consider how we might unite these two contradictory—and equally impossible—senses; neither grasps tact, but by reading them side by side we might yet touch upon it at a tangent.

The relationship between Leonora Stern and Maud in Byatt's *Possession* reinforces the belief expressed by Cunningham that too great a proximity may be damaging. Leonora, Franken explains, "is a caricature of a lesbian feminist who follows every theoretical trend there is, in A.S Byatt's words, and who invades Maud Bailey's life, wreaking havoc there".[66] The particular "havoc" Leonora wreaks is explained by Maud herself: "'[s]he is – she is – invasive. An expert in intimacy. She reduces my space. I'm not very good with that sort of thing'".[67] Maud's hesitant start ("she is – she is") and short, uncertain sentences contrast with her usual coherence and thus convey her unease. The source of her discomfort, she points out, is Leonora's proximity; "intimacy" loses its usual positive connotations, becoming instead a particularly threatening craft in which Leonora has become "expert". She is *too* close; too much intimacy is as undesirable as its lack. For Kathleen Coyne Kelly this idea runs throughout the novel as a whole; she argues that "[t]here is a clear continuum of feeling, from sexual and physical possession to academic absorption, throughout the novel. Excessive possession leads to the objectifying of the other, whether the other is a human being or a text".[68] Kelly argues that at a certain point possession becomes "excessive"; like Maud, she implies that one must leave the other space.

A similar wariness is expressed by Nathan Zuckerman in *The Human Stain*. Zuckerman, we discover, has become a recluse; Hamilton notes that "Zuckerman is not the man he used to be.

[65] Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, p. 157.
[66] Christien Franken, *A.S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 89.
[67] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 270.
[68] Kelly, *A.S. Byatt*, p. 93.

Nowadays, he is more spectator than participant".[69] Nathan recounts to us his "determination to concern myself, in whatever time *I* have left, with nothing but the daily demands of work, to be engrossed by nothing but solid work, in search of adventure nowhere else—to have not ever a life of my own to care about, let alone somebody else's".[70] Zuckerman has distanced himself from the world and from life in order to focus solely on "work". Throughout the course of the novel, however, this resolve is undone, as Zuckerman finds that "Coleman Silk's life had become closer to me than my own".[71] This experience is not, however, entirely pleasant; he describes it as an "obsession" which is both all-consuming and inescapable.[72] Debra Shostak argues that "[w]ith the pleasures of knowing and telling […] Zuckerman experiences the fall into history, into the contingencies of one's own and others' making, causing him to confront the uncontrollable real".[73] The real is unnervingly "uncontrollable". Zuckerman finds that his friendship with Coleman denies him the ability to "live apart from the turbulence and intensity" he has fled. "I did no more than find a friend", he writes, "and all the world's malice came rushing in".[74] Zuckerman is understandably wary of an intimacy which admits an undesirable "malice" and "turbulence".

The narrator of Coetzee's *Slow Man* also evinces this distrust of the too-close. The theme emerges most explicitly in his relationship with Elizabeth Costello. When Elizabeth first arrives in Paul's flat she is out of breath:

> 'Bad heart,' she says fanning herself. 'Nearly as much of an impediment as' (she pauses to catch her breath) 'a bad leg'.
> Coming from a stranger the remark strikes him as inappropriate, unseemly.[75]

For Paul, Elizabeth contravenes the rules of politeness and propriety; her comment about his "bad leg" assumes a greater intimacy with his situation than he would expect from a "stranger". Later in the novel, Paul finds Elizabeth's notebook; he reads a few pages but then stops, explaining that

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[69] Ian Hamilton, "'Ok, Holy Man, Try This'," *London Review of Books* 22 June 2000: 37.
[70] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 43; italics in original.
[71] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 344.
[72] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 344.
[73] Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives*, p. 264.
[74] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 45.
[75] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 80.

> [h]e is not sure he wants to know more. Something unseemly about this writing, the fat ink sprawling carelessly over the tramlines; something impious, provocative, uncovering what does not belong in the light of day.
> Is the whole notebook like that: a provocation, an affront to decency?[76]

The comments Paul makes here express more forcefully the criticism he articulates when he first meets Elizabeth; her writing is "unseemly" and an "affront to decency" because it places in the "light of day" what does not belong there. It is too explicit and too direct. In *Possession* Ash, too, evinces this opinion when he apologises to LaMotte: "'[f]orgive this baldness. I am truly trying to discover your wishes. We left in so exalted a state – I wish decisions could arise naturally – but you see how it is'".[77] By apologising for it, Ash establishes "baldness" as undesirable; it would be better if he and LaMotte could come to a decision "naturally", without having to address the question obviously. Thus, each of these characters expresses a feeling, as Derrida explains, that "[w]hat is closest *must* be avoided, by virtue of its very proximity. It must be kept at a distance, it must be warned. It must be turned away from, diverted, *warned*".[78]

An example from *Possession* suggests why this too-closeness may be problematic. Roland and Maud find a diary written by Sabine, LaMotte's cousin, in which she declares that "I can't so describe my father's eyes, nor his hair, nor his stoop. He is *too* close. If you hold a book too close to your face, in poor candlelight, the characters blur. So with my father".[79] Sabine explains that she is "too close" to be able to describe her father; she cannot attain the distance necessary to see him clearly and properly. To be too close, she implies, is disorientating. The example of a book held too close to the face makes this especially clear. The characters of such a book "blur"; they can no longer be read.

This theme is explored at greater length in the opening pages of *The Human Stain* as we are introduced to the novel's protagonist, Coleman Silk. Coleman recounts for Zuckerman the events that led to his resignation and, he believes, to the death of his wife. When working at Athena College, Coleman remarks one day upon the persistent absence of two students from his class;

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[76] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 121.
[77] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 275.
[78] Derrida, "To Speculate", p. 263; italics in original.
[79] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 342; my italics.

"[d]oes anyone know these people?" he asks, "[d]o they exist or are they spooks?"[80] The students, it later transpires, are black, and interpret Coleman's comment as a racial slur. They issue a complaint, which the college upholds. As we hear this story we learn, too, that Coleman is writing a book about the incident. It is apparent, moreover, that he is still very angry. In fact, Zuckerman observes the "near impossibility of his tearing himself free from his bitterness".[81]

Mark Schechner notes that "Coleman Silk knows his own life only through the fogs of indignation and grief, the fog of self-intoxication, the fog of self-loathing, the fog of self-misunderstanding, the fog of occluded desire, the fog of self-forgetfulness".[82] The fog metaphor, like Sabine's image of a blurred character in a book, implies obscured or imperfect vision; Coleman, Schechner suggests, has lost the ability to consider events objectively. Zuckerman is therefore certain that the quality of Coleman's book will not be high. He writes, "I'd heard stuff like that from him frequently during these last two years, ravings about black anti-Semitism and about his treacherous, cowardly colleagues that were obviously being mainlined, unmodified, into his book".[83] Zuckerman implies that the "unmodified" transcription of these thoughts will make for a bad novel; writing requires transformation. Coleman finally concurs; having read over his "completed" book he abandons the project: "'[b]ut I read it and it's shit and I'm over it. I can't do what the pros do. Writing about myself, I can't maneuver the creative remove. Page after page, it is still the raw thing. It's a parody of the self-justifying memoir. The hopelessness of explanation'".[84] Coleman admits that his book fails; "still the raw thing", it is unable to execute the "remove" necessary for creation to take place.

Coleman's experience reveals the dangerous distortions that result from remaining too-close. Conscious of this danger, the texts I am examining here all express a desire for distance. As I explained in the first section of my chapter, the nineteenth and twentieth century narratives of *Possession* invite comparison. Often, I pointed out, the twentieth-century protagonists are criticised for their lack of intimacy. Equally—and yet contradictorily—they are disparaged for their poor

[80] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 6.
[81] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 18.
[82] Mark Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 190-1.
[83] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 16.
[84] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 19.

command of distance; the nineteenth-century characters are, apparently, also to be lauded for their reticence. Johnson, for example, argues that "the theme is the contrast between the Victorian and modern worlds […] this work celebrates the Victorian age, with its reassuring structures, decent reticences, and solid bourgeois comforts. Byatt's convincing imitations pay tacit homage to these old values and comparative certitudes".[85] The Victorians are, Johnson argues, superior because masters of an indirect propriety. Roland concurs; he lauds Ash in terms similar to those employed by Johnson: "[h]e thought he knew Ash fairly well, as well as anyone might know a man whose life seemed to be all in his mind, who lived in a quiet and exemplary married life for forty years, whose correspondence was voluminous indeed, but guarded, courteous and not of the most lively. Roland liked that in Randolph Henry Ash".[86]

Roland likes that Ash is "guarded" and that he will never know him more than "fairly well"; aspects of his character will always remain unspoken. Jenkyns celebrates Byatt's novel in similar terms; he explains that "Byatt is wise enough not to tell us everything; Christabel keeps some of her secret, including the nature of her feelings for Blanche Glover, and that is as it should be".[87] Jenkyns praises *Possession*'s tact in letting Christabel's "secret" be.[88] Jenkyns' comment implies a decidedly non-tactile model of tact which is echoed by Cunningham when he writes that "[w]hat I shall end up praising as readerly *tact* would […] respect the integrity of literary texts […] by letting literary texts speak in their own voice".[89] Cunningham invokes a model of reading in which texts might "speak in their own voice" and which is echoed both by *Possession* and those who comment upon it. *Possession* announces that "[t]here are – believe it – impersonal readings – where the mind's eye sees the lines move onwards and the mind's ear hears them sing and sing"[90] whilst Hadley declares that "[a] proper approach towards the past is one that understands it on its own terms, rather than merely co-opting it into the present".[91] Jenkyns also echoes Hadley's declaration,

[85] Diane Johnson, "The Best of Times," *New York Review of Books* 28 March 1991: 33.
[86] Byatt, *Possession*, pp.7-8.
[87] Richard Jenkyns, "Disinterring Burried Lives," *Times Literary Supplement* 8 March 1990: 213.
[88] Jenkyns thus implies, erroneously, that the novel has decided to exclude information which exists prior to or outside it; he overlooks the fact that the novel creates the very secrets it decides not to tell – creates them, in fact, in its not-telling. I will return to this point in my chapter's final section.
[89] Cunningham, *Reading after Theory*, p. 86.
[90] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 471.
[91] Hadley, *The Fiction of A.S. Byatt*, p. 66.

announcing that "we can apprehend the past rightly only by letting it work in its own natural way, absorbing so much that is precious into the mysteries of privacy and oblivion".[92]

All three of these writers invoke an "impersonal" or objective mode of reading in which the reader steps back and allows the text (or history) to speak or sing "on its own terms" or "in its own natural way". Cunningham, somewhat paradoxically, again employs the term "close reading" to invoke this experience. Isobel Armstrong points out, however, that we might more aptly call this "distance reading, not close reading". Its basis, she explains, lies in "an account of the text as *outside*, something external which has to be grasped – or warded off. Despite the anti-positivist language of so much modern criticism and theory, the text is seen as *other*: it is object to a Kantian subject who stands over against the world in a position of power".[93] Armstrong highlights a paradox concealed by the term "close reading"; it proposes a model of interpretation in which the text in fact remains untouchable. It thus reiterates a model of self and other that we, after Derrida and Levinas, understand to be problematic.

All three of these examples nonetheless echo the belief that it is best to read in this tactful, distant, impersonal manner. As I will show in the paragraphs which follow, however, their narratives demonstrate that it may not in fact be possible to do so. *Possession*, for example, notes in relation to Beatrice Nest's reading of Ellen Ash's diary that

> As is common with extended acquaintance with any task, topic or human being, Beatrice had an initial period of clear observation and detached personal judgment, during which she thought she saw that Ellen Ash was rambling and dull. And then she became implicated, began to share Ellen's long days of prostration in darkened rooms, to worry about the effect of mildew on damask roses long withered, and the doubts of oppressed curates.[94]

Beatrice attempts to remain distant and detached but finally finds that she has become "implicated" in Ellen's life; the novel records a process by which Beatrice, too-immersed in the diary, comes increasingly to share Ellen's opinions and perspectives. The other characters in *Possession* gently

[92] Jenkyns, "Disinterring Burried Lives": 214.
[93] Armstrong, "Textual Harassment: The Ideology of Close Reading, or How Close Is Close?": 403; italics in original. Kerrigan also points out that Cunningham "associates this tactility with a sacramental sense of language" (Kerrigan, "Touching and Being Touched": 19) thus locating it in a realm inaccessible to the "earthly" reader.
[94] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 115.

mock Beatrice for this partiality. As Roland and Maud become increasingly obsessed with the lives of Ash and LaMotte, however, the reader notices that they, too, have forsaken "clear observation" and "detached judgment". The novel subtly suggests that this increasing loss of objectivity may be the inevitable result of all academic and "extended acquaintance".

This inevitability becomes clear if we return once more to the question of "theory". As I explained in my first section, critics of Byatt's *Possession* distance themselves from theory; they dismiss it as both dangerous and damaging. They reject theory as too-distant. We are presented with a concept of theory which must—to borrow a phrase of Derrida's—be "*distanced* precisely because it is too *distant*".[95] The semi-repetition of "distanced" and "distant" in this phrase draws attention to the double bind in which Byatt's critics are caught; they revile theory as distant and yet, by distancing themselves from it, validate the distance they fear. Their distancing-attempt is thus doomed to failure.

