Samantha Purvis

Fictive Institutions: Contemporary British Literature and the Arbiters of Value

PhD – Literature

University of East Anglia

Literature, Drama and Creative Writing

April 2020

ABSTRACT

My thesis assesses the relationship between contemporary British literature and institutions. Literary culture is currently rife with anxieties that some institutions, such as prizes, exert too much influence over authors, while others, such as literary criticism, are losing their cultural power. As authors are increasingly caught up in complex, ambivalent relationships with institutions, I examine how recent British novels, short stories and 'creative-critical' texts thematise these engagements.

My thesis mobilises Derrida's term 'fictive institution', which marks the fact that institutions are self-authorising; they are grounded in fictitious or invented origins. Institutions, then, share with literary texts a certain fictionality. My project considers how Rachel Cusk, Olivia Laing, Gordon Burn, Alan Hollinghurst, and—most prominently—Ali Smith, have used the instituting or inventive power of fiction to reflect on the fictionality of institutions. Each chapter assesses how a different institution—academic criticism, public criticism, the book award and publishing—reproduces aesthetic discourses and values which my corpus of literary texts shows to be grounded in an institutional fiction. In making this argument, my thesis marries three disparate strands of contemporary criticism: literary sociology, aesthetic theory and deconstruction. This approach repositions Derrida—a figure maligned by postcritique and the aesthetic turn—as an important and surprisingly timely thinker of the literary.

Situating my readings in terms of a resurgent critical discourse on the value of the novel, my project traces how a wide range of twenty-first-century writing mounts a defence of literature by asserting fiction's power to 'speak back' to institutions. While contemporary culture seems to suffer more and more from what David Shields calls 'reality hunger', and the rise of autofiction seems to augur the outmodedness of fiction, this thesis ultimately suggests that it is precisely as a fictional medium that literature retains its cultural power.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about institutions, so it seems appropriate to point out at the very beginning that the word institution—as well as referring to social forms and organisations—means 'the act of […] establishing' or 'foundation'.[1] Ali Smith's novels have a very particular way of marking their beginnings, with her first lines often foregrounding the strangeness inhering in the act of instating a fictional narrative. *Hotel World*, for example, opens with the ghostly '[w]ooooooooo- | hooooooo' of chambermaid Sarah Wilby falling to her death down the shaft of a dumbwaiter.[2] The apparition of this spectral, nonlinguistic voice at the novel's opening moment recalls Maurice Blanchot's description of literary voice speaking from a 'place without a place' in the text.[3] This phrase most clearly designates the space from which 'the

---

[1] 'Institution, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/97110> [accessed 31 January 2020].

[2] Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2002).

[3] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 385.

narrative voice, a neutral voice […] speaks', but it also points to a more general truth about fiction.[4] The third-person omniscient point of view has no grounding in the world of the story, but is a strange, self-generating fiction. It is therefore a particularly clear example of the fact that all narratives institute themselves. Staging the entrance of a sourceless voice as the act which inaugurates its narrative, *Hotel World* shows an acute awareness of the self-instituting nature of fiction. This thesis argues that Smith and a number of other contemporary novelists deploy the fictional status of their texts to turn this thinking of institution back on the actual institutions that arbitrate literary value. Twenty-first-century British fiction, I argue, often thematises the fabulous nature of institutional discourses about literature.

My argument centres on Smith's oeuvre because of its particular insistence on questions of institution. *The Accidental*'s introductory line concerns both beginnings and fictions: Amber recounts that '[m]y mother began me one evening in 1968 on a table in the café of the town's only cinema', with the reference to the big screen foreshadowing the lurid origin stories Amber will tell about herself throughout the novel.[5] *There but for the* opens by asking the reader to call up the text's opening image with the power of their imagination, foregrounding the work of inventing a fiction: 'The fact is, imagine a man sitting on an exercise bike in a spare room.'[6] Franchesco del Cossa's narrative in *How to Be Both* begins with their surprise at returning to life and voice: '[h]o'.[7] *Autumn*'s first line parodies the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*: 'It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times.'[8] *Winter* kicks off with: 'God was dead: to begin with.'[9] Smith's novels take care about how they begin themselves; they don't just start any which way, but mark their own coming into being: the work, will or imagination it takes to institute a fiction.

In this sense, Smith's opening lines reflect Jacques Derrida's proposition that fiction institutes or invents, and conversely institutions establish themselves through

---

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 1.

[6] Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Penguin, 2012), np.

[7] Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014), p. 3.

[8] Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), p. 3.

[9] Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), p. 3.

a practical fiction. A fiction isn't grounded in fact or objective reality, but has to create itself. The same can be said of an institution, which has to install or inaugurate itself. This is what Smith's opening sentences dramatise as they bring their narratives to life: there always has to be a first moment, even as this inauguration marks its own fictiveness. What Derrida calls a 'fictive institution' has an origin that never properly existed, that was always a fiction.[10] This is true of concepts, beliefs, discourses, and values—all of which have to be founded, begun, inaugurated. As such, institutions often carry traces of the paradoxes, aporias, or difficulties that have been repressed in order to found them. Smith's thinking of the institutive power of fiction, I argue, allows her to reflect on the fictitiousness of various institutional discourses on literature.