The claim that *Possession* distances theory centres and relies upon the idea that the novel somehow rejects its twentieth-century plot. Buxton, for example, argues that "[f]or all its postmodern gestures, *Possession* is first and foremost a 'straight' narrative, a realistic fiction".[96] For Buxton, *Possession* is "truly" a straight, realistic narrative whose postmodern gestures serve only to critique postmodernism. Byatt, Buxton claims, "is using postmodernism—or, at least, post-structuralism—against itself".[97] Buxton implies that the novel is able—to recall the categories, which I outlined earlier, highlighted by Derrida—to mention poststructuralism without using it or whilst holding at a distance. An example from another of Byatt's novels, *The Biographer's Tale,* illustrates, however, that the matter may not be so simple. *The Biographer's Tale*, like *Possession,* is a novel which thematizes—and apparently rejects—theory. Its protagonist, Phineas G. Nanson, evinces a desire to "[abandon] […] post-structuralist semiotics" and repeatedly satirizes the theory he finds within the

[95] Derrida, "To Speculate", p. 368; italics in original.
[96] Buxton, ""What's Love Got to Do with It?"", p. 98.
[97] Buxton, ""What's Love Got to Do with It?"", p. 99.

university at which he works.[98] In the opening pages of the novel, for example, he sits in "one of Gareth Butcher's famous theoretical seminars" and explains that:

> It's odd that I can't remember what text we were supposed to be studying on that last day. We'd been doing a lot of not-too-long texts written by women. And also quite a lot of Freud – we'd deconstructed the Wolf Man, and Dora. The fact that I can't remember, though a little humiliating, is symptomatic of the 'reasons' for my abrupt decision. All the seminars, in fact, had a fatal family likeness. They were repetitive in the extreme. We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and deceptions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying. I thought, next we will go on to the phantasmagoria of Bosch, and, in his incantory way, Butcher obliged.[99]

Phineas dismisses these "theoretical seminars" as "repetitive" and reductive, suggesting that they boil every text down to the "same clefts and crevices". Later in the novel, too, he rails against theory when he declares that "[w]hat follows is not of course what went through my head as I stood amongst the pollination people in the Linnaean strongroom. It is what I have later revisited and adumbrated for this document. I have resisted the temptation to insert several pages of Foucault. One of the reasons why I abandoned – oh, and I *have* abandoned – post-structuralist semiotics, was the requirement to write page upon page of citations from Foucault […] in support of the simplest statement".[100]

Phineas cites post-structuralism but claims repeatedly not to use it. Despite his avowed dismissals the reader realises however that Phineas has not abandoned theory as absolutely as he might have hoped. The style of the first passage above recalls "quite a lot of [the] Freud" it would reject; the terms "symptomatic", "repetitive" and "fatal family likeness" all invoke psychoanalysis. Equally, the second passage is followed by a lengthy description of the Foucault Phineas has apparently not inserted. Theory thus appears time and again as Phineas's central concern even as he professes no interest in it. Paradoxically, moreover, Phineas spends more time worrying about "post-structuralist semiotics" than, for example, Foucault to whom the phrase would be anathema.

[98] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 114.
[99] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, pp. 1-2.
[100] Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 114; italics in original.

We could argue, too, that *Possession* is very much a "postmodern" or "post-structuralist" novel; it never fully banishes theory. By citing post-structuralist theory, Byatt's novels implicate themselves within its scene and invite us to read them as its products.[101] In order to distance themselves from theory, these novels must first admit it. In order to elude theory entirely they would have to distance themselves yet again, excluding not only theory but also a critique of theory which always allows its return. Even then there is no guarantee that "theory" would not reappear once more. A further step is always required, as Derrida points out in "To Speculate" when he writes that "[i]t is exactly *there* (where? *there*), in the paralysis of this further step that always has to be taken away, it is there (but why there? why not one more or one less step? Where, there? *there*, answers life death)".[102] "Absolute" distance is always "there" – permanently one step further away; we can never gain enough distance from this (supposedly too-distant) theory.

In his essay "To Speculate – On Freud" Derrida demonstrates that one is always, and necessarily, implicated in and by that upon which one would merely comment. In his essay, Derrida analyses a passage from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which Freud contemplates the "speculative assumptions" at which he has arrived.[103] Speculation, Derrida points out, indicates "a mode of research, a theoretical attitude"; Freud highlights the method his writing employs. Derrida, however, interrogates the word beyond this "proper" sense; he behaves as though Freud not only "[speaks] *speculatively* of this or that" but is also "speaking *of* speculation".[104] Derrida claims—and demonstrates that—in what Freud writes "something must derive from the speculation of which he speaks […] speculation is not only a mode of research named by Freud, not only the oblique object of his discourse, but also the operation of his writing, the scene (of that) which he makes by writing what he writes here".[105]

[101] Franken thus acknowledges that Byatt's novels offer us a "sustained ambivalence which structures the critical work in important ways" (Franken, *A.S. Byatt*, p. 91).
[102] Derrida, "To Speculate", p. 369; italics in original.
[103] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 45.
[104] Derrida, "To Speculate", p. 283; italics in original.
[105] Derrida, "To Speculate", p. 284.

Derrida shows that Freud's speculative remarks also remark upon speculation. We find that "the related is related to the relating".[106] Derrida, notes, moreover that as a result "one does not gain an auto-reflective transparency, on the contrary".[107] This inevitable self-reflexivity means that there is no purely "speculative" statement; there is no comment which merely speculates or maintains itself at an absolute distance. Thus, the pure distance with which theory is aligned is not, in fact, possible. As I explained earlier, Derrida suggests in "Some Statements and Truisms" that theory, in its "proper sense", ought always to be bounded by quotation marks; properly it, like these marks, implies a distant stance in which we mention but do not use. I also suggested, however, that Derrida's formulations imply a further complexity. As I have shown above, this "proper" sense remains elusive; theory and quotation marks alike fail to achieve it. The quotation marks cannot to suspend the word absolutely; although they attempt not to touch, they do not succeed. A residual contact persists. Offering yet another quotation-mark metaphor, Derrida argues that "two pairs of pegs hold in suspension a sort of drape, a veil or a curtain. Not closed, just slightly open".[108] The quotation marks attempt to bound and contain the word but remain slightly open; the word threatens to escape the veils between which it is placed. It is not in fact possible to mention a word without using it; the distance with which theory is allied is inevitably compromised.

As Paul de Man points out in *The Resistance to Theory* "[n]othing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance".[109] Every attempt at theory fails, resists theory.[110] There is no strictly "theoretical" statement; it is not possible to mention a word without using it. Roland realises this when he speaks of "'desire, that we look into so carefully'" and admits "'I think all the *looking-into* has some very odd effects on the desire'".[111] It is not possible to "look into" desire without having an effect on that desire; we cannot attain distance enough to speak of it without altering it.

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[106] Derrida, "To Speculate", p. 304.
[107] Derrida, "To Speculate", p. 391.
[108] Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 31.
[109] Paul De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 19; italics in original.
[110] The very term "resistance" embodies the contamination with which we are faced; it invokes a touch which would repel touch, a touch without touching. In its psychoanalytic sense, too, it refers to a defense: that of the repressed in reaction to attempts to bring it into consciousness. It is, however, the very resistance which, in analysis, belies a too-closeness to that which the unconscious would hide.
[111] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 267; italics in original.

We find that, just as there is no pure proximity, a residual touch always problematises distance. This realisation emerges gradually for the reader of *Possession* through his/her understanding of Maud and Roland's relationship. In *Possession*, Johnson argues, "the moderns, disillusioned and revolted by their own sexual lives, long for chastity and simplicity".[112] Maud is described as "most untouchable" while Roland "wanted secrecy and privacy".[113] This desire for "chastity and simplicity" is most memorably encapsulated by the discussion Roland and Maud have about a "clean empty bed in a clean empty room":

> 'At my life, at the way it is – what I *really* want is to – to have nothing. An empty clean bed. I have this image of a clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked. Some of that is to do with – my personal circumstances. But some of it's general. I think.'
> 'I know what you mean. No, that's a feeble thing to say. It's a much more powerful coincidence than that. That's what I think about, when I'm alone. How good it would be to have nothing. How good it would be to desire nothing. And the same image. An empty bed in an empty room. White.'
> 'White.'
> 'Exactly the same.'
> 'How strange.'
> 'Maybe we're symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists. Or maybe it's just us'.[114]

The white of the room the scholars imagine invokes sterility; Maud links the image to a sense of exhaustion and a wish to "desire nothing". The exchange in which this is revealed, however, is one of the first in which the reader senses the possibility that Maud and Roland might desire each other. This joint longing for distance and isolation results in a paradoxical and peculiar intimacy; the thought that "maybe it's just us" isolates Roland and Maud from the world but, in doing so, places them as a pair closer together.[115]

Maud and Roland's celebration of distance is paradoxically seductive; this is again apparent in a later conversation:

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[112] Johnson, "The Best of Times": 33.
[113] Byatt, *Possession*, pp. 48-9.
[114] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 267; italics in original.
[115] The image which strikes Maud and Roland so forcefully also appears in other novels by Byatt. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, for example, Alexander "wanted a clean white empty room and silence. He wanted no liquor and no dancing" (A. S. Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 416) while in *The Biographer's Tale* we are told that "[t]here was nothing in the room but a white bed and a white chest of drawers" (Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 186). For someone who has read these other novels, the re-discovery of the image leads one momentarily (in a glimpse, as I outlined in my "traces" chapter, that can never be more than fleeting) to share Maud and Roland's sense of "powerful coincidence".

> They were not touching. They were sitting amicably close and not touching.
> 'Oddly,' said Maud, 'if we were obsessed with each other, no one would think we were mad.'
> 'Val thinks we are obsessed with each other. She even said it was healthier than being obsessed with Randolph Ash.'
> 'Leonora thinks I've rushed away in response to a telephone call from a lover.'
> Roland thought, all this giddy clear-headedness is dependent on our not being obsessed with each other.[116]

Roland and Maud's conversation appears at first to be "clear-headed" and objective. However, Roland's final comment transforms it; indirectly, he introduces the idea that he and Maud might, in fact, be "obsessed with each other". The reader, of course, has intuited this long before; now, however, Roland finally suggests that he too may be conscious of the fact. In light of Roland's comment, we re-read his and Maud's exchange as a coy flirtation; it occurs to us that they are perhaps using the opinions of Val and Leonora in order covertly to suggest to each other that they could become "obsessed" lovers.

Roland and Maud thus seduce each other indirectly and from a distance. *Possession* implies, moreover, that these conditions are necessary. The narrator notes, for example, that "[i]t was important to both of them that the touching should not proceed to any kind of fierceness or deliberate embrace".[117] Later we are told that

> Neither was quite sure how much, or what, all this meant to the other.
> Neither dared ask.[118]

To ask, the narrative implies, would be to shatter the distance the pair have carefully maintained; they must avoid the direct question and the "deliberate embrace" if they are to sustain the indirection which constitutes their flirtation's success.

In *The Human Stain* Delphine Roux, sitting in a library and scanning it for eligible men, finds that "[t]he ones who make eye contact with her are automatically the ones she doesn't like". On the other hand, "the ones who are lost in their books" she describes as "charmingly oblivious and

[116] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 332.
[117] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 424.
[118] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 424.

charmingly desirable".[119] An encounter with Prince the crow later in the novel recalls this moment. When Prince refuses to respond to Faunia's attention the other girl in the barn advises Faunia that

> 'If he knows you're trying to get him, he usually stays out of reach, but if he thinks you're ignoring him, he'll come down.'
> They laughed together at the humanish behavior.[120]

It is possible to gain the affections of the crow only by distance and (feigned) disinterest. *The Human Stain* is bemused, but nonetheless acknowledges, that distance is the most effective seduction.

Derrida thus writes, in a passage in *Spurs* which ventriloquizes Nietzsche (a process which itself raises questions of touch. *Spurs* gets very close to Nietzsche and his views on women but at the same time it maintains a reserve as the reader wonders, does Derrida agree? Or is he in fact parodying Nietzsche's point of view?) that

> A woman seduces from a distance. In fact, distance is the very element of her power. Yet one must beware to keep one's own distance from her beguiling song of enchantment. A distance from distance must be maintained. Not only for protection (the most obvious advantage) against the spell of her fascination, but also as a way of succumbing to it, that distance (which is lacking) *is necessary*. *Il faut* la distance (qui faut).) It is necessary to keep one's distance (*Distanz*)! Which failing us, we fail to do. Such might also be the advice of one man to another: a sort of scheme for how to seduce without being seduced.[121]

As we learn through these novels, distance may be seductive. Towards the end of *Possession*, for example, Maud explains to Roland "'[e]ven you – drew back – when we met. I expect that, now. I use it'".[122] Roland's drawing back is the "very element" of Maud's "power". Derrida thus tells us that it is imperative that we keep our distance "for protection". The success of this move cannot, however, be guaranteed; distance would also be the means by which one "succumbs" to the seduction one would resist.

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[119] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 200.
[120] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 239.
[121] Derrida, *Spurs*, p. 49; italics in original.
[122] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 506.

In *Possession* Maud hides her hair under a headscarf, fearful of the attention it might bring. By concealing it, she attempts to erase its interest. However, her attempt fails, as Roland explains: "'[b]ecause if anyone can't see it they think and think about it, they wonder what it's like, so you attract attention to it'".[123] Against her intention, Maud finds that her attempt to distance herself from her hair's seductive potential has backfired; her very act of distancing becomes a further seduction, rendering her (hidden) hair an even greater attraction. We cannot absolutely separate "genuine" withdrawal from that which begs intimacy and interest.

We cannot distinguish between "true" distance and that which aims to seduce; it is always possible that the distance we encounter is in fact a coy plea for intimacy. A possible proximity and closeness lies at the heart of all distance, provoking a confusion which Delphine in *The Human Stain* best embodies. As I explained earlier, Delphine falls for those "who are charmingly oblivious and charmingly desirable". There is, however, a great deal of pathos in this scene; Delphine finds that "the ones who are lost in their books, who are charmingly oblivious and charmingly desirable, are…lost in their books".[124] The men who are desirable because "charmingly oblivious" are, unfortunately, unreachable. Moreover, and more tragically in terms of the novel's plot, Delphine's application of this logic causes her to mis-read Coleman Silk: "[t]he first time they met, in his office, he had seemed so remote, so judging, that she found herself paralyzed with fear until she realized that he was playing the seduction against the grain. Was that what this Dean Silk was up to?"[125] Delphine's logic is not entirely flawed; as my reading of Roland and Maud's relationship in *Possession* has shown, it is entirely possible that Coleman's "remote" and "judging" demeanour (words which recall Roland's description of Maud when he first meets her) is an attempt to play "the seduction against the grain". The novel shows, however, that Delphine is incorrect. The contamination of distance by proximity makes error as possible as it makes seduction. The ongoing infiltration of intimacy into distance, and vice versa, demands that we negotiate a profound ambivalence, as I will show in the next and final section of my chapter.

[123] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 271.
[124] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 200.
[125] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 187.

I have now outlined two contradictory senses of tact. I showed, in my first section, that tact aligns itself with touch and contact. In my second section, I demonstrated a very different sense of tact as distant propriety. I have illustrated, however, that each sense of tact is undone by the other: a distant noncontact persists at the heart of contact; distance is undone by the possibility of an intimacy it can never wholly eschew. We find that

> what is going on no longer concerns a distancing rendering this or that absent, and then a rapprochement rendering this or that into presence; what is going on concerns rather the distancing of the distant and the nearness of the near, the absence of the absence or the presence of the present. But the distancing is not distant, nor the nearness near, nor the absence absent or the presence present.[126]

We are faced with a series of distancing moments which never fully distance and instants of contact which never wholly touch. There is—always a step further away—a touch and a distance but we never attain either absolutely. Neither distance nor touch can escape the other and neither can claim to be tact's proper sense.

Tact instead situates itself *between* these contradictory inflections and demands that we read them together. It thus functions according to a logic with which Geoffrey Bennington aligns the prefix "inter" in an essay of that name. "Inter", Bennington explains, possesses two distinct senses:

> *On the one hand*, inter- separates, places between two or more entities, keeps them apart, puts up a frontier, prevents them meeting, joining, mingling, and maybe identifying. Inter-val is perhaps the clearest case of this sense. Inter-calating, inter-posing, inter-polating, inter-mitting all obey this logic. But *on the other hand*, inter- joins, provides a means of communication and exchange. This can go from inter-view to inter-action to inter-course to inter-pretation, and implies just the first sense of inter-: here the hap or difference is not being established or reinforced, but diminished, overcome or denied.[127]

"Inter" can function either as a mark of separation (or distance) or as a mark which joins (or places in contact). As my analyses above have shown we cannot, however, fully discriminate one sense

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[126] Derrida, "To Speculate", p. 321.

[127] Geoffrey Bennington, "Inter," *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 103; italics in original.

from the other; Bennington suggests that "'inter' finds its own truth in the sublation of its two contradictory senses".[128]

This "sublation" of "contradictory senses" is not, however, simple. *Possession* informs us of this fact via Beatrice Nest's experience of Ash's poetry. "Reading those poems", we are told, "she obscurely knew, offered her a painful and as it seemed illicit glimpse of a combination of civilised talk and raw passion which everyone must surely want, and yet which no one, as she looked round her small world, her serious Methodist parents, Mrs Bengtsson running her University Women's Tea Club, her fellow-students agonising over invitations to dance and whist – no one seemed to have".[129] Beatrice makes it clear that what is most desired is a "combination of civilised talk and raw passion". However, Beatrice's realisation is "painful" and leaves the reader with a sense of pathos. "No one" is of course able to successfully unite such contradictory approaches; the "combination" which "everyone must surely want" is, the reader realises, impossible. Beatrice, for one, knows it only "obscurely" and is afforded only an "illicit glimpse".

Marcel Cornis-Pope echoes Beatrice's sentiments when he argues that "[a]esthetic experience relies on a paradoxical, 'impossible' combination of absorption and self-consciousness, participation and critical distance".[130] Cornis-Pope's "aesthetic experience" is very close to what I have been discussing here as tact or close reading. It, too, conjures a certain approach, or "experience" which is marked by both "participation" and "critical distance". According to tact's rule, Derrida writes, "one must touch without touching. In touching, touching is forbidden: do not touch or tamper with the thing itself, do not touch on what there is to touch".[131] He repeats this injunction throughout *On Touching*. A little later he writes

> Between two given orders—yes, given as given as much as ordered (do touch but *do not* touch, in no way, do touch *without* touching, do touch *but* do watch out and avoid any contact)—it in effect installs a kinship that is at the same time *conjunctive* and *disjunctive*. Worse than that, it brings

[128] Bennington, "Inter", p. 104.
[129] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 114.
[130] Cornis-Pope, *Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Writing*, p. 26.
[131] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 66.

> into contact both contradictory orders (do do and do not do), thus exposing them to contamination or contagion.[132]

Derrida's complex and sometimes confusing formulations—"do touch but *do not* touch", "do do and do not do", "touch without touching"—make the counter-intuitive nature of tact's imperative clear. It is embodied, too, by Jenkyns' declaration in relation to *Possession* that "the way to possession is through dispossession".[133] How are we to touch without touching or possess without possessing? If there is indeed a touch that does not touch, how are we to understand contact? What does a dispossession that leads to possession say about both? Cornis-Pope, like Beatrice, highlights the "paradoxical" and "impossible" nature of this demand. Derrida, a little less scholarly, declares simply "it is madness".[134]

We can thus see that the "questions of ethics" I outlined in my chapter's introduction will not be so simple as to have a constative, voice-able answer. The interrogation is itself fraught, as we realise if we examine more closely that which the novels' characters ask. In *Slow Man* Paul says to Elizabeth:

> 'Are you writing a book and putting me in it? Is that what you are doing? If so, what sort of book is it, and don't you think you need my consent first?'
> She sighs. 'If I were going to *put you in a book*, as you phrase it, I would simply do so. I would change your name and one or two of the circumstances of your life, to get around the law of libel, and that would be that'.[135]
>
> 'It would not be proper. My wife would not thank me for offering her up as a minor character in one of your literary efforts. But if it is stories you want, I will tell you a story from the period of my marriage that does not involve my wife. You can use it to illustrate my character, or not, as you wish'.[136]
>
> 'And are you sure,' he replies icily, 'that you are not seeing complications where they do not exist, for the sake of those dreary stories you write?'[137]

All three of these statements interrogate the propriety, or impropriety, of Elizabeth's writing project; the second even announces explicitly that "it would not be proper". The first and second quotations allude to a decision Elizabeth must make: is it right for her to include certain facts or

[132] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 67-8; italics in original.
[133] Jenkyns, "Disinterring Burried Lives": 214.
[134] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 68.
[135] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, pp. 88-9; italics in original.
[136] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, pp. 199-200.
[137] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 157.

characters? Should Paul, and his wife, be "put in" a book or not? The third quotation refers to a slightly different dilemma; in this case, Paul questions Elizabeth's interpretation of events and implies that it may be skewed "for the sake of" the work she is composing. Despite their differences, however, all three of these declarations are founded on the same assumption: the book Elizabeth is writing is based on Paul's life and its propriety hinges on the way in which she chooses to portray it; the "ethics" of her project centre on issues of transformation and representation.

A similar logic emerges in *The Human Stain* as Zuckerman maps his error-strewn path to the uncovering of Coleman's secret. Zuckerman repeatedly informs us that he has "got it wrong" and, moreover, that getting it wrong is inevitable.[138] Zuckerman is surprised, for example, to discover that Coleman has a tattoo and therefore describes it as "[a] tiny symbol, if one were needed, of all the million circumstances of the other fellow's life, of that blizzard of details that constitute the confusion of a human biography—a tiny symbol to remind me why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong".[139] Zuckerman alludes to a process of interpretation which one can get "wrong" or, by implication, "right". Zuckerman invites us to contemplate whether getting it wrong might have ethical consequences for the novel he is writing.

Both Paul and Zuckerman offer what appears to be a valid and straightforward interrogation of the fiction's ethics. However, the form in which these questions are presented to us problematises them profoundly. The interpretation and transformation to which the two characters allude does not of course ever take place; the exteriority to which these questions apparently refer is in fact an illusion they effect. The "secret" surrounding Coleman Silk, for example, is not uncovered but is produced by *The Human Stain*. Timothy Clark explains in "Not Seeing The Short Story" that "[w]ith a fictional character, the observations, however acute they seem, become true by the simple virtue of being made. The language can only describe what it has itself posited and in the terms in which it posits it. There is an effect of nice discrimination, but the fine lines are actually drawn by the finger that seems to be merely pointing them out". The literary, Clark concludes, "actually conjures up

[138] This theme is also present in the other two books in Roth's American Trilogy.
[139] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 22.

what it seems merely to re-present as already there".[140] The "questions" these novels pose are not questions *per se*; they do not interrogate a pre-existing ethical situation but generate the very dilemmas—the very "ethics"—they appear simply to discuss. Their content is therefore compromised. In *Slow Man,* Paul's wife appears as a "minor character" at the very moment he tells Elizabeth he won't "offer her up"; Paul is clearly already "in" a book even as he asks Elizabeth whether she is planning to put him in one. What happens at these moments is far stranger than the summaries I outlined in my introduction suggest. These novels do not offer a discussion of, but point to the impossibility of thematizing, an ethics of fiction.

This is not to say, however, that we should abandon "ethics" *tout court* or cease to tend towards tact. Derrida does not dismiss tact; it continues to inform his reading of Nancy and discussion of touch in *On Touching.* However, this text remains mindful of the "madness" outlined above; *On Touching* plays with the "[u]ndecidable play of the metonymy". Derrida realises that "[t]o touch, to touch him/it, is possible only by not touching"; his text, if it succeeds, will have offered us an "[e]xperience of the impossible".[141] Ben-Naftali writes that "[d]econstruction […] chooses tact. It is a discourse of tact, of involvement, which defines its own measure. However, it is also always already impossible".[142]

Derrida offers a commentary on Nancy's work but, even as he does so, he wonders "how to do it in the right fashion, by touching it without touching it too much, while observing the limits of decency, of duty, of politeness – of friendship?"[143] Derrida repeatedly expresses a desire to touch Nancy's work and to be in contact with it. At the same time, however, his text maintains a reservation. The hyphen of his title, for example, institutes a distance between his wish for "touching" and his subject, Jean-Luc Nancy (this respectful hesitation is repeated, too, in the title "To Speculate – On Freud").

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[140] Timothy Clark, "Not Seeing the Short Story: A Blind Phenomenology of Reading," *Oxford Literary Review* 26 (2004): 8.
[141] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 298.
[142] Ben-Naftali, "Deconstruction: Derrida", p. 663.
[143] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 303.

Derrida proposes the figure of the tangent as that which best embodies this simultaneous desire to touch and not to touch:

> *A tangent touches a line or a surface but without crossing it, without a true intersection, thus in a kind of impertinent pertinence. It touches only one point, but a point is nothing, that is, a limit without depth or surface, untouchable even by way of a figure. Suppose one were to reach there, what would give one the right to touch it?*[144]

Derrida points out that a tangent "touches a line or a surface" but only briefly, "without a true intersection". It is, even at the moment of contact, already moving away. The touch it achieves is glimpsed, only, at a single point. The reader experiences it only fleetingly. As Derrida explains in the intimacy of an aside "(the etymology of *contingency* also points to touching, tact, or contact)".[145] The touch tact demands happens only contingently, as it moves away.

On Touching attempts to replicate this movement in its approach towards Nancy. It is, like many of Derrida's texts, marked by a series of interruptions. The most lengthy of these occurs at approximately the work's mid-point. Derrida ruptures his text both graphically and logically by declaring in italics "[*a*]*t this point, my discourse was shaping up badly, and everything already had to be started over from the beginning*".[146] He repeats this move time and again until finally he suggests that it might be better were we not to read *On Touching* at all: "[l]et's rush towards the ending and recapitulate. I'm now sincerely asking that this book be forgotten or effaced, and I'm asking this as I wouldn't have done—with as much sincerity—for any of my other books. Wipe it all away, and start or start again to read him—Nancy—in his *corpus*".[147] Derrida points out that the most tactful and respectful thing to do would be to read Nancy's work itself; all commentary, Derrida implies, is somewhat tactless. Derrida and Nancy appear as distant as they can be. Just as it seems as though Derrida might be coming close to Nancy's work, he dismisses all that he has written before, informing us that it represents a failed attempt and distancing himself absolutely from his project. Then again, we realise that Derrida's injunction is, of course, somewhat insincere; he does not "wipe…away" his entire work and he asks us to forget his book only once we are very

[144] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 131; italics in original.
[145] Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, p. 133.
[146] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 131; italics in original.
[147] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 301; italics in original.

close to completing it. Derrida proposes to remove himself from his work; by taking place within this work, his declaration reveals, however, that he is irrevocably bound within it. This distancing-moment realises a paradoxical and inescapable closeness.

We experience a similar oscillating movement between closeness and distance when we read *Slow Man* and *Possession*. I pointed out earlier that Paul in *Slow Man* champions distance and indirection. Regarding his nurse the narrator notes, for example, "[h]e does not refer to her as *Marijana* in case it sounds too familiar; in conversation with her he continues to call her *Mrs Jokić,* as she calls him *Mr Rayment*".[148] Paul posits the "too familiar" as that which ought to be avoided; it is proper that he address "Marijana" as "Mrs Jokić". The remarks Paul makes about his amputated leg repeat this pattern. Paul admits that "[t]o himself he does not call it a stump. He would like not to call it anything; he would like not to think about it, but that is not possible. If he has a name for it, it is *le jambon*. *Le jambon* keeps it at a nice, contemptuous distance".[149] Distraught, Paul would prefer not to think about his stump at all but, given that he must, he chooses to refer to it euphemistically as "le jambon". The word, to the reader, seems a somewhat absurd description. But that, Paul explains, is the point; avoiding direct reference to legs, amputation, or stump, this nonsense-word keeps Paul's predicament at a "contemptuous distance".

The figures of Beatrice Nest and Ellen Ash in Byatt's *Possession* share Paul's belief that distance is "nice". Jenkyns argues that "Beatrice Nest, the editor of Mrs Ash's journal, is muddy and pathetic, but she is on the side of the angels because she recognises in it the 'mystery of privacy', in contrast to the smart omniscience of more successful academics".[150] By criticising the "smart omniscience of more successful academics" Jenkyns suggests that it might be better not to know. At one point in the novel, Ellen composes a letter to LaMotte in which she announces

> 'You must understand that I have *always known*, that my husband told me, long ago, freely and truthfully, of his feelings for you …'[151]

[148] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 30.
[149] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 29.
[150] Jenkyns, "Disinterring Burried Lives": 213.
[151] Byatt, *Possession*, pp. 452-3; italics in original.

Ellen's tone is defiant and certain as she declares that her husband told her about his relationship with LaMotte "long ago". As the passage progresses it becomes clear, however, that Ellen "knows" of her husband's affair because she has gleaned it indirectly through "silence". We are surprised to learn this; Ellen's initial description of the telling as free and truthful implies a very different, more direct, form of communication. This initial declaration is clearly at odds with the way in which we would usually understand a message inferred through silence. By describing Ash's discretion in this counter-intuitive way, Ellen validates it, offering us a positive description which, she declares, "would be no more and no less than the truth". Silence, Ellen implies, can be as open and as honest as any other form of declaration.

However, there is also an ambivalence here. Ellen is ostensibly defiant. It occurs to the reader, however, that this certainty might be a defence. If, indeed, she is proud of her indirect understanding, why does she write as though events occurred otherwise? Why does she announce that her husband has "told" her about LaMotte when no such telling occurred? Does Ellen's description in fact represent what she wished had happened? *Slow Man* concludes its contemplation concerning the way in which Paul addresses *Marijana* with the words "[b]ut to himself he has no reservation about calling her *Marijana*".[152] Paul's admission that "to himself" he addresses Marijana familiarly establishes a tension: what is permitted and correct is at odds with the way in which Paul secretly desires to speak to the woman who nurses him. The statements in which Paul and Ellen affirm distance in fact conceal a desire for intimacy; their longing for proximity becomes, paradoxically, apparent at the moments at which they beg for distance.

A similar disjunction emerges between Paul's declaration and the reader's understanding in relation to his stump. Paul celebrates the "contemptuous distance" of the appellation "*le jambon*" as "nice"; the reader, however, senses the problem Paul's comments mask: such avoidance may be both undesirable and damaging. In each of these examples it is therefore possible to read these characters against what they ostensibly say; the reader intuits a "truth" at odds with what the characters would have us believe.