Literature, Derrida says, is 'the place or experience of this "trouble" we also have with the essence of language, with truth and with essence, the language of essence in general'.[11] In other words, literature gives us access to the unstable ontological grounding of institutions, the fact that they invent or install themselves. Whenever I refer to fiction's capacity to trouble institution(s), I am pointing both to the fact that literature foregrounds this aporia in the logic of inauguration, and to the ways in which particular institutional discourses or values can therefore be perturbed by the work of fiction. As Raymond Williams observes, '[f]iction has the interesting double sense of a kind of IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE and of pure (sometimes deliberately deceptive) invention'.[12] My argument throughout this thesis holds that fictions of the first kind can tell us something about fictions of the second. Smith's particular attention to beginnings shows her repeatedly asking the question of how fictions come to institute themselves, and conversely how institutions are fictional.

The examples above go some way to demonstrating Smith's interest in the instituting power of fiction. Each chapter of this thesis shows how Smith's oeuvre engages in a sustained thinking of this question—not only with regard to literary

---

[10] Jacques Derrida, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–75 (p. 36) [emphasis removed].

[11] Ibid., p. 48.

[12] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 111.

form, but in respect of various enabling fictions which mediate contemporary literary culture. Often featuring writers, university lecturers, booksellers and other literary professionals, Smith's novels and short stories show a marked concern with the conditions of the modern literary market, and how its values and ideologies come to be instituted and promulgated. Smith's attention to the institutional contexts of literary production is thus particularly striking, but these contexts by definition structure the field of contemporary fiction in general, affecting every author working today. As such, while positioning Smith as a central figure, my analysis goes beyond the remit of a single-author study. Each chapter brings Smith's writing into relation with texts by Olivia Laing, Gordon Burn, Rachel Cusk, Alan Hollinghurst, and Claire-Louise Bennett, whose works show a keen self-awareness on the part of contemporary writing about its complex institutional entanglements.

In the following chapters, I examine how these novelists thematise the fictive nature of the values that ground, and are propagated by, four key literary institutions. These institutions are: academic literary criticism, public criticism (of the kind seen in newspaper reviewing), book awards and publishing. These are institutions in the sense that they are examples of '[a]n established law, custom, usage, practice, organization, or other element in the political or social life of a people; a regulative principle or convention subservient to the needs of an organized community or the general ends of civilization'.[13] They are what the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy refers to as 'social forms': they give rise to practices and conventions which *form* or *shape* the writing, reading, evaluation and circulation of literature.[14]

I construct my accounts of literary institutions in part by analysing their discourses: their definitions of and ideas about literature, their literary values. The first chapter, which attends to the academic study of literature, examines the relationship between contemporary fiction and the scholarly discourses of criticism and theory. Chapter two builds up a picture of public literary discourse by analysing forms of criticism that are more widely circulated and accessed, such as newspaper

---

[13] 'Institution, n.'.

[14] Seumas Miller, 'Social Institutions', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 9 April 2019 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-institutions/> [accessed 14 February 2020].

reviews. While the public might appear to be a rather diffuse kind of institution, it is an organising principle or social form in the sense that the idea of a public defines a coherent body or audience. It therefore allows a diverse range of texts and ideas to cohere as something recognisable as a discourse or institution. Literary journalism is also a key source in my analysis of the book prize, since this is where debates between judges and commentators over the values and aims of these awards are typically played out. My chapter on publishing likewise seeks to understand this institution's literary values and discourses by reading commentary on the industry in newspapers and specialist journals like the *Bookseller*. This emphasis on discourse analysis enables me to capture what each institution says about itself: how it articulates its own values and role in the literary landscape.

Each chapter pairs this discourse analysis with a review of the growing academic research on the relevant literary institution (I will turn to a brief outline of this corpus in a moment), but the key insight furnished by studying what these institutions have to say about themselves is that they each mobilise or depend on certain *philosophical* concepts that the novels studied here call into question. For example, prizes are predicated on the concept of value and academic criticism on the notion of professionalism (as opposed to amateur appreciation). Each chapter of this thesis moves from an account of the material existence of the institution in question to a more theoretical or philosophical analysis of its conceptual framing, and from there to a reading of how literary texts put this framing into question. My thesis therefore demonstrates how each institution is founded on a set of values or concepts which the novels show to be fictional—without discounting their powerful material effects.

This is, in part, why Derrida's work is so prominent in my thesis; his language of fictive institution emphasises the advent or origin, and therefore the materiality, of institutions. Indeed, as Geoffrey Bennington remarks, 'it would not be difficult to construct an argument showing that deconstruction, insofar as it insists on the necessary non-coincidence of the present with itself, is in fact in some senses the most

historical of discourses imaginable'.[15] As such, this thesis also partakes of a wider move to reposition Derrida as an important thinker of literature, institution and materiality as intertwined questions at a time when a majority of the combatants in what Paul Crosthwaite calls the 'reading wars' have been inclined to dismiss him as an abstractionist with little interest in the literary or aesthetic.[16]

The literary market

In this way, I situate my thesis at an angle to recent sociological and materialist accounts of the literary market. Often heavily influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, many of these monographs—such as John B. Thompson's *Merchants of Culture* or James F. English's *The Economy of Prestige*—frame their descriptions of the literary landscape in terms of cultural capital or prestige, an approach which reduces texts to their symbolic or economic value. However, these studies have done important work in returning our attention to the economic underpinnings of literary production. My thesis extends the insights of these important works of literary sociology with formally-attentive close readings which emphasise the capacity of literary works to thematise, critique or otherwise turn back on regimes for producing and assigning value.