[152] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 30.

The realisations that we make concerning Paul and Ellen place us in a position of interpretative superiority; we feel as though we have realised something that these characters themselves have not. Later in both novels, however, it becomes clear that Paul and Ellen are in fact conscious of this alternative reading. Ellen continues:

> And if she did write that, it would be no more and no less than the truth, but it would not ring true, it would not convey the truth of the way it had been, of the silence in the telling, the silences that extended before and after it, always the silences.[153]

This admission is more sorrowful in tone and less certain about the benefits of silence; Ellen is somewhat less sure about the "mystery of privacy" than Jenkyns suggests. In *Slow Man* Paul tells Elizabeth "[i]n my earlier life I did not speak as freely about myself as I do today, Mrs Costello. Decency held me back, decency or shame'".[154] Paul first attributes his decision not to "speak…freely" about himself to "decency", thus reiterating a preference for proper distance. Belatedly, however, he admits that the source of his reservation may be a more negative "shame". Ellen, too, wonders "[h]ad she done well, or ill? She had done what was in her nature, which was profoundly implicated in not knowing, in silence, in avoidance, she said to herself, in harsher moments".[155] Ellen and Paul both acknowledge the realisation made earlier by the reader: the distance they celebrate *may* be proper and polite or then again, it may also be an "avoidance", the product of cowardice, "one of those oblique remarks that people make at moments when the real words are too difficult to bring out".[156] Such comments may be "oblique", an imperfect substitute for the "real words".

The characters display a belated comprehension of our earlier realisations. These admissions have a dual effect. On the one hand, they affirm our interpretation; we were correct to note the conflicted nature of Paul and Ellen's desire for distance. On the other hand, however, they undercut our reading; the realisation we believed to be at odds with, and more sophisticated than, the

[153] Byatt, *Possession*, pp. 453.
[154] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 156.
[155] Byatt, *Possession*, p. 455.
[156] Coetzee, *Slow Man*, p. 44.

understanding of the characters themselves is in fact shared by them. Our interpretation is not "wrong" *per se* but has failed to take into account to whom it might properly belong; the realisation was not so simply our own.[157] Paul and Ellen reclaim our interpretation; we become conscious of a certain tactlessness in our earlier reading.

We are left with an awareness of the potential effect of our earlier "superiority". Tact, we realise, might be linked to the problem of "staying in-tact", as Naftali's hyphen makes subtly apparent .[158] Who gets to stay intact? And who might be undone as a result? Ellen compounds this dilemma as she expresses an awareness of potential, future readers of her journal, of those who might interpret her situation. The narrator announces, "[s]he put more coal and more pieces of wood on the fire, and made a brave little blaze, by the side of which she sat down to manufacture the carefully edited, the carefully *strained* (the metaphor was one of jelly-making) truth of her journal. She would decide later what to do with *that*. It was both a defense against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and vultures".[159] By depicting her readers as "ghouls and vultures" against whom she must defend herself, Ellen positions herself as the victim of others' interpretations; she is, she highlights, vulnerable to our reading.

Ellen's anxiety leaves me aware that I, too, am vulnerable; the interpretation I offer is subject once again to another reading. This fact also becomes apparent in Derrida's *On Touching*. I cited earlier the moment at which Derrida points out that the most tactful and respectful thing to do would be to read Nancy's work itself. Ostensibly, Derrida announces that his work has failed; his relationship with Nancy is doomed. At this moment, however, the question of relationship *per se*—and of our relation to the text—is placed into relief. We can either continue to read Derrida's text or we can abandon it and read Nancy's work instead. This dilemma is left to us to resolve; we, as readers, realise that Derrida's text cannot make the decision for us. Derrida's moment of apparent failure thus signals a dependence; the tactful- or tactlessness of Derrida's reading cannot be affirmed by

[157] The novels are not innocent to the reprimand but perhaps, through the belatedness of Paul and Ellen's admissions, deliberately invite this mis-reading.
[158] Ben-Naftali, "Deconstruction: Derrida", p. 663; italics in original.
[159] Byatt, *Possession*, pp. 461-2.

and within his work itself but will be decided later. Derrida thus announces, "[*m*]*y impertinence will be my tact*".[160] The moment of impertinence in Derrida's text makes the question of tact indirectly apparent; it shows us that it is left to us to judge.

Tact, I have shown in this chapter, exercises a fundamental yet tricky imperative. It demands both distance and proximity; it declares that we ought both to touch and not to touch the work that we read. The co-habitation of these two inflections within a single word highlights the extent to which intimacy and distance are, in fact, never discrete; one always informs and undoes the other. Even as we aim to distance ourselves or to touch we must remain mindful of the impossibility of our task. In our failures we may perhaps achieve the paradoxical touching distance or distant touch that tact demands.

[160] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 131; italics in original.

Chapter Five
You

I have enjoined you to tact, and elsewhere to responsibility, and realised that neither can be known or guaranteed. The appeal can and must be made, but its success is never certain. It must be made again. This chapter of my thesis considers it a final time by analysing the direct address in which it is formulated. The conclusion to my Deconstruction and Ethics apostrophises; it addresses itself directly to you. The form may have struck you as unusual. In her book *Relating Narratives,* Adriana Cavarero points out that "the *you* [*tu*] is a term that is not at home in modern and contemporary developments of ethics and politics".[1] Derrida also wishes "to underscore to what degree philosophical discourse has excluded (one might even say prohibited) this strophic turn of the apostrophe, as well as 'thou' and 'you', from Aristotle to Kant, from Descartes to Hegel and to Heidegger". He points out that "[e]ven today, this prohibition extends to many others" and that "[e]xceptions—if any—are rare".[2] You is also "an uncommon pronoun in modern literature", as Justine Jordan points out in her review of Smith's *Other Stories and Other Stories*.[3] It is unusual in comparison to what Richardson calls its "more established and conventional neighbours, the first and third persons".[4] Monica Fludernik, in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology,* discusses it in a chapter on "'odd' personal pronouns" and describes "second-person fiction" as "[t]he most outstanding oddity in the pronominal realm".[5]

These comments suggest that the second person is rare, peculiar and seldom used. Not everyone agrees; Richardson argues that you is in fact fairly prevalent. He asserts that "[t]he genealogy of second person fiction is surprisingly rich".[6] Richardson concedes, however, that this richness is seldom acknowledged. He points out that "earlier theorists of narrative either ignored this kind of

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[1] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 90; italics in original.
[2] Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 23.
[3] Justine Jordan, "Dropped Stitches," *London Review of Books* 1 July 1999: 33.
[4] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Theory and Interpretation of Narrative (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 18.
[5] Monika Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 223 and p. 226.
[6] Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, p. 17.

narration or dismissed it as a curiosity".[7] Jonathan Culler, in *The Pursuit of Signs,* stresses similarly that the apostrophe is employed "repeatedly and intensely" in poetry but that one can "read vast amounts of criticism without learning" that this is the case. Criticism "in some innate hostility to voice, always seeks to deny or evade the vocative".[8]

It is suggested either that philosophy and literature shun the second person or, alternatively, that the second person *is* employed but that critics refuse to acknowledge it. Whichever is the case, it is clear that "you" provokes discomfort. Derrida, in *The Politics of Friendship*, reflects briefly upon the "flexions and reflections of personal pronouns, between *I, they, we* and *you*". He explains that

> I feel responsible towards *them* (the new thinkers who are coming), therefore responsible before *us* who announce them, therefore towards *us* who are already what we are announcing and who must watch over that very thing, therefore towards and before *you* whom I call to join us, before and towards me who understands all this and who is before it all: me, them, us, you, etc.[9]

A hierarchy emerges; "I" or "me" comes first, followed by "them", "us" and finally "you". Not all pronouns are equal. There is, as Cavarero also points out, an "intrinsic morality of pronouns". Our "curious linguistic code" places the second person pronoun at the bottom; it dismisses it as "superfluous".[10] Culler argues that the apostrophe is "embarrassing" and "that which critical discourse cannot comfortably assimilate".[11] Sarah Wood, reproducing in an analysis of Derrida's "Envois" the apostrophe we find within it, wonders "[w]as there ever such a text as 'Envois' for making you say strange things? And for making you unable to say anything?"[12] The second person of Derrida's text is perplexing and puzzling.

"You" threatens to destabilize criticism. The conclusion of my Deconstruction and Ethics chapter employs it for this very reason; the second person promises to perform a necessary and productive affront. Morrissette suggests that "narrative 'you'" "although of comparatively late development, appears as a mode of curiously varied psychological resonances, capable, in the proper hands, of

[7] Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, p. 21.
[8] Jonathan D. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 136; italics in original.
[9] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 39.
[10] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, pp. 90-1.
[11] Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 135 and p. 137.
[12] Wood, "Edit": 48.

producing effects in the fictional field that are unobtainable by other modes or persons".[13] "The second person" is, for Richardson, "a playful form, original, transgressive, and illuminating" whose "ideological possibilities" are "rich".

My chapter will, in its first section, explore these possibilities by turning to a number of instances in which the second person is both employed and theorised in Derrida's "Envois", "My Chances" and *The Politics of Friendship* and in Ali Smith's short stories. Jordan points out that "[m]any of [Smith's] pieces are interior monologues apostrophizing a lover". In "The Theme is Power", for example, "the lover, even when absent, provides the necessary audience".[14] The story is littered with phrases such as "I tell you", "[y]ou see, this is what I mean" and "[y]ou see, I tell you".[15] Smith's work also offers a theorization of the apostrophe's effects; one of the pieces in her collection *The First Person and Other Stories*, entitled "The Second Person", ruminates on the pronoun she so frequently employs.

Celebration of the second person is not, however, absolute. Morissette cautions that "certain recent examples" indicate that the second person may "denigrate" into "a technical 'trick'".[16] Both "The Second Person" and Derrida's theorisations reveal, as I will show in my second section, that "you" is a tricky pronoun; it does not remain still and its address is not guaranteed. As I pointed out in my earlier chapter we still need to think you further and read you a little more. Something different *might* happen when I address you, but we must remain suspicious of any claim that this direct address is intrinsically or unquestionably beneficial. As with every concept I've discussed thus far, and as I will show in my chapter's third and final section, it requires reading—even, perhaps, a particular type of reading—if it is to remain useful.

[13] Bruce Morrissette, "Narrative 'You' in Contemporary Literature," *Comparative Literature Studies* 2 (1965): p. 2.
[14] Jordan, "Dropped Stitches": 33.
[15] Ali Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories* (London: Granta, 1999), p. 124, p. 126 and p. 132.
[16] Morrissette, "Narrative 'You' in Contemporary Literature": 2.

You Included

Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* opens by quoting an apostrophe which, according to Montaigne, "'Aristotle often repeated'": "O my friends, there is no friend".[17] Straight away, the text reflects on the address it has just made. Derrida writes:

> 'O my friends, there is no friend.'
>
> I am addressing you, am I not?
> How many of us are there?
> - Does that count?
> - Addressing you in this way, I have perhaps not said anything yet. Nothing that is *said* in this saying. Perhaps nothing sayable.[18]

Derrida's book first addresses "you"; in doing so, Derrida points out, it has "perhaps not said anything yet". The address perhaps, performing a "saying" prior to the "said", highlights a relationality which precedes whatever constative statement it might later make. Smith's "Text for the Day" begins by telling us to "[i]magine Melissa's collection of books".[19] The first word of the text anticipates the work (of imagination) in which the reader must engage if this story is to succeed. The opening of the text refers not to the fiction that it will tell, but to the reader with whom it is engaged.

Culler, more definite than Derrida, announces that "apostrophe is different in that it makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself".[20] Culler declares, and Derrida tentatively suggests, that the second person shifts the emphasis of an account towards its "circuit of communication". For McHale "[t]he second person is *par excellence* the sign of relation. Even more strongly than the first person, it announces the presence of a communicative circuit linking addressor and addressee".[21]

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[17] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, pp. 1-2.
[18] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 1; italics in original.
[19] Ali Smith, *Free Love and Other Stories* (London: Virago, 1995), p. 19.
[20] Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 135.
[21] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York; London: Methuen, 1987), p. 223; my chapter's third section will question McHale's claim that the second person "announces the presence of a communicative circuit" "*more strongly*" than the first person. This "communicative circuit" may become just as apparent when I say "I".

Second person texts therefore admit both the reader and the act of reading. The final story in Smith's collection *Free Love and Other Stories,* "The World with Love", opens with the words "[o]n a day when it looks like rain and you're wandering between stations in a city you don't know very well, you meet a woman in the street whom you haven't seen for fifteen years, not since you were at school".[22] The story's protagonist is referred to as "you".[23] For McHale, the text therefore invites us to place ourselves in the position of protagonist; to "project" ourselves "into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*".[24]

We are welcome to identify ourselves, as Margolin points out, as either "recipients of the narration" or even as "the hero of the narrated events".[25] Fludernik points out that second person texts "seem to involve the reader directly".[26] The direct address turns these texts, according to Margolin, from "the traditional *lecture d'un aventure*, in Ricardou's terms" to "*une aventure d'une lecture*".[27]

Jason Edwards, in his book on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, repeatedly pauses in order to address his reader. He writes,

> Before starting formally, though, can I ask you a favour? As you read this book, for reasons I'll again explain, can you check in regularly on how you're feeling, where you're feeling it, and for how long? Could you also note down what you're thinking and dreaming about, recalling and registering? Thanks. I promise I'm not just being enigmatic.[28]

Edwards begs the reader to monitor his/her reaction to the text; he does this, he explains, "to make you more visible, dear reader".[29] Edwards acknowledges his reader and admits him/her into the text.

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[22] Smith, *Free Love and Other Stories*, p. 141.
[23] This text is, according to the rules stipulated by Richardson, Fludernik and others, a "second person narrative". It is in fact one the few of Smith's stories which properly fits the definition. The other stories that I have mentioned and that I will discuss blend first person narration and second person address and therefore conform less neatly. They illuminate our thinking of "you" nonetheless.
[24] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 224.
[25] Uri Margolin, "Narrative "You" Revisited," *Language and Style* 23.4 (1990): 437.
[26] Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, p. 226.
[27] Margolin, "Narrative "You" Revisited": 444.
[28] Jason Edwards, *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,* Routledge Critical Thinkers: Essential Guides for Literary Studies (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 2.
[29] Edwards, *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick*, p. 4.

The reader is, in Margolin's terms, "not just an observer, but the main agent of these events as well".[30] The second person is, therefore, for Margolin, closely allied with "the wider concerns of literary theory in the 1970s" I outlined in my introduction under the term "reader-response" whereby "the thematics of the reader's role has replaced creativity or the text in isolation as the new focus of investigation".[31]

Smith's stories make the "thematics of the reader's role" their "focus of investigation" in other ways too. Their narratives frequently revolve around acts of storytelling and thereby thematize and explore the shift to which Margolin refers. I will, in the paragraphs which follow, examine them more closely in order to highlight in more detail the implications of this emphasis on the "reader's role" and to ask, ultimately, whether the second person is indeed capable of acknowledging them. As the narrator of "The Theme is Power" does the washing-up s/he tells "you" "[l]isten to this. This is what happened".[32] S/he then proceeds to recall a number of episodes from his/her childhood. The second person does not simply listen, however; the narrative is marked by a series of bracketed interruptions:

> (So it happened quite long ago? you say behind me.)[33]
>
> I pile the bowls and cups up on each other, a bit unsafe. (Don't you feel bad about that man who got beaten up? you say behind me […])[34]
>
> But is it connected? I'm a bit lost, are they connected, the story about your father and the story about the woman with the headscarf? you say behind me. You throw your applecore at the bin with perfect aim; in it goes […])[35]
>
> (Aha, you say.)[36]
>
> (Then what happened? you ask.)[37]

The listener interjects in order to comment on and pose a number of questions about the stories the first person tells. A similar situation is portrayed in another of Smith's stories, "A Story of Love".

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[30] Margolin, "Narrative "You" Revisited": 443.
[31] Margolin, "Narrative "You" Revisited": 444.
[32] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 121.
[33] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 121.
[34] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 129.
[35] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 130.
[36] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 131.
[37] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 133.

In this text, the first and second person take it in turns to tell each other stories which, again, provoke enquiries and objections from the character who listens:

> Is this going to be a sentimental story? [...] Is the dog going to die? Because if it is I don't want to hear it.[38]
>
> But that can't be the end, you said. Were they really brother and sister? Why wouldn't he help her?[39]

The speakers are, in both stories, unimpressed by these interventions. By interrupting, the second person implies—and later in "A Story of Love" announces explicitly—that the narrator has told only "half-stories".[40] The narrator is irritated by this implication; s/he is insulted that the listener would think his/her stories lacking or incomplete. The narrator therefore evinces an exasperation towards the demands of the listener. In "The Theme is Power" the first person tells the second "quiet […] I'm thinking" and "yes, but wait, in a minute". [41] The first person adopts a despairing tone; s/he implies that the second person is both too impatient and overly-inquisitive. In "A Story of Love" the first person interrupts and it is the second person who retorts:

> Listen, you said. Either I tell you a story or I don't. Make up your mind. And you have to promise here and now to take that story on its own terms.
> All right, okay. Within reason, I said.[42]

Again, the character telling the story dismisses the listener's demands; s/he requires that the first-person "take the story on its own terms" if s/he is to continue. Nonetheless, the first person continues to complain; at the end of the story about the dog s/he announces:

> That's all very well, I said. But it's not the kind of love story I wanted. I wanted something different.
> You want another kind of love in your story? you said.
> Yes, I said, and I want a story that's a story.
> A story that's a story, you said.
> A proper story, I said.[43]

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[38] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 170.
[39] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 175.
[40] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 174.
[41] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 129 and p. 130
[42] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 170.
[43] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 171.

In response to this demand for a "proper story", the second-person responds "[r]ight then [...] There was once a child whose mother fell asleep. The end".[44] The first-person provides an abrupt and paltry narrative; s/he refuses to mollify or cede to the demands of the second person who asks incredulously "[i]s that it?"[45]

The narrator of the story attempts to shut down the questions of the listener and to silence his/her demands. The listener, s/he suggests, ought merely to receive the tale that is told. The story, these characters suggest, is the possession of s/he who tells it. However, as my thesis has repeatedly stressed and as Smith's stories ultimately show, we cannot uphold this illusion. Later in "A Story of Love" the second-person tells a story about "someone who was in love with the sky".[46] The story concludes "[a]nd so, in the end […] his mother gave in and saw how good it all was and stopped being ashamed and let them live together, so they got a flat in London and settled down and were happy ever after".[47] The first-person is confused:

> Who settled down? I said. Who lived together? I don't get it. How could you settle down in a flat with the sky?
> You looked hard at me as if I was mad.
> Unless she lived in a top flat, did she? I said. And she put in dormer windows. So she could see it above her all the time.
> Your mouth fell open and you looked at me as if I was speaking in a language you couldn't understand. I was frightened. I couldn't think why you were looking at me like this. But you burst out laughing. Not the sky, you said. Not the sky. There was once a man who was in love with *this guy*.[48]

The first-person mis-hears "this guy" as "the sky" and so constructs an entirely different story to the one the first-person would tell; the listener transforms the speaker's story into something other.

The above scene reveals this interpretation as a "mistake" and accordingly corrects it. The story, however, accords the listener's interpretation priority; it bestows a certain privilege on the first-person's "sky" story. We hear the story first as a tale about "the sky" and never in fact read it in full as one about "this guy". Moreover, the final "correction" is somewhat anti-climatic; it converts the

[44] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 172.
[45] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 172.
[46] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 176.
[47] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, pp. 176.
[48] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, pp. 176-7; italics in original.

story into a banal tale of love for "this guy". We may well prefer the fantastic tale of love for the sky. It certainly sits more comfortably alongside other stories by Smith such as "May" in which the narrator falls in love with a tree.

By privileging the listener's version of the tale, "A Story of Love" admits that the reader may alter the story that s/he is told. Moreover, the story frames this alteration as necessary and important; at another point in the text, after the second person has asked a series of questions about a story the first person has told, the first person realises that s/he has no answers; s/he admits "[t]o me there was no mystery; the characters were just characters I had made up to intrigue you, and although I had enjoyed it, now, lying next to you and sensing your mind elsewhere, I wished I had the luxury of wondering about them too".[49] The second-person attributes to the characters a "mystery" the first-person never intended. The first person envies this imaginative readerly operation; the inventions of the listener—which, for Trev Broughton, revolve around "the lure of connections just out of reach, the 'luxury of wondering'"—are revealed to be as fundamental to the creation of these characters as the invention of the speaker.[50] "You" are as fundamental to the storytelling process as the "I" who would tell the story.

The story emerges as the result of a dialogue between "I" and "you". The story in "A Story of Love" is of course not *wholly* determined by its recipient; the comedy of the scene around the sky/guy story relies upon the relational aspect of the two stories; it emphasizes and plays upon how different (in meaning) and yet how similar (in sound) the two words are. The two versions remain closely bound. Smith's stories both admit and celebrate that for "I" and "you" alike what is heard or told is always a "half-story"; the "whole" story lies in the relationship of the two. Smith's stories represent a "project of writing" which is "*at heart*, a transaction" with a "figure-of-the-beloved", as J.M Coetzee writes in an essay on censorship.[51] Both Coetzee and Smith's stories stress that a "transaction" or relationality is central to—"at the heart" of—all writing. Judith Butler also draws attention to this fact in *Giving An Account of Oneself*. "No account", she points out, "takes place

[49] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 175.
[50] Trev Broughton, "Acts of Human Kindness," *Times Literary Supplement* 5 March 1999: 22.
[51] J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 38; my italics.

outside the structure of address, even if the addressee remains implicit and unnamed, anonymous and unspecified".[52]

Wood points out that "[a]bsolute soliloquy is impossible".[53] The work always depends to some extent on "you". Recent theorists—to whom I will turn in my chapter's third section—have made similar realisations with regard to the subject. Cavarero explains that in Levinas's account, for example, the "category of personal identity postulates an*other* as necessity".[54] The beginning of "The Theme is Power" explicitly admits this necessity; the narrator announces "I really need you with me in this story".[55] Derrida, too, acknowledges that "everything comes down to the ear you are able to hear me with".[56] Those writing after Derrida repeatedly confess this dependence. Clare Connors admits that "this book depends on you, my unknown reader, reading it too" and that "[m]y writing is entrusted to you, relies upon your engagement and risks – but perhaps also needs – your disagreement".[57] Hélène Cixous writes, "I will never say enough what (I) my writing owes you".[58] And Sarah Wood admits that "it is a matter here of what *you* will, what you see, hear and love, to the end of it, forever".[59] "A New International, or What You Will" begins by "[turning] to you, the ones who are nearest, with no more than a guessing-sense of who you might be, in the grey light of a journal before daybreak".[60] These statements do not seek to conceal but appear openly to acknowledge—both through their constative statement and via their second person form—that their work relies upon an other or a reader.

Determining the Other

As my thesis has stressed repeatedly, the work is not self-sufficient or masterful; alterity or the other always plays a part. We can no longer uphold a philosophy which, as Derrida writes, claims a

[52] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 36.
[53] Sarah Wood, "A New International, or What You Will," *The Oxford Literary Review* 30.1 (2008): 148.
[54] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 20; italics in original.
[55] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 121.
[56] Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Christie McDonald (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 4.
[57] Clare Connors, *Literary Theory: A Beginner's Guide*, Beginnners' Guides (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), p. 26 .
[58] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 199.
[59] Wood, "A New International, or What You Will": 149; italics in original.
[60] Wood, "A New International, or What You Will": 147.

"self-mastery and mastery of its object in a formalization without remainder".[61] Many critics suggest that the second person itself shatters this illusion of self-sufficiency by admitting the presence of a reader or an addressee. There is, Margolin argues, "an immediacy [in second person narratives] that enables the addressee to enter into dialogue with the narrator, commenting on the manner and matter of the story as it is being presented".[62] Cavarero intimates that the second person acknowledges "the ontological status that binds the reality of the self to the […] material presence of some*one* other".[63] It is, Richardson suggests, "admirably suited to express the unstable nature and intersubjective constitution of the self".[64] But are these effects guaranteed? Is the second person really able fully to convey the dependency I have just outlined?

A problem is already apparent in the claim made by Margolin; in it, the distinction between "narratee" and "reader" has begun to blur. I will, in the next section of my chapter, distinguish more firmly between them. In doing so, it will become clear that the function and effect of the second person is not as straightforward as the above writers suggest. The relationality and the dependence I outlined above cannot be simply thematized. Their very operation undermines our ability to point dispassionately to them. We must, as I will show in my third section, restrict ourselves to a more tentative analysis of the possibilities offered by the second person.

The opening of Smith's "The World with Love" addresses us directly, placing us within the scene it outlines. We may, however, only identify ourselves as the story's main character for a short time. Just as, on the story's second page, "[y]ou're about to say goodbye" to the woman "you" have met, she "says to you out of the blue, God Sam, do you remember that time the Ark went mad?"[65] The story's protagonist is given a proper name; the woman refers to him/her as "Sam". S/he is no longer simply "you". You are no longer able to identify yourself as him/her, unless your name also happens to be Sam (although even if it is, it is clear that her question is not for you; you do not "remember time the Ark went mad"). The text ceases to address us. "As second-person texts

[61] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", pp. 145-6.
[62] Margolin, "Narrative "You" Revisited": 443.
[63] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, pp. 90; italics in original.
[64] Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, p. 36.
[65] Smith, *Free Love and Other Stories*, p. 142.

proceed to fill in more and more specific information about the *you*", Fludernik explains, "with the *you* starting to acquire a job, a family, a specific age, idiosyncratic interests and attitudes, the status of this *you* as a fictional persona becomes increasingly clear". The second person "becomes displaced from its communicational (deictic) relation to a possible (real) reader".[66] Stories such as "The Theme is Power", also, for Jordan, address "you" via "a suggestive tranche of shared memories that the narrator takes for granted". For the reader, however, they are "only hints and clues"; s/he is "out of the loop".[67] The second person "[loses] its function of direct address".[68]

Something similar happens in Derrida's "Envois". Derrida tells you at the start of his text that "[y]ou might read these *envois* as the preface to a book that I have not written" and that "[y]ou might consider [these texts], if you really wish to, as the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence".[69] Derrida's text addresses its reader directly, tentatively suggesting the way in which s/he might wish to interpret it. The text which follows, as Derrida's prefatory comments suggest, turns out to be a "peculiar love letter".[70] "Envois" is, Elam explains, "a series of missives that detail a romance, which is both larded with philosophical allusions and with explicitly clichéd sentimentality".[71] "Envois" "is (they are?)" (we are, as John Phillips' aside implies, never quite sure how to refer to it/them) perhaps a series of messages written originally as letters or postcards.[72] These letters are also written to "you". In one Derrida writes, for example, "I repeat, my love: *for you.* I write for you and speak only to you".[73]

Derrida again employs the second person. However, it no longer addresses us. It seems to speak "only" to Derrida's "love". "[T]he more I read this tremendous love", Wood writes, "the more I read it's not for me. I want it. I want a piece of that. Was there ever such a thing? How good it would be to be sure, to have it there in writing, the ultimate experience of anticipation that actually

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[66] Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, p. 227.
[67] Jordan, "Dropped Stitches": 33.
[68] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 223.
[69] Derrida, "Envois", p. 3.
[70] Diane Elam, *Romancing the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 147.
[71] Elam, *Romancing the Postmodern*, p. 149.
[72] John Phillips, *Angel: The Telescopic Soul or the Episcopic Gaze*. Available: http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/readingthepostcard.htm. Consulted 6 April 2010 .
[73] Derrida, "Envois", p. 73; italics in original.

arrives, in person. And he's not writing to me. How very irritating. It's heartbreaking, in fact".[74] David Wills points out that "there immediately exist at least two addressees – her and the reader".[75] The "you" first refers to us and then does not.

A similar process occurs in "My Chances". As in *The Politics of Friendship*, an apostrophe appears very close to the beginning of the text; Derrida admits that "[y]ou are perhaps wondering".[76] Again, the text seems to address us. A little later, however, Derrida writes

> Playing now with the apostrophe, I prefer to tell you right away: I do not know to whom I am speaking. To whom is this discourse or lecture addressed here and now? It is indeed to you that I am delivering it, but that doesn't change the situation much. You understand quite well why I say this.[77]

Derrida reminds us that he does not know to whom he writes. The you does not address us as directly as it initially seemed; it is less intimate than we supposed. Derrida's text distances itself from us.

In "Envois" Derrida would address himself directly *to* "you" so as to declare his love. He wonders, however, whether

> when I call you my love, my love, is it you I am calling or my love? You, my love, is it you I thereby name, is it to you that I address myself? I don't know if the question is well put, it frightens me. But I am sure that the answer, if it gets to me one day, will have come to me from you. You alone, my love, you alone will have known it […] when I call you my love, is it that I am calling you, yourself, or is it that I am telling my love? and when I tell you my love, is it that I am declaring my love to you or indeed that I am telling *you*, yourself, my love, and that you are my love. I want so much to tell you.[78]

Derrida wants so much to tell you "I love you", but in doing so he finds also that he tells "you"; the declaration of "my love" does not simply address itself to you but names "you" as "my love". Derrida therefore finds "I have called you, yourself. And thereby I have taken your name".[79]

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[74] Wood, "Edit": 53.
[75] David Wills, "Post/Card/Match/Book/Envois/Derrida," *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism* 13.2 (1984): 23.
[76] Derrida, "My Chances", p. 344.
[77] Derrida, "My Chances", p. 344.
[78] Derrida, "Envois", p. 8; italics in original.
[79] Derrida, "Envois", p. 219.