My project is therefore more similar to Crosthwaite's recent *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* or Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, both of which trace contemporary novels' responses to the increasingly dominant forces of the literary market and institutions. However, I have largely eschewed the postmodern vocabulary of 'self-referential metafiction' and 'self-reflexivity' that McGurl and Crosthwaite employ.[17] As various contemporary fiction scholars such as Robert

---

[15] Geoffrey Bennington, 'Demanding History', in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. by Derek Attridge, Geoffrey Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 15–29 (p. 17). Bennington's argument, like Derrida's work, actually disturbs the terms under which such a claim could be made. I go into deconstruction's thinking of materiality in more depth in my chapters, but for the moment I think it is safe to say that Derrida is simply far more on the side of historicism and materialism than he is usually given credit for.

[16] Paul Crosthwaite, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 16.

[17] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 136; Crosthwaite, p. 3.

Eaglestone and Jennifer Hodgson have argued, postmodernism is losing traction as a paradigm for understanding contemporary fiction.[18] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker argue that 'the cultural industry' is 'increasingly abandoning [postmodern] tactics such as pastiche and parataxis for strategies like myth and metaxis, melancholy for hope, and exhibitionism for engagement'—a cluster of strategies they call 'metamodernism'.[19] However, despite their reliance on the vocabulary of postmodernism, McGurl and Crosthwaite's studies offer crucial insights into the contemporary relationship between literature and institutions.

The Program Era was one of the first and most influential studies of contemporary fiction to situate readings of novels in terms of an institutional context. As Daniel N. Sinykin puts it (perhaps more pithily than McGurl himself ever does), 'drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann, [McGurl] contends that literary texts possess a reflexivity that expresses the institutional conditions from which they emerge'.[20] McGurl argues that the creative writing program is an 'increasingly hegemonic' institution exerting a powerful influence over contemporary literary aesthetics.[21] As such, '[y]ou don't have to be a dogmatic historical materialist to believe that a transformation of the institutional context of literary production as fundamental as this one might matter to a reading of postwar American literature'.[22] More recently, The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction has focussed attention on the institutions of the literary market. Drawing on earlier studies of the economics of publishing, such as Merchants of Culture, Crosthwaite describes how the widescale buying-up of small and medium-sized publishers by large media conglomerates in

---

[18] Robert Eaglestone, Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 14; Jennifer Hodgson, '"Such a Thing as the Avant-Garde has Ceased to Exist": The Hidden Legacies of the British Experimental Novel', in Twenty-First-Century Fiction: What Happens Now, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2013), pp. 15-33 (p. 19).

[19] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', Journal of Aesthetics and Culture, 2 (2010) [n.p.].

[20] Dan N. Sinykin, 'The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007', Contemporary Literature, 58 (2017), 462–91 (p. 474).

[21] McGurl, p. 31.

[22] Ibid., p. 24.

the late twentieth-century has led to a risk-averse, homogenised market, prompting a renewed interest on the part of literary critics in the relationship between commerce and contemporary fiction.[23] Crosthwaite observes that 'the heavily financialized restructuring of the global publishing industry since the 1970s has ratcheted up the commercial pressures on authors'.[24] This has 'obligat[ed] a submission to the literary marketplace that is sharply at odds with an equally strongly felt imperative—mandated by the legacy of modernism and the avant-garde—to maintain one's artistic and intellectual autonomy'.[25] Somewhat similarly to McGurl, Crosthwaite argues that the result has been the emergence of 'market metafiction', which he defines as 'a mode, evident across a varied array of narratives, which is concerned less with the fictionality of the text as such, and more with the ways in which that fictionality solicits or spurns the approval of the literary marketplace'.[26] Institutions, particularly those closest to the market, require careful analysis if we are to build up a nuanced picture of the status of literature under the conditions of contemporary capitalism:

> One reason why [Fredric] Jameson's work (as well as that of literary scholars working within paradigms derived from it) doesn't provide a fully adequate account of the relations between contemporary capitalism and contemporary literature is its lack of sustained attention to the crucial ways in which authors' responses to an intensely financialized capitalist system are mediated through the economic spheres whose pressures impose themselves most directly and urgently on the practice of writing: namely, the publishing industry and the book retail business.[27]

McGurl and Crosthwaite's studies advocate for the importance of understanding contemporary fiction in its institutional dimensions, and the four main institutions addressed in the following chapters have recently been the subject of much useful research and analysis.

---

[23] Crosthwaite, pp. 20-1.

[24] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., p. 3.

[27] Ibid., p. 18.

My first chapter deals with the institution of academic literary criticism. Over the last decade there has been a surge in theoretical or methodological interventions in the practice and teaching of criticism, testifying to a renewed attention to the institutional conditions of the discipline. Such polemics have always been a feature of English Literature's disciplinary self-awareness, but this has been particularly true of recent times. Advocates of postcritique such as Rita Felski have begun to argue that literary-critical frameworks overpower the individual's response to the text, and that what they see as the discipline's highly-professionalised critical discourses should be abandoned in favour of less theoretically-elaborated reading strategies.[28] Rather than merely posing an immanent problem of method, however, postcritique's attack on the specifically *institutional* dimensions of literary criticism is symptomatic of wider problems in the discipline. As Ben Knights argues, the institutionalisation and professionalisation of criticism have historically been strategies for legitimising the study of literature as a proper academic subject.[29] As such, the return of anxieties around professionalism (in the form of postcritique's attempt to exorcise it from the rhetoric of criticism) is indicative of a wider crisis in disciplinary legitimacy.

The necessity of defending the study of literature as a proper academic subject is currently felt to be particularly acute as market imperatives increasingly influence public understandings of (to paraphrase Stefan Collini) what universities are for.[30] Bill Readings argued as early as 1996 that the bureaucratisation of higher education has thoroughly undermined the university's autonomy, which Kant viewed as central to its health and proper functioning.[31] Now, policymakers in the UK assert that a degree course's success should be measured in terms of 'labour market returns', and critics in the psychoanalytic and deconstructive traditions such as Sarah Wood and Nicholas Royle have extended Readings' argument to address the implications of this value-for-money discourse, with its emphasis on measuring outcomes, for the study of

---

[28] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), p. 34.

[29] Ben Knights, 'Intelligence and Interrogation: The Identity of the English Student', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 4 (2005), 33–52 (p. 36).

[30] Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).

[31] Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 3, 57.

literature.[32] For Wood and Royle, reading and writing resist regularisation and programming; as such, literature will always have a complicated relationship with the notion of a discipline or profession. My readings of Smith and Bennett's fiction and criticism show these texts reflecting on the tensions attendant upon the institutionalisation or professionalisation of the reading and writing of literature.

The instability of the professional/amateur boundary is also felt acutely in the second institution addressed in my thesis, public criticism. Public criticism may traditionally be written by professionals, but its audience is general; it is addressed to amateurs. However, the academy's controversies about professionalism are somewhat mirrored in the domain of popular criticism: in the age of 'blogs and discussion groups', Rónán McDonald argues, 'the public critic has been dismembered by two opposing forces: the tendency of academic criticism to become increasingly inward-looking and non-evaluative, and the momentum for journalistic and popular criticism to become a much more democratic, dispersive affair, no longer left in the hands of the experts'.[33] While these remarks register an increasing polarisation of professional and amateur criticism, McDonald's recommended combination of scholarly rigour and aesthetic evaluation can already be found in a number of serious literary journals such as the *London Review of Books* and *Times Literary Supplement*. Newcomers such as *Gorse* and *The White Review* have also emerged as reassertions of serious literary journalism and the value of the print media at a time when newspapers, which have traditionally been key venues for book reviewing, are struggling to cope with the disruptive effects of the internet on their business models. McDonald's arguments are also echoed in Ray Ryan and Liam McIlvanney's introduction to their collection *The Good of the Novel*, which features novelists essays'

---

[32] Chris Belfield et al., 'The Impact of Undergraduate Degrees on Early-Career Earnings', Institute for Fiscal Studies, 27 November 2018 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/undergraduate-degrees-labour-market-returns> [accessed 27 March 2020], p. 9; Sarah Wood, *Without Mastery: Reading and Other Forces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 138; Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 56.

[33] Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. vii, ix.

on contemporary fiction.[34] James Ley, meanwhile, has proposed eminent reviewer James Wood as a model for accessible-yet-rigorous public criticism.[35] McDonald, Ley, and McIlvanney and Ryan's books all describe the emergence of a new style of contemporary public criticism in response to changes in the institutional make-up of literary culture: the deprofessionalisation of academic criticism, the democratisation of public discourse, and the simultaneous weakening of the print media and resurgence of literary journals. My chapter on popular criticism examines how a cluster of Smith's novels, as well as Cusk's *Outline*, address the questions around publicity, democracy and populism underpinning the institution of public criticism.

Like public criticism, the book award has recently been the subject of intense debate in British literary culture. English's monograph on the cultural prize, the first full-length study of this topic, renders an account of the anxieties surrounding this newly-ascendant mechanism for arbitrating aesthetic value. English traces how what Bourdieu called symbolic capital, or 'prestige', is produced, assigned and naturalised by the judgements of cultural prizes—while, at the same time, prize judges often disown their role in creating this value by professing a form of disinterested judgement.[36] Prize discourse therefore upholds an outdated ideology of aesthetic autonomy at the same time as exemplifying for many critics the queasy insinuation of the market into the cultural sphere. Recalling McDonald's concerns about the 'dismember[ing]' of public criticism due to the 'dispers[al]' of authority, journalism about book awards often expresses a sense that prizes embody a form of market populism. As Crosthwaite observes, 'an ideology of the market […] has arrogated the category of the popular to itself', and it is often argued that prizes—particularly the Booker—manifest populist, marketable values rather than reflecting genuine literary merit.[37] For example, 2008 Booker judge Alex Clark observes that the award 'is happy

---

[34] Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan, 'Introduction' in *The Good of the Novel*, ed. by Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), pp. vii-xiv (p. vii).

[35] James Ley, *The Critic in the Modern World: Public Criticism from Samuel Johnson to James Wood* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[36] James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 3.

[37] Crosthwaite, p. 28.

to be seen as a marketing strategy'.[38] Chapter three assesses how Smith's prizewinning novel *How to Be Both* and Alan Hollinghurst's Booker-garlanded *The Line of Beauty* intervene in these debates by thematising the production and circulation of various kinds of value.