Smith's "The Second Person" explores this taking of "your name". The story's first-person narrator tells a story to and about a second person. Once s/he has finished s/he tells the second person

> That's what you're like.
>
> No it isn't, you say.
> I feel you get annoyed beside me.
> That's nothing like me, you say.[80]

The first-person claims to describe the second. The second-person disagrees, however; the "you" of the first-person's story is, s/he claims, "nothing like" him/her. In order to exact her revenge she retorts

> God, you're saying next to me now. *This is what you're like*.
> You say it in a voice like it's supposed to be my voice, though in reality it's nothing like my voice.
> *This is what you're like*, I say. I say it in the mimic voice you've just used.[81]

The first-person, claiming that the second-person's imitation is "in reality…nothing like my voice", expresses an almost identical objection; s/he, too, does not agree with the way in which the second person represents him/her.

My reaction to the address I encounter in Edwards' *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* is somewhat similar. As I explained earlier, Edwards addresses himself directly to you and asks you to "check in regularly on how you're feeling". The thing is (and I apologise if this sounds unduly harsh) I find these moments in Edwards' text intensely irritating. *No*, I think, *I'm not going to think about how I'm feeling, not if you're going to patronise me like that. "Dear reader" indeed*— I don't know what readers he has in mind but *my* reading is certainly not "more visible" in his text. I feel not addressed, but, like Smith's characters, appropriated, decided in advance.

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[80] Ali Smith, *The First Person and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008), p. 123.
[81] Smith, *The First Person and Other Stories*, p. 125; italics in original.

I experience a similar dissatisfaction when reading the preface to Derrida's "Envois". Derrida tells us "[y]ou might read these *envois* as the preface to a book that I have not written" and that "[y]ou might consider [these texts], if you really wish to, as the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence". The phrase "if you really wish to" expresses an "if you must"-style exasperation. Derrida later tells us that we are "in a hurry to be determined", too "decided upon deciding".[82] He cannot understand why we're so set on knowing.

It is "you" who—much to Derrida's frustration—would "really wish" to define the nature of the text. Yet this is perhaps unfair. We, the readers, have not at this point made any such demand; we haven't even read the "correspondence" to which Derrida refers – we're still reading his preface. Derrida's "you" creates an image of us which fails to correspond to our actual reading. I instinctively disidentify from it and am inclined to assume that he speaks to some other, less patient, audience.

Both of the characters in "The Second Person" are similarly irritated and stress that the "you" of the other's story is a fabrication; it is not a depiction of his/her "true" character. The story's second-person complains:

> What amazes me about you, you say still looking away, is that after all these years, all the years of dialogue between us, you think you've got the right to just decide, like you're God, who I am and who I'm not and what I'm like and what I'm not and what I'd do and what I wouldn't.[83]

The second-person is appalled that the first-person would decide in this way who s/he is and likens it to a God-like act of appropriation. S/he argues that the "I" has treated him/her as "a fiction you can play with".

The "you" of the text becomes a "fiction", a construct or a character. McHale examines a number of second-person texts and realises that "you" either becomes a substitute for the first person "indicating that a character is 'talking to himself'" or, alternatively, that it "stands in for the third-

[82] Derrida, "Envois", p. 4.
[83] Smith, *The First Person and Other Stories*, pp. 123-4.

person pronoun of the fictional character, functioning in a kind of displaced free indirect discourse".[84] This slippage does not happen only in fictional texts; it is also a feature of the second person when used in everyday speech, as Smith's "God's Gift" and "No Exit" reveal. In "God's Gift" the narrator declares "I wasn't frightened, I wasn't frightened on any of the flights, since you are only frightened of losing something if you've got something to lose. Not you: one. One is only frightened, etc".[85] The pattern is repeated again at the end of the story: "[e]verything you do, everything you see, everything you feel, every single moment, good or bad, that you get. Not you: one. Every single moment, good or bad, that one gets".[86] And in "No exit", too, the narrator phones "you" (again a character from whom it appears s/he has recently separated) in order to ask, "[w]hat I was wondering, I say, is whether or not, if you were trapped in there, well, not you, I mean one, someone, anyone, if someone was trapped in there and the door had shut and everybody'd gone home, do you think there'd still be any lights on in there?"[87] In each of these examples, the narrator corrects his/her use of the pronoun "you". S/he has used it (as we often do) when s/he "really" means "one". "You" functions as a third person impersonal pronoun. Fludernik therefore describes it as "inherently ambiguous and multi-functional".[88] You is, for Bonheim, a "Protean shape-shifter".[89] And for McHale it is simply "shifty".[90]

This slippage cannot be controlled; it occurs every time I use the word "you". Derrida finds that he writes "[*e*]*n train* to write *you* (you? to you?)".[91] Cixous echoes this equivocation when she announces "I write you: I write to you and I write you".[92] When I write "you" I do not simply address myself to "you" but name and create a "you". My writing determines "you" in a certain way. I mentioned earlier that Coetzee describes a writing which is "at heart" a transaction with the figure-of-the-beloved. Coetzee admits, however, that writing does not only try to please its figure

[84] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 223.
[85] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 4.
[86] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 12.
[87] Smith, *The First Person and Other Stories*, p. 111.
[88] Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, p. 223.
[89] Helmut Bonheim, "Narration in the Second Person," *Recherches Anglaises et Americaines* 16 (1983): 79.
[90] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 223.
[91] Derrida, "Envois", p. 32; italics in original.
[92] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 199.

of the beloved, but "also tries continually though surreptitiously to revise and recreate her as the-one-who-will-be-pleased".[93]

Derrida realises that

> I apostrophize. This too is a genre one can afford oneself, the apostrophe. A genre and a tone. The word—apostrophizes—speaks of the words addressed to the singular one, a live interpellation (the man of discourse or writing interrupts the continuous development of the sequence, abruptly turns toward someone, that is, addresses himself to you), but the word also speaks of the address to be detoured.[94]

The apostrophe is "detoured". When I apostrophize, Derrida points out, "I have [the other] come, he is present for me; I *presuppose* his presence, if only at the end of my sentence, on the other end of the line [*au bout du fil*], at the intentional pole of my allocution". However, "my very sentence simultaneously puts him at a distance or retards his arrival, since it must always ask or presuppose the question 'are you there?'"[95] The apostrophe therefore "resembles at one and the same time a *recall* and a *call*".[96] This duality is contained in its very etymology. Although we think of it in terms of address and inclusion it derives, according to the OED, from the Greek meaning "to turn away".[97]

In any second person text there is therefore "[a] continuous dialectic of identification and distancing […] as the reader is alternately drawn closer to and further away from the protagonist".[98] Derrida explains in *The Politics of Friendship* that the readers "are summoned to be spoken to, *da*, then dismissed, *fort*, saying to them, speaking *of them*, that they are no longer there".[99]

The apostrophe does not only speak *to* its addresses, but also speaks *of* them. We realise, moreover, that "between talking *to them* and speaking *of them* there is a world of difference".[100] Both Derrida's text and the second person of Smith's story imply that the act of determination I just

[93] Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, p. 38.
[94] Derrida, "Envois", p. 4.
[95] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 173.
[96] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 235; italics in original.
[97] Dictionary, Available: http://www.oed.com/. Consulted 19 November 2009.
[98] Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, p. 21.
[99] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, pp. 173; italics in original.
[100] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 172.

outlined is problematic. In order to show why this is the case I will, in the paragraphs which follow, return once more to the reader-response theory I outlined in my introductory chapter. Reader response, as I pointed out earlier, argues that the response of the reader ought to be taken into account and represented by literary criticism. Fish, however, is conscious that the reader he talks about is "a construct, an ideal or idealized reader […] *the* reader is the *informed* reader".[101] As has been highlighted by many commentators on Fish's work, this "ideal" is not neutral but carries with it a number of assumptions. Most notably, Fish's reader is always male. Vincent B. Leitch stresses, moreover, that theories of reader-response "pushed critical enquiry towards pedagogy, typically locating text and reader in the classroom".[102] Fish's reader is someone who "does everything within his power to make himself informed".[103] He even envisages his own reader as a "user-student" for whom his account might function as a "way of teaching".[104] Elsewhere, Fish writes that "[i]t seems obvious that the efforts of readers are always to discern and therefore to realize (in the sense of becoming) an author's intention".[105] For Iser, too, "[a]n ideal reader would have to have an identical code to that of the author". The author, therefore, is "theoretically the only possible ideal reader".[106] The above examples construct a specific image of who the reader is or ought to be; the notion of the ideal reader establishes in advance the code to which s/he ought to conform.

Fish and Iser find that, in writing about the experience of reading, they construct an image of a particular reader. They cannot do otherwise. This is, Fish realises, a problem. Reader response argues that the response of the reader ought to be taken into account and represented by literary criticism. Fish is, however, unable to keep this response sufficiently open in his work. He interrupts his analysis in order to ask anxiously "[b]ut what reader? When I talk about the responses of 'the reader', am I not really talking about myself, and making myself into a surrogate for all the millions of readers who are not me at all?"[107] Later he wonders "[w]ho is this reader? How can I presume to describe his experiences, and what do I say to readers who report that they do not have

[101] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 48; italics in original.
[102] Vincent B. Leitch, "Reader-Response Criticism," *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 1995), p. 33.
[103] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 49.
[104] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 67.
[105] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 161.
[106] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, pp. 28-9.
[107] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 44.

the experiences I describe?"[108] In both of these quotations, Fish becomes aware of the fact that there are readers and responses other than those his text represents. His text enacts certain exclusions; it cannot take into account every perspective. We may find, as readers of Fish's text, that we "do not have the experiences" he describes. Our reading diverges from that which Fish sets down; the text does not address us. By constructing a particular reader Fish's text excludes us as readers and thereby negates its own theory; it fails to take into account our experience or response.

Equally, the texts I am examining set out to acknowledge their dependence on an other; they attempt to speak to, and admit, a reader on whom they rely. However, they find themselves instead speaking *of* this reader. As I explained earlier, the narrator of Smith's "The Theme is Power" begins by announcing "I really need you with me in this story". S/he admits, however, that "you're not home. You won't be home for hours yet".[109] S/he proceeds nonetheless to tell his/her story, complete with the second person interjections I mentioned in my chapter's first section. After a while the narrator declares "I turn around. You're not there. I knew that. There's no one here, just me, and my father breathing next door".[110] Later, after the second person complains "I still don't really get the connection", the first person admits "[w]ell, no. Okay. Actually you don't say anything, you're not home yet. But you'll be home soon, so I imagine your key in the door, you kicking off your shoes and hanging your jacket in the hall, and coming through, stealing up behind me and kissing the back of my neck".[111] The interjections do not, in fact, come from a second person; the dialogue is imagined wholly by the story's first person. There is no second person proper in these texts; the "reader" is not in fact made present.

The "I" appropriates "you" as knowable and identifiable; it assumes, in its confident representation, an ability to recognise the other. Moreover, whenever I think I have recognised "you" or think "'[o]h, now I know who you are'", Butler argues, "I cease to address you, or to be addressed by you".[112] By assimilating you within *my* language, I do a disservice to your quality *as* other; I return you to the same. The text masters whatever "you" it represents. Derrida suggests that "the proper

[108] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 159.
[109] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 121.
[110] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 133.
[111] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 135.
[112] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 43.

name of the other" would "perhaps […] come back to and come down to the same".[113] Even when the name we use is "you" the other finds itself assimilated within the language of an "I".

The other, Derrida explains, is not properly other unless left "to come". We must, Derrida points out, "by definition, leave the other to come".[114] Derrida suggests that "[s]omething of [the] call of the other must remain nonreappropriable, nonsubjectivable, and in a certain way nonidentifiable, a sheer supposition, so as to remain *other*, a *singular* call to response or to responsibility".[115] In order to remain other, the "call of the other" must elude the appropriation my language performs. Butler suggests that "[a]s we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy".[116]

The other must remain "nonidentifiable" and "nonsubjectivable". In order to fully signal their dependence these texts must address themselves *to* an other they do not yet, and may never, know. For Derrida, *who* is therefore "the great question". We must ask "*Who? Who asks the question who? Where? How? When? Who arrives?*". *Who*, Derrida suggests, remains "irreducible" to a "what" which would decide the other. "Who", Derrida realises, "withdraws from or provokes the displacement of the categories in which biography, autobiography, and memoirs are thought".[117] We might, in the wonder of the question *who are you*, remain open to the other.

Who is, however, "the most difficult question". As I have already explained there is no *to* which does not also speak *of* the other. Hannah Arendt admits that "[t]he moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us into saying *what* he is".[118] Even when we want to say *who*, we find ourselves again saying *what*. For both Arendt and Derrida "who" remains curiously impossible. Derrida places us in a paradoxical bind; he demands that we favour "who" above

[113] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 147.
[114] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 174.
[115] Jacques Derrida, ""Eating Well", or the Calculation of the Subject," *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, eds. Elisabeth Weber and Peggy Kamuf, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 276
[116] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, pp. 42-3.
[117] Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, pp. 41-2; italics in original.
[118] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, ed. Margaret Canovan, 2nd ed. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 181; italics in original.

"what" and yet, at the same time, informs us that there is no answer to the question "who" which does not return us to "what".

By presenting the other, these texts betray his/her otherness, as the "you" of Smith's "The Second Person" is aware. As I outlined earlier, s/he objects to the picture "I" constructs of him/her and to the way in which the first person's address in fact determines him/her. The complaint the second-person offers is, however, ironic: the second-person is, precisely, a fiction within the story. There is no second-person here – no properly other other; both the "I" and the "you" originate from the same place and "The Second Person" does not voice any perspective but its own. "The Second Person" performs the very mastery it attempts to thematize. We find, as Derrida writes in "Envois", that "[w]e have never yet seen each other. Only written" and that "[t]he other does not answer, is not published".[119] I can publish "you" but the "you" that I inscribe will never be the answer of the "true" other of my writing. The second person, despite our hopes, fails fully to signal relationality or the other on whom these texts depend.

Over to You

You are fundamental to the work. The second person—by addressing and including a "you" on whom the work depends—perhaps admits it. We realise, however, that this "you" also decides or determines the other or the reader to whom the text supposedly opens itself. Derrida writes in "Envois" that "I have called you, yourself. And thereby I have taken your name".[120] By calling "you" Derrida takes the name "you" for himself; he appropriates the other to whom he would address himself. The other is returned to the same, mastered by and within the text "I" write.