Finally, chapter four addresses the institution of publishing. In response to the consolidation of the literary market that Crosthwaite describes, there has recently been a surge in monographs on the publishing industry. Thompson's *Merchants of Culture* tracks how, as a result of 'economic and technological change', traditional publishers are in danger of being 'disintermediated': cut out of the book production chain.[39] Publishing, then, is currently understood as an intermediary between authors and the public. Indeed, Michael Bhaskar argues that 'mediation is key' to understanding the role of publishing.[40] Conventional publishing, as an institution defined by its mediating role, is often thought to be under threat from various forms of contemporary immediacy. It is often argued that twenty-first-century modernity is characterised by a sense of what David Harvey calls 'time-space compression', which is produced by technologies for instant communication, dissemination and publication.[41] As Harvey notes, this immediacy is a desired feature of the market under neoliberalism; as such, we can understand traditional publishing to be threatened not just by instantaneous forms of publication which threaten to outcompete it, but by the drive towards a 'rising density of market transactions' facilitated by the elimination of economic mediators.[42] My fourth chapter argues that understanding anxieties about the fate of conventional publishing in terms of this conceptual tension between mediation and immediacy provides crucial context for

---

[38] Alex Clark, 'Man Booker Prize: This Year's Judges Are Betraying Authors and Their Readers', *Guardian*, 16 October 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/16/booker-prize-judges-betray-readers> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[39] Ibid., pp. 18, 19.

[40] Michael Bhaskar, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), p. 38.

[41] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4.

[42] Ibid.

readings of Smith's quickly-written and speedily-published quartet of novels, *Seasonal*, as well as Laing and Burn's similar projects, *Crudo* and *Born Yesterday*.

As this brief review of recent scholarship on literary institutions shows, each of the institutions examined in my thesis plays a powerful role in determining the production and reception of contemporary fiction. These institutional contexts are currently subject to enormous change, foregrounding the contingencies and paradoxes of their discourses and values. The next section of my introduction surveys the particular tensions attendant on authors' entanglements with literary institutions, making a case for Smith's exemplary status in this regard.

Authors and institutions

Smith's attitude toward academia, public criticism, prizes and publishing shows a paradigmatic ambivalence about literary institutions, meaning that her body of work gives a particularly nuanced picture of the contemporary relationships between authors and institutions. As such, each chapter foregrounds Smith's work while also introducing select examples of other contemporary novels which gesture towards the wider prevalence and significance of the tendencies identified. This structure brings out what is distinctive about Smith's institutional engagements while also staging a tension between this particularity and the field of generality denoted by the concept of an institution, market or canon.

Smith's distinctiveness in this regard lies in her marked tendency to shuttle between antipathy towards literary institutions and an acceptance of their role in the lives of contemporary authors. Smith's aversion to institutions has been widely noted, such as in Raoul Eshelman's rather ungenerous (if understandable) reading of *Hotel World*. He argues that 'the author's treatment of space and order is easy to pin down ideologically': 'At times, in fact, the book reads as if the author had cribbed straight out of Judith Butler or Michel Foucault. The hotel is a spatial trap, a panoptic surveillance center in which the employees are strictly monitored and punished

according to need.'[43] Here, Eshelman thinks he detects not the novel's disposition towards institutions, nor the characters', but Smith's own paranoid anti-institutionalism. I do not dispute that many of Smith's texts lampoon institutions, but Eshelman's reading misses a more complex ambivalence which pervades her writing and public guise.

Smith maintains the persona of an institutional outsider, describing her encounters with academia and the press as highly fraught, while also demonstrably engaging with these institutions. She has spoken on more than one occasion of abandoning her doctoral studies at Cambridge because she found the institutional setting too rigid. According to Smith, the university imposed strict limitations on her thesis: 'It really wasn't allowed, not permitted, to do prose and poetry together, and it really wasn't allowed to go across an ocean in the one thesis and look at both Irish and American writing. So I kept getting castigated for being "too creative."'[44] Smith has also expressed scepticism about the way the university system arbitrates the value of academic work: 'I did complete [my thesis], but it was referred, which means that I had to change it if I wanted to complete it. […] Got two jobs on the back of its first chapter and then went to my viva and was told that the first chapter wasn't good enough and had to be changed, so then I thought, I just don't get this at all, so I stopped.'[45] Smith has also described disliking the position of institutional authority she had to inhabit as a lecturer, yet she has returned to academia several times, as the Weidenfeld Visiting Professor in Comparative Literature and as a creative writing fellow at the University of East Anglia (she has even described herself as 'happily' fulfilling the latter duties).[46]

---

[43] Raoul Eshelman, 'Checking out of the Epoch: Performatism in Olga Tokarczuk's "The Hotel Capital" vs. Late Postmodernism in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (with Remarks on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Miloš Urban's *Sevenchurch*)', *Anthropoetics*, 10 (2004-5) [n.p.].

[44] Tory Young, '"Love and the Imagination Are Not Gendered Things": An Interview with Ali Smith', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9 (2015), 131–48 (p. 135).

[45] 'Ali Smith', *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4, 11 November 2016.

[46] Arifa Akbar, 'Conversations with the Undead: Ali Smith Gives the Lecture a Haunting Twist', *Independent*, 27 October 2010.

Smith appears to have similarly mixed feelings about the press, especially after a controversy over her introduction to the British Council's *New Writing 13* anthology, in which Smith and co-editor Toby Litt lamented the domesticity of female writers' submissions. Smith referred to the incident as 'nonsense in the papers' and threatened to withdraw from public life: 'It made me think well why the fuck would I be a public person at all? Why would I want to be? It makes no difference, people make up rubbish about you and it becomes true. I wonder [...] if the only thing is to insist on context, or to remove yourself altogether.'[47] However, the lifestyle and activities of the contemporary author seem to keep her involved with the literary press, as she continues to give interviews, make appearances, and write articles.

While it is tempting to infer from Smith's antipathic remarks that she views institutions as constraints on literary freedom, she hardly maintains a blanket scepticism towards them. She has said of her publisher Hamish Hamilton that '[t]hey have always let me have enough rope'.[48] When accepting the Goldsmiths Prize for innovative fiction, she praised the organisation:

> Speaking before the award ceremony, Smith called the Goldsmiths prize 'really about the thing closest to your heart if you work with the novel as a form, if you're interested in the form of the novel and the form of language [...] The point of this is that it's about language, about all the things a novel can do, not just some of the things a novel can

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/conversations-with-the-undead-ali-smith-gives-the-lecture-a-haunting-twist-8226873.html> [accessed 30 April 2019]; St Anne's College, 'Weidenfeld Visiting Professorship in Comparative European Literature' <http://www.st-annes.ox.ac.uk/about/weidenfeld-visiting-professorship-in-comparative-european-literature> [accessed 30 April 2019]; Ali Smith, graduation speech, University of East Anglia, 18 July 2016 <https://soundcloud.com/ueaevents/uea-honorary-graduate-ali-smith-speech> [accessed 4 February 2020].

[47] Christina Patterson, 'Ali Smith: The Power and the Story', *Independent*, 17 June 2005 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/ali-smith-the-power-and-the-story-226080.html> [accessed 14 August 2019].

[48] Akbar.

do,' she said. 'That's what this prize is about. It's about the multi-variousness, everything the novel can do is included in this prize.'[49]

Clearly, Smith has been unable or unwilling to entirely avoid institutional entanglements, and her involvement with universities and prizes seems characteristic of the contemporary economics of authorship: these are new forms of literary patronage. As Dominic Head has remarked, these institutions of literary valuation have appropriated Smith as a 'canonical' contemporary author, suggesting that—whatever her personal animus towards institutions—Smith's output is easily assimilable into the dominant institutional order.[50] After all, as Simon Morgan Wortham has observed in his work on Derrida and the university, there is no possibility of positioning oneself completely outside of the institution; one always stands in an oblique 'counter-institutional' attitude characterised by 'a measure of both distance and proximity'; in other words, 'a deeply complex and highly ambivalent relationship'.[51] Smith's career is characterised, then, by a push-pull between institutional assimilation and anti-institutional sentiment, making her a richly complex figure for understanding contemporary British fiction's institutional contexts.

While treating Smith as a privileged example of a counter-institutional force in contemporary British publishing, this is not a single-author study, and the reason for this lies in the very structure or tension of the counter-institutional. To single out one author as a gadfly or outsider risks attributing to them a heroic and impossible resistance to the market or institution. Conversely, to treat several authors as if they were all performing the *same* anti-institutional gesture would be to recapitulate the logic of the trend, ameliorating the force of each example by levelling out their

---

[49] Alison Flood, 'Ali Smith Wins Goldsmiths Prize for Bifurcating Marvel How to Be Both', *Guardian*, 12 November 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/12/ali-smith-goldsmith-prize-how-to-be-both> [accessed 29 October 2019].

[50] Dominic Head, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency: Ali Smith and the Contemporary Canon', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 101-114 (p. 102).

[51] Simon Morgan Wortham, *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 2, 1.

distinctive features. Instead, in order to bring into view the very struggle this thesis describes, I have used Smith as a through-line for my argument while also comparing her work with that of other authors. My aim here is to bring out a tension between the very notion of a general tendency, on the one hand, and what Derrida would call the 'signature' on the other.[52] The signature, which is 'the making of a unique and authenticating mark', is supposed to secure the singularity of a text, but this singularity is always involved in a field of other potential examples.[53] I have identified Smith as a particularly interesting example for the reasons described above, but my attention to novels by Laing, Burn, Bennett, Hollinghurst and Cusk retains an awareness of a potential reversibility between the general and the exemplary.

I conceived of this approach in deliberate contrast to methodologies such as Philip Tew's in *The Contemporary British Novel*. Tew's book surveys an extraordinarily wide range of recent British fiction in order 'to demonstrate at least at some level that among recurrent cultural and creative elements one may identify common authorial practices'.[54] The very possibility of identifying an authorial practice common to a group of similar authors is precisely what is at stake in this thesis. Tew's approach risks both ignoring what is distinctive about each of the texts he includes *and* eliding the homogenising role of institutions and markets in the development of 'common authorial practices'. My decision to foreground one author, but also include a select set of secondary examples, enables me to address the question of how a particular author might find ways to perform something like a signature while also being bound up in the broader fields of textuality and market. The attention to a limited group of novels by other authors gestures towards shared tendencies or similarities which might allow us to make more general claims about contemporary British fiction, but without losing sight of the fact that these other writers are also working to perform their own signatures.

---

[52] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 152.

[53] Ibid., p. 163.

[54] Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 4.

The aesthetic turn

This encounter between signature and institution is another variation on the tension Crosthwaite describes between the demands of the market and the modernist doctrine of aesthetic autonomy. Central to the twenty-first-century iteration of this debate is a widespread sense that not merely aesthetic autonomy but the category of the aesthetic itself has been critiqued out of existence. My thesis situates itself in relation to a contemporary return of aesthetic discourse; this new thinking of aesthetics refuses to accept that the category of the artwork has been totally subsumed by the logic of the commodity, and sets out to describe the special features of literary experience, as well as its political and ethical possibilities. Mobilising Derrida's description of 'this strange institution called literature', each chapter in this thesis elaborates a fuller account of how contemporary novels turn the logic of fictive institution back on the regimes for producing, selling and evaluating literature to which they might otherwise be understood as irremediably subordinated.[55] In describing literature as possessing a capacity to reframe institutional discourses, my thesis partakes of a wider contemporary move to re-evaluate the cultural importance of the novel.