Should we, then, give up writing you altogether? Derrida does not think so; he informs us that "[w]hat cannot be said above all must not be silenced, but written".[121] Derrida explains in *The Politics of Friendship* that "I need" the "freedom" of the other "in order to address the other *qua*

[119] Derrida, "Envois", p. 68 and p. 96.
[120] Derrida, "Envois", p. 219.
[121] Derrida, "Envois", p. 194.

other". Derrida explains that he "would therefore command him to be capable of not answering – my call, my invitation, my expectation, my desire. And I must impose a sort of obligation on him thereby to prove his freedom, a freedom I need, precisely in order to call, wait, invite".[122] In the act of calling or demanding the other's freedom, we exert an obligation, divesting him/her of the very freedom we wish him to prove. Nonetheless, we must call the other in order to demand his/her freedom. We cannot *not* call the other; his/her appropriation is both inevitable and necessary.

Derrida wonders, in "My Chances", what his chances are "of reaching my addressees if, on the one hand, I calculate and prepare a place of *encounter* (and I underscore the word) or if, on the other hand, I hope, as we say in French, to *fall* upon them by accident".[123] We cannot, I have shown above, fully "calculate and prepare a place of encounter". In the very act of calculating and preparing we betray the "encounter" we desire. Derrida is, however, equally sceptical concerning our ability to "*fall* upon" the encounter "by accident". In speaking of chance he suggests that "what I say at this moment about chance has more chance of reaching you than if I had delivered it over to chance without speaking about it".[124] In failing to prepare a "place of encounter" an encounter might yet become possible. Moreover, it is more likely that an encounter will take place this way than if the meeting is left purely to chance.

Even though I am unable to address myself purely and directly to you, our relation might, I will suggest in the final section of my chapter, yet be glimpsed. Derrida explains in "Envois" that he has "taken your name"; his writing involves an act of appropriation. Derrida tells us in *The Politics of Friendship*, however, that "the inaccessibility can be interpreted *otherwise*".[125] "*Mais si*" he continues in "Envois" "and somewhat in the way, as they say in their system, that a woman takes the name of her husband". Derrida now compares his appropriation to the marriage custom whereby the woman adopts her husband's name. He thereby offers an entirely different slant on my earlier analysis. By giving up her own name and taking the man's instead the woman is marked as her husband's possession. Taking the name is no longer an act of appropriation; the one who takes

[122] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 174.
[123] Derrida, "My Chances", p. 345; italics in original.
[124] Derrida, "My Chances", p. 345.
[125] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 221; italics in original.

the name (typically the wife, but in this case Derrida) is appropriated. A very different relation becomes visible; the one who takes the name may also be dispossessed.

I quoted earlier the moment in "My Chances" at which Derrida tells us "I prefer to tell you right away: I do not know to whom I am speaking". Derrida's first "you" addresses us, his readers. In the declaration "I do not know to whom I am speaking", however, the text ceases to refer to us. I also described my reaction to the moments in Edwards' text when he addresses his readers and argued that, rather than opening itself to reading, the text writes and decides its reader in advance. I am not, I argued, "more visible" in his text. Equally, I argued that "A Story with Love" ceases to address its reader after the first page.

We are dispossessed. However, the rejection is not absolute; our disidentification is not straightforward. Derrida tells us that "since you find this intelligible, it becomes at least possible to demonstrate that, beginning with the first sentence, my lecture has not purely and simply missed its destination".[126] You might have noticed that, despite my protestations—in fact, in my very protestations themselves—my relation to the text is acute. At the moment in "A Story with Love" at which the text's second person is first addressed as "Sam" we realise that we have made a mistake; we have identified ourselves with a "you" that was not properly addressed to us. We become aware, at this moment, of the extent to which we previously identified ourselves with the you of the text.

In the instant it ceases to address us our relation to the text belatedly becomes pronounced; our relation to it becomes *most* evident at the moments at which it dispossess or un-addresses us, as Smith's "God's Gift" illustrates. "God's Gift" opens defiantly as the narrator announces "[t]here are so many things that you don't know about me now".[127] We deduce that the story takes place sometime after a break-up between the story's narrator and the "you" s/he addresses. The narrator's

[126] Derrida, "My Chances", pp. 344-5.
[127] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 3.

"there are so many things you don't know about me now" marks a temporal and emotional distance between "you" and "I". Announcing that s/he has changed, it implies "I'm over you".

The story's opening sentence is followed by the words "[f]or instance": "For instance. Some neighbouring cat has been bringing me birds, dead or dying, for several days".[128] The narrator adopts a casual tone; these are not, s/he implies, pieces of information s/he truly wants to tell "you", but offhand examples chosen at random. The phrase is echoed later in the story when the narrator introduces an anecdote with the phrase "again for instance".[129] The emphatic "again" draws attention to these words; the narrator's tone is *pointedly* casual – s/he wants it to be noticed.

The insouciant tone is not genuine, but is clearly a performance; the narrator feigns (or rather, fails to feign) disinterest and in doing so draws attention to a contradiction inherent in his/her tale. The story's opening sentence eschews "you", reasserting the independence of the "I". In its very performance, however, this declaration fails to achieve that which it announces; it addresses the "you" it would reject. The story announces that it is over you, but as it does it reveals its need to inform you of this fact and so illustrates its continued reliance upon you.

Against its wish, this story finds that it is preoccupied entirely by a "you" it can neither forget nor banish. This becomes especially apparent at the moments I cited earlier when the narrator declares "I wasn't frightened, I wasn't frightened on any of the flights, since you are only frightened of losing something if you've got something to lose. Not you: one. One is only frightened, etc" and "[e]verything you do, everything you see, everything you feel, every single moment, good or bad, that you get. Not you: one. Every single moment, good or bad, that one gets".[130] The narrator alters his/her "you" to an impersonal (and more seemly) "one". Too late, the narrator realises that the "you" the "I" ought to forget has crept back in. These determined corrections render the mistake all the more visible; they draw our attention to the "you" of the previous phrases. The narrator, determined not to address you, has failed. As the narrator sits in a café in Greece she declares "I

[128] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 3.
[129] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 4.
[130] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 4 and p. 12.

saw the writing painted all along the wall out to the lighthouse, some Greek words I couldn't understand and then the English words, love, and you".[131] These, too, are the words that gradually emerge from this story, even against its narrator's avowed intention. "God's Gift" demonstrates the inability of the "I" to banish the "you".

"God's Gift" patterns a contradiction; even as the narrator aims to separate him/herself from "you" his/her monologue reveals a continued reliance. The "I" is inscribed against its will by "you"; the second-person is, for the first-person of "God's Gift", bewilderingly inescapable. The second person is, as in Derrida's "Envois", "immense" and "omnipresent".[132] Obsession, Levinas suggests, is a good name for this inevitable return; he explains that "obsession traverses consciousness contrariwise, inscribing it there as something foreign, as disequilibrium, as delirium, undoing thematization, eluding *principle,* origin, and will, all of which are affirmed in every gleam of consciousness".[133] He argues, moreover, that this "disequilibrium" is key to the way in which we ought to understand the subject. The condition "God's Gift" describes is not, for Levinas, exceptional, but a general condition.

To understand why, we must turn to the theorisation Levinas offers of the subject's inauguration. For Levinas, the "I" "begins […] in the accusative"; the "I" is inaugurated by the answer "yes, me" to a "you" which comes before it.[134] Althusser, although working with a very different set of notions to those we encounter in Levinas's work (while Levinas rethinks ethics, Althusser focuses on the concept of ideology), depicts a similar scene. The subject, he suggests, is "interpellated" into being. Althusser famously imagines a scene in which an individual hears a "'[h]ey, you there'" and "[a]ssuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversation, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognised that the hail was 'really' addressed to him,

[131] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 5.
[132] Derrida, "Envois", p. 107.
[133] Emmanuel Levinas, "Substitution," *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 81; italics in original.
[134] Levinas, "Substitution", p. 88.

and that 'it was *really* him who was hailed' (and not someone else)".[135] For Althusser, "I" become a subject only once "I" have turned around in response to the call of the other.

In the accounts of both Levinas and Althusser "I" am formed by and as my response to "you". Butler—who discusses both of these theories in *Giving an Account of Oneself*— explains that "I begin my story of myself only in the face of a 'you' who asks me to give an account".[136] Smith's "Erosive", for example, opens with the words "[w]hat do you need to know about me for this story? How old I am? how much I earn a year? what kind of car I drive?"[137] The narrator finds that the story is governed from the outset by a series of expectations; s/he is bound by the questions "you" might ask and by what you might "need to know". The "other" precedes the story; the thought of "you" informs it even before it has properly begun.

I mentioned earlier that the listener in the "Theme is Power" sits behind the narrator as s/he stands at the sink. "Envois" presents a similar scene. Derrida contemplates a postcard which features a picture of Plato stood behind Socrates: "[h]e is in front of Plato, no, Plato is *behind* him, smaller (why smaller?), but standing up".[138] The most obvious sense of Derrida's "behind" positions Plato at Socrates' back, reading over his shoulder that which he writes. However, "Envois" also stresses a second sense of the word; Plato is also "behind" the words that Socrates writes; he invents and is responsible for them. Derrida writes that "*Socrates* turns his *back* to plato, who has made him write whatever he wanted while pretending to receive it from him".[139] Although apparently receiving Socrates' work, Plato in fact creates it. The reader dictates the text's emergence. Whoever writes or gives an account finds, as Derrida does in "Envois" that "[y]ou give me words, you deliver them, dispensed one by one, my own".[140] The words that are supposedly "my own" are in fact delivered and "dispensed" from elsewhere, by "you". Derrida explains that "whoever writes must indeed ask

[135] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), p. 163; italics in original.
[136] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 11.
[137] Ali Smith, *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. 99.
[138] Derrida, "Envois", p. 9; italics in original.
[139] Derrida, "Envois", p. 12; italics in original.
[140] Derrida, "Envois", p. 12.

himself what it is asked of him to write, and then he writes under the dictation of some addressee".[141]

"You" precede me. There is no "I" without a "you" which inaugurates it. I mentioned in my first section McHale's claim that the second person "announces the presence of a communicative circuit" "*more strongly*" than the first person. McHale's assertion cannot be upheld; the "I", we now see, is equally marked as a sign of relation and may also signal the "presence of a communicative circuit". Derrida explains that "it is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography. When, much later, the other will have perceived with a keen-enough ear what I will have addressed or destined to him or her, then my signature will have taken place".[142] I must, with a somewhat "paradoxical" thought, wait for the other to "[say] me to me" before "I" am able to say "I". There is, Derrida writes, "thought for man only to the extent that it is thought *of the other*".[143] Derrida's genitive signals doubly; "my" every thought is a thought belonging to, and given to me by, the other, and is also and therefore a thought of or about the other.

The self is not, Coetzee explains, "the unity it was assumed to be by classical rationalism".[144] We are no longer able to maintain a model in which "[t]he subject assumes presence, that is to sub-stance, stasis, stance".[145] We can no longer uphold a notion of the self for which "everything is intentionally assumed", which "always assumes what it undergoes" and which "reappears as the *principle* of what happens to it".[146] The "alterity that has become internal" makes us, as Butler writes, "permanently and partially foreign to ourselves".[147]

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[141] Derrida, "Envois", p. 143.
[142] Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p. 51.
[143] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 224.
[144] Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, p. 37.
[145] Derrida, ""Eating Well"", p. 270.
[146] Levinas, "Substitution", p. 82 and p. 89; italics in original.
[147] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 98.

If, as Robert Smith points out, the "other" "starts the autobiography off", autobiography can no longer remain the category we believed it to be.[148] The text, Derrida points out, "will not be an autobiography, naturally, but a heterobiography in the sense in which one also says heterosexuality, and so on".[149] There is no *auto*biography proper. Caught in a relational scene, my work is neither masterful nor self-sufficient. I am not the unequivocal proprietor of it, as Derrida makes clear when discussing Levinas's work in "At This Very Moment". It is, he claims, no longer possible to name Levinas as the "subject-author-signer-proprietor of the work [*ouvrage*] […] he does not *make* a work, he is not the agent or creator of his work".[150]

Derrida points out that "[t]he other is in me before me". He therefore explains that

> 'Leaving room for the other' does not mean 'I have to make room for the other'. The other is in me before me: the ego (even the collective ego) implies alterity as its own condition. There is no 'I' that ethically makes room for the other, but rather an 'I' that is structured by the alterity within it, an 'I' that is itself in a state of self-deconstruction, of dislocation […] The other is not even simply the future [*futur*], it is, so to speak, the anterior future [*l'avenir avant*], the advance on the future [*avenir*]. Which means that I am not proprietor of my 'I', I am not proprietor of the place open to hospitality. Whoever gives hospitality ought to know that he is not even proprietor of what he would appear to give.[151]

"You" are not a figure for whom I can choose to make room or not. "You" come before my ability to write "I" or "you". "You", Levinas explains, are "the primary fact of Saying [*Dire*]".[152] "You" precede my ability to thematize or to master "you" in language. The "ethical-vocative origin" which founds the work and the subject "belongs to an 'absolute-past'".[153] "The invention of the other" must "have already taken place, before everything, so that its very question may arise, which renders the question obsolete in advance".[154] Whatever "other" "I" represent comes too late. My "you" comes too late. Cixous therefore realises that "I will never say enough what (I) my writing owes you".[155]

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[148] Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 118.
[149] Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p. 79.
[150] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 175; italics in original.
[151] Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, pp. 84-5.
[152] Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (Linton: Athlone, 1999), p. 93.
[153] Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 120.
[154] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", pp. 147-8.
[155] Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 199.

The dependency to which I alluded in my introduction is more profound than it might at first appear. It belongs to a "rhetorical dimension that is not reducible to a narrative function".[156] It is a preontological or linguistic relation, a "precondition" of "narration" which cannot therefore "yield to narrative form".[157] Derrida warns that "[t]he disturbance" Levinas's text "*refers* to (the Relation it relates to the Other by linking to it the *récit*) *is* never assured, perceptible, *demonstrable:* neither a demonstrative conclusion nor a phenomenal monstration". It is, "[b]y definition" "not a controllable disturbance, it is not readable within the *inside* of logic, semiotics, language, grammaticality, lexicon, or rhetoric with their supposedly internal criteria, because nothing is less certain than the rigorous limits of such an inside".[158] The "disturbance" to which Levinas's text refers cannot be captured by or within language; it does not belong to the realm of the said. Levinas explains that "[t]he approach is not the thematization of any relation but that very relation which resists thematization inasmuch as it is an-archic".[159] The quality of the relationality to which Levinas alludes lies with a telling which cannot be told.