Sianne Ngai has recently suggested that the culture industry has now totally foreclosed the possibility of aesthetic autonomy, resulting in a weakening of aesthetic concepts, appeals and feelings. She cites a long list of 'major problems in aesthetic theory' which have become particularly acute in the contemporary era:

> These include the implications of the increasingly intimate relation between the autonomous artwork and the form of the commodity; the complex mixture of negative as well as positive affects resulting in the ambivalent nature of many of our aesthetic experiences; the ambiguous state of the avant-garde, which in a zombielike fashion persists even as its 'disappearance or impossibility' is regarded as one of postmodernism's constitutive features; the relevance of aesthetic to critical or other nonaesthetic judgements aimed at producing knowledge (or how one is permitted to link judgements based on subjective feelings of pleasure/displeasure to ones with claims to objective truth); the future of the longstanding idea of art as play as opposed to labor in a world where immaterial labor is increasingly aestheticized; and the

---

[55] Derrida, 'This Strange Institution', p. 36.

'parergonal' relation between art and theoretical discourse itself, all the more pressured with the rise of an institutional culture of museums and curricula that has led art and criticism to internalize each other in historically unprecedented ways.[56]

Many of the circumstances outlined here are addressed in this thesis. Chapter one, for example, looks at the ways in which 'art and criticism […] internalize each other'. The conflation of the artwork and the commodity is a central problematic in my study of the literary prize, while the concomitant appropriation of public discourse by market forces is a key issue addressed in chapter two. Ngai's is one of the theories of contemporary aesthetics on which this thesis most often draws, outlining the ways in which the market and other institutions seem to be growing in strength while aesthetic experience feels increasingly diffuse.

     Pieter Vermeulen notes that this attenuation of the aesthetic is particularly marked in the case of the novel, but sees this very weakening as the genre's lever of intervention:

> Following (and quoting) Adorno, Sianne Ngai has argued that 'bourgeois art's reflexive preoccupation with its *own* "powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world" is precisely what makes it capable of theorising social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis'. The novels in this study theorize powerlessness (in Ngai's words) and imagine weak forms of affect and life (in my slightly more upbeat phrasing) by dismantling the 'strong' affective scenarios that have allowed the novel to exercise its cultural power, and by elaborating less robust assemblages of life, affect and form in their wake.[57]

Against the ever-maundering discourse of the death of the novel, Vermeulen mounts a defence of the form, suggesting that it is relevant now precisely because the 'assemblages' with which it has been linked since its genesis are beginning to disintegrate. Contemporary novels mobilise 'the notorious elasticity of the novel form

---

[56] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 2.

[57] Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 2-3.

in order to move beyond a particular hegemonic instantiation of that form'.[58] Vermeulen describes the weakening of social, political and cultural institutions, and how the novel's status as an institution which undermines or deviates from its own form gives it special purchase on the deterioration of this institutional order.

The novels considered in my thesis address a contemporary sense that—while literary institutions have become increasingly powerful insofar as they express market forces—they are weaker in their instantiations as non-market wellsprings of education, critique and aesthetic experimentation.[59] An accompanying sense of the strength of the culture industry and the weakness of the novel calls for an articulation of the specific powers of the literary to trouble the basis of institutional power. This is what Derrida's work provides: an account of literature's capacity to reflect on the fictiveness of institutions and their values. This finally brings me to properly account for the status of Derrida's thought and writing in my thesis, a question which is perhaps most usefully framed in terms of how Derrida's reputation has fared in the recent aesthetic turn.

This turn is described in Peter Boxall's *The Value of the Novel* as a 'contemporary tendency towards a reassertion of literary value'.[60] Boxall traces the initial foreclosure or cancellation of aesthetic discourse back to 'a new generation of critics that came to prominence in the sixties and seventies (including figures such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva) [who] developed a much more critical and sceptical approach to the very concept of value itself'.[61] Now, he argues, 'in the wake of the theoretical developments of the last century, and with the decline of postmodernism as a cultural dominant', the critical task at hand is to re-establish a discourse of literary value by 'produc[ing] a new means of understanding what kind of a thing literature is—how it differs from other forms of representation, how it makes meaning, how literary form allows us to imagine and represent the cultures in

---

[58] Ibid., p. 3.

[59] Crosthwaite, for example, describes the loss of arts and education programming characteristic of the twentieth-century British and American welfare states (pp. 24-25).

[60] Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 7.

[61] Ibid., p. 1.

which we live'.[62] Boxall's emphasis on the role of theory in the foreclosure of aesthetic value is common to many twenty-first-century defences of the novel. For example, McIlvanney and Ryan (whom Boxall cites) write that their project 'is motivated partly by the sense that, as books like Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2004) and Valentine Cunningham's *Reading After Theory* (2001) postulate, we are emerging from a period of heavily theoretical criticism and that, as a result, what might be called the novelness of novels is coming back into focus'.[63] These examples demonstrate that theory in general and Derrida in particular are usually thought of as having foreclosed discussion of the particularity and value of literature.