Butler explains that "[t]his exposure […] cannot be narrated. I cannot give an account of it, even though it structures any account I might give".[160] Although resistant to narration, this "exposure" is always inescapably *there*. I pointed out earlier that in "The Theme is Power" the second person, when asked by the first for a "proper story", responds "[r]ight then [...] There was once a child whose mother fell asleep. The end".[161] I suggested that this abrupt response refuses to mollify or cede to the demands the first person makes. The story does not, however, escape so simply. The comedy we derive from the second-person's story lies in the *relationship* it bears to the first-person's demands; it is amusing not in and of itself but as an answer to the request for a proper story. The second-person's story, produced in and as its resistance to the first-person's expectations, continues to cite them. It cannot wholly discard them. The story is still a response to the demands that the listener levels. We thus realise that although the story may choose the manner in which it responds, it cannot choose whether or not *to* respond; it is bound in a relational scene

[156] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 63.
[157] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 38.
[158] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 161; italics in original.
[159] Levinas, "Substitution", pp. 92-3; italics in original.
[160] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 35.
[161] Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, p. 172.

from which it cannot escape. You may equally have spotted the fact that my rejection of Edwards' address cedes to the very request he makes; it indeed records "how I am feeling" as I read his text. Somewhat infuriatingly, it obliges him even in turning away from him. Derrida explains that, in relation to the call of the other, "I can *only* answer, have already answered, even if I think I am answering 'no'".[162] The demand of the other is inescapable.

"The structure", Robert Smith explains, "is one of an *essential* responsiveness".[163] Given that the "call to responsibility" is "anterior to any possible response" and "dissymmetrical in its coming from the other within us", we cannot *not* respond; "even a nonresponse a priori assumes responsibility".[164] The subject is, as Cavarero realises, "[*c*]*onstitutively* altruistic, rather than by choice".[165] We find, somewhat counter-intuitively, that we cannot escape responsibility; it is not that which we can choose or deny.

Derrida therefore realises in "Envois" that "it only depends on you that it is you" and "(everything depends upon you, it is only up to you that your answer destines my love to you)".[166] It is in the hands of Derrida's readers (in this case me) to decide, even, whether his "you" addresses us or not. Even (and especially) when I write you, when I address myself to you, it is up to you to decide what I have written – and whether or not I might have written (to) you. Margolin suggests that "[f]rom now on, any adoption by an actual reader of a 'you' token as referring to him or her is strictly optional and ludic, involving a willingness to place him/herself in or occupy a slot which, strictly speaking, is already occupied by nonfactual recipients".[167] It is always "[u]p to you [*toi*] first"; even when I supposedly address you, I find that "I await only one response and it falls to you" – only you can confer my second-person pronoun the right of address.[168]

[162] Derrida, ""Eating Well"", p. 261; italics in original.
[163] Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 82; italics in original.
[164] Derrida, "Mochlos, or the Conflict of the Faculties", p. 83.
[165] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 90; italics in original.
[166] Derrida, "Envois", p. 137 and p. 174.
[167] Margolin, "Narrative "You" Revisited": 438.
[168] Derrida, "Envois", p. 4.

This is not to say that you decide absolutely. Derrida writes, "[t]o be sure, you are the author of the text you read here, that can be said, but you are still in an absolute heteronomy. You are responsible for the other, who makes you responsible. *Who will have obligated you*".[169] I casually commented in my analysis of Edwards' text that "you may have noticed" that my relation to the text was more acute, and more visible, than I at first admitted. You might already, in reading my second section, have noted the point I come finally to make in my third. My admission might, for you, have come too late. In your reading, I was perhaps still bound by the relation I would escape. I cannot simply refuse Edwards' address; you may refuse me the ability to do so. My reading is in thrall to yet another "you". It remains in an "absolute heteronomy".

The texts I have examined here fail to address themselves directly to you; they fail to inscribe the profound reliance to which you subject them. In doing so, however, they might, in fact, make visible the very relationship to which they would allude. I fail to address you because I am bound already, before I even begin to write, in the scene I would invoke. My failure is caught in the logic it attempts to describe. The relation might therefore yet be glimpsed. Yet it cannot be guaranteed; this happening is easily missed. There is "no promised encounter without the possibility of a *contretemps*".[170] You can always refuse my address. We discover that "[r]esponsibility carries within it, and must do so, an essential excessiveness. It regulates itself neither on the principle of reason nor on any sort of accountancy".[171]

There is an increasing awareness, thanks both to reader-response and to a growing interest in questions of ethics, of the importance of "you" and the role "you" play in deciding the work. Smith's stories openly acknowledge this debt, as does Derrida and those who write after him. The use of the second person itself appears to mark the dependence. The texts I have examined here address themselves to an other to whom they are in thrall. However, the "you" of these apostrophes is not necessarily the other *per se*. These texts, in their confident inscriptions, decide their addressee in a way which might in fact close down the reading they invite. The other is all too

[169] Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am", p. 161; italics in original.
[170] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 1.
[171] Derrida, ""Eating Well"", p. 272.

easily returned to the same. The apostrophe does not necessarily make you or your reading more visible in the text that is written. We thus realise that the dependence is not one which can be thematized. Our very thematization betrays it, as Levinas's work points out. The possibilities offered by the apostrophe are more indirect, more difficult to discern. This difficulty is fundamental. Derrida explains that "the determination of the singular 'Who?'—or at least its determination as subject—remains forever problematic". He asserts, moreover, that "it *should* remain so. This obligation to protect the other's otherness is not merely a theoretical imperative".[172] We must continue to represent and to address ourselves to you. At the same time, however, we must remember that which we are told at the end of "The Second Person". The first-person receives a note which reads "[y]ou're something else, you. You really are".[173] We must remember that "you" is always something else; it is always something other than that as which we represent it.

Derrida writes that "I believe there is no responsibility, no ethico-political decision, that must not pass through the proofs of the incalculable or the undecidable. Otherwise everything would be reducible to calculation, program, causality, and, at best, 'hypothetical imperative'".[174] For Derrida, "[a] limited, measured, calculable, rationally distributed responsibility is already the becoming-right of morality". It is no longer a responsibility at all. Derrida writes, "I repeat: responsibility is excessive or it is not a responsibility".[175] It is—excessively—up to you that you are you.

[172] Derrida, ""Eating Well"", p. 276; italics in original.
[173] Smith, *The First Person and Other Stories*, p. 134.
[174] Derrida, ""Eating Well"", p. 273.
[175] Derrida, ""Eating Well"", p. 286.

Coda
Desire

Each of my chapters repeats the pattern established by my first. Each takes as its theme a provocation that gets reading and interpretation going: composition, the trace, deconstruction and ethics, tact and you. These are elements we fall for, concepts we desire. Very quickly, however, we realise that we cannot have or grasp these things that we want; they remain elusive.

In realising this failure, however, something like reading, writing, the trace and so on happen. We experience and glimpse them. We come to know them "with a knowledge that is not a knowledge at all".[1] They present themselves momentarily, contingently and fleetingly.

These concepts reward our fascination; they prove themselves useful. But the quality we prize does not last. We cannot, in light of the work that we have done, adopt these concepts or guarantee their future use. We cannot embrace them too heartily. Instead, our investigation demands that we start the next chapter all over again; we must repeatedly re-realise these concepts anew. They remain useful only so long as they stay impossible, only so long as they continue to demand reading.

There can, therefore, be no conclusion. Connors, at the end of her discussion of force, notes that "the calling to account of a conclusion, with its complacent hindsight, cannot quite render either the shock of force's irruption or the forcelessness of the moment of reading".[2] The "calling to account" and "complacent hindsight" of the conclusion will never capture the experiences of "shock" and "forcelessness" which characterise both "force" and the concepts my thesis has discussed. The conclusion betrays the qualities the book sets out to create. The "only possible end" for philosophical discourse is, therefore, according to Levinas, "interruption".[3] If it is to remain true to the concepts it pursues, philosophy's "end" cannot be closure but an interruption which starts it all over again.

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[1] Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement...", p. 164.
[2] Connors, *Force from Nietzsche to Derrida*, p. 130.
[3] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 20.

My aim here is not therefore to offer a conclusion, but to perform one final interruption. This, my coda, performs the fall *par excellence*. It falls for love and in love; it's about desire. You may have noticed already that it's fallen for a phrase. Namely, to fall for. There's something cute, albeit slangy about it, don't you think? I picked it up from Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and was straight away seduced by the neatness of its double meaning. It signifies at once to fall for, to fall in love, and to fall for, be duped by. There is something unknowing about desire. It does not know itself well. For Belsey "we *know* exactly the opposite of what we *desire*, of what we know our desire to be". Love is, she points out "at once infinitely and uniquely desirable" and "conspicuously naïve".[4]

Nonetheless (or, perhaps, for this very reason) the language of desire is employed repeatedly by those working alongside and after Derrida. Derrida famously writes that "I love very much everything that I deconstruct in my own manner; the texts I want to read from the deconstructive point of view are texts I love, with that impulse of identification which is indispensable for reading".[5] Jean-Luc Nancy goes so far, in his essay "Shattered Love", as to say that thinking and philosophy *are* love. He cautions, though, that "[w]e know nothing more about what this means. We only know, by a sort of obscure certainty or premonition, that it is necessary or that it will one day be necessary to attest this phrase: *Thinking is love*. But philosophy has never explicitly attended this".[6] Thinking will always "have said and will have failed to say that it is love—or to explain what this means". It "reaches toward it, it does not reach it".[7]

Nancy, by equating philosophy with love, places the unknown at its centre. Exercising a "double constraint", the very definition Nancy gives refers us to that which cannot be defined.[8] The exact nature of love or desire eludes our grasp. Adam Phillips, in *Kissing, Ticking and Being Bored*, suggests that "obstacles are the clue to desire, that the word is full of meaning". At the end of his essay, however, he confesses to an "uneasy feeling, which we all remember from childhood, and which may be pertinent to the subject at hand; the feeling that comes when one endlessly repeats a

[4] Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 73; italics in original.
[5] Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p 87.
[6] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis; Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 84-5; italics in original.
[7] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 86.
[8] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 86.

word only to be left with an enigmatic obstacle as to its sense".[9] "Desire", Belsey suggests "eludes final definition, with the result that its character, its nature, its meaning, becomes itself an object of desire for the writer".[10] For both Phillips and Belsey, the investigation of desire turns us back on ourselves; it subjects us to the experience my thesis has described over and over. Certainty about desire eludes us, but in looking for it we find ourselves "uneasy", desiring.

The OED defines desire as "[t]he fact or condition of desiring; that feeling or emotion which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected; longing, craving; a particular instance of this feeling, a wish".[11] Framed in terms of expectation, desire is defined in relation to its end or outcome. It looks towards a future "attainment" or "possession". Desire is desire *for* fulfilment, success, certainty, possession. For presence, in other words.

However, desire places this presence in the future; it expects it and, in expecting it, makes it clear that it is not yet here. Desire declares that presence is, at the moment, absent. Although defined in terms of presence, desire's present is all about absence. Desire is, according to Belsey, "predicated on lack".[12]

Put otherwise, something stands between desire and presence. Phillips explains that "the existence of that extraordinary phenomena, the wish, always implies a prior perception of obstacles. After all, why would we need to wish if nothing were in the way?"[13] "In order to fall in love with someone", Phillips suggests, "they must be perceived as an obstacle, a necessary obstacle".[14] Phillips outlines an "apparently inevitable twining of obstacle and desire".[15] It is, he argues, "impossible to imagine desire without obstacles, and wherever we find something to be an obstacle

[9] Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, p. 98.
[10] Belsey, *Desire*, p. 3.
[11] Dictionary, Available: http://www.oed.com/. Consulted 19 November 2009.
[12] Belsey, *Desire*, p. 38.
[13] Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, pp. 96-7.
[14] Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, p. 90.
[15] Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, p. 88.

we are at the same time desiring".[16] For Phillips "[d]esire without something that resists it is insufficient, wishy-washy, literally immaterial".[17]

For Derrida, too, "non-assurance" and the "risk of misunderstanding" go "to make the essence of desire".[18] However, this leads to confusion; we "never know whether obstacles create desire, or desire creates obstacles. We are never quite sure which it is we are seeking".[19]

The second thought—that desire creates obstacles—seems the stranger yet points to a paradox at the heart of desire. If obstacles are necessary for desire, then desire must create obstacles in order to preserve and prolong itself. Belsey writes that "[p]art of the intensity of love is the desire to know the truth of the other's desire, to be *certain*. But, paradoxically, such certainty would be the death of desire".[20] If certainty, possession and attainment were achieved, desire would no longer exist. Yet this is, supposedly, the very state for which desire longs. Desire desires its own demise. A strange and melancholy thought.

There lies a paradox at the heart of desire: our desire desires fulfilment, but if it were fulfilled it would no longer *be* desire. There is, at the moment of fulfilment, no more desire; the event "injures desire". It is "*traumatic*".[21] Desire's "apparent fulfilment is" for Belsey "also a moment of loss".[22] The loss of desire. We can therefore never "have" what we "desire". Having (or presence) and desiring are incompatible; presence kills desire. The two cannot exist simultaneously. The attainment desire craves is impossible because, at the moment it occurs, it is no longer desired and is therefore not "attainment" *per se*.

Presence, or attainment, is impossible. Yet there is no desire without the thought of this attainment. There is "desire for presence and intimacy" only so long as "there is no such thing" and only

[16] Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, p. 87.
[17] Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 4.
[18] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 220.
[19] Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, p. 87.
[20] Belsey, *Desire*, p. 37; italics in original.
[21] Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon", p. 159; italics in original.
[22] Belsey, *Desire*, pp. 38-9; italics in original.

because there is "no pure presence".[23] Desire, inscribed and constituted by what it will never have or be, is impossible. "In one sense", Nancy writes, "and in a sense that will perhaps always conceal the totality of *sense*, assignable as such—love is the impossible, and it does not arrive, or it arrives only at the limit, while crossing".[24]

This thought returns us to the questions with which we began. Literary study desires the literary, but remains a *literary* study only so long as its desire remains unfulfilled. The REF (which is very much on my mind as I approach the moment at which I hand over my thesis for examination, to be judged in its light), which demands that we account for the literary in order to guarantee that its study is taking place, misses the point. Were it possible to present and possess the literary in the way it desires, the REF would have the opposite effect to that which it sets out to achieve; it would kill our desire, and so annihilate literary study. We in fact find, however, that we cannot capture the literary in the way the REF would like; we cannot fully answer its demands. Contrary to its aims—and according to a logic it can neither condone nor comprehend—the REF ensures the non-arrival of the literary and functions as the obstacle which keeps our desire for the literary alive.

[23] Jacques Derrida, "Following Theory," *Life.After.Theory*, eds. Michael Payne and John Schad (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 9.
[24] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 99; italics in original.

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