This thesis, however, argues that Derrida's thought has an important role to play in the contemporary aesthetic turn. His writing on literature is already very similar to the ways in which critics such as Boxall are currently articulating literary value. For example, Boxall argues that we need 'to produce an adequately rich account of the democratic power of the literary imagination'.[64] The novel 'exercis[es] a kind of freedom from the conventions that it articulates, a kind of freedom that is woven into its status as fiction, its immunity from anything like responsibility to existing truth'.[65] Similarly, Derrida describes literature as an 'institution of fiction which gives *in principle* the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect conventional law, nature and history'.[66] As a result:

> The institution of literature in the West, in its relatively modern form, is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy. Not that it depends on a democracy in place, but it seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy.[67]

---

[62] Ibid., p 8.

[63] McIlvanney and Ryan, pp. vii-viii.

[64] Boxall, p. 9.

[65] Ibid., p. 11.

[66] Derrida, 'This Strange Institution', p. 37.

[67] Ibid.

It is true that a certain conservative notion of literary value cannot stand after Derrida's intervention, but his democratic and ethical account of literature resonates with the language of the aesthetic turn. As such, my project intervenes in the current disciplinary debates about postcritique and aesthetics by showing how Derrida's work is an underexploited resource in contemporary defences of the novel.

Indeed, Royle argues that Derrida has been maligned by postcritique, and that his account of literature in fact provides a theoretical grounding for the aesthetic turn. Royle cites the example of Derrida's treatment by Felski, who simultaneously sidelines him *and* seems to hold him responsible for the cancellation of the literary:

> *Uses of Literature* […] poses as an intellectually progressive, non-reductive book about the contemporary value and importance of literature, in which Derrida has apparently been airbrushed out of the picture and out of history. Critical writing and thinking after Derrida or 'after deconstruction' here seems to have become, at least in part, a sort of painful exercise in suppression, a strange negotiation with he who must not be named: *writing in a post-[shtumm, shtumm] era.*[68]

Similarly, in *The Limits of Critique*, Felski places Derrida in a genealogy of philosophical 'negativity', tracing what she sees as a problematic 'hermeneutics of suspicion' back through his work, while never substantively engaging with his account of language or literature.[69] She does concede that 'disciples of Foucault and Derrida have often insisted that their work is radically antihermeneutic in spirit, putting a massive dent in the project of interpretation'.[70] However, while happy enough to take the 'dent' as a win, she completely misses the point made by the 'disciples' when, further down the page, she obliquely cites and misreads Derrida's critique of semiotics:

> Indeed, rather than giving up interpretation, critics are practicing it ever more fervently and furiously, thanks to the spread of poststructuralist theories that school them in preternatural alertness and vigilance. *The unreliability of signs secures the permanence of suspicion*: no longer a temporary way station on the path to a newly

---

[68] Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 97.

[69] Felski, pp. 131, 1.

[70] Ibid., p. 33.

discovered truth, it is a permanent domicile and dwelling place for criticism 'after the linguistic turn.' This entrenching of suspicion in turn intensifies the impulse to decipher and decode.[71]

The wording around the 'unreliability of signs' loosely recalls Derrida's response to Saussure, but if his is one of the 'poststructuralist theories' Felski is referring to, then her extrapolation about the consequent interpretive approach is unfounded. According to Derrida, the separability of a mark from its context does not mean that there is another meaning in a given text; he describes precisely the absence of determinate meanings, whether these are imagined as superficial or concealed.[72.] The reader can never finally determine the meaning of the mark, but this is exactly why Derrida is against 'the impulse to decipher and decode'. There is nothing to be deciphered or decoded, no fixed signified of the signifier—not even a secret one.

In fact, the very appearance of secrecy as such is described elsewhere in Derrida's oeuvre as an effect generated by the work of fiction. Describing an unsolvable mystery in Baudelaire's 'Counterfeit Money', Derrida argues:

> If the secret remains undetectable, unbreakable […] it is first of all because there is no sense in wondering what actually happened, what was the true intention of the narrator's friend and the meaning hidden 'behind' his utterances. As these characters have no consistency, no depth beyond their literary phenomenon, the absolute inviolability of the secret they carry depends first of all on the essential superficiality of their phenomenality, on the too-obvious of that which they present to view.[73]

The secret is an effect of fiction through which the text creates the sense of a mystery to be uncovered—but, this being fiction, there is no underlying truth to be discovered. This is another reason why Derrida's thought is 'radically antihermeneutic'.

---

[71] Ibid.

[72] Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf), pp. 307-330 (pp. 315-16).

[73] Jacques Derrida, '"Counterfeit Money" II: Gift and Countergift, Excuse and Forgiveness (Baudelaire and the Story of the Dedication)', in *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 108–72 (p. 153).

Royle's reading of *Uses of Literature* registers the irony that, while Derrida has been associated with the linguistic turn, a strain of theory that has been accused of evacuating the concept of the literary, Derrida's critique of semiotics is actually a prerequisite for any 'literary turn'.[74] As such, '[t]he literary turn would be at once about the "literary in theory" […] and more specifically about new ways of registering the place of literature in the light of Derrida's work'.[75] In other words, Derrida is not merely in tune with, but actually pre-empts, the contemporary literary or aesthetic turn. While the genealogy of this turn has been written as a recovery from theory in general and Derrida in particular, Derrida himself emerges as an important thinker of the literary. Each chapter of this thesis also shows how Smith's thinking of signification, invention and fiction is remarkably close to Derrida's; it is for this reason that I have privileged his work in my own contribution to the resurgent critical genre of the defence of the novel.

Literature and fiction

As I outlined briefly earlier, Derrida characterises literature in terms of its democratic license—but he also associates it with an aporia of ontology or truth. This is what Derrida means when he says that '[l]iterature "is" the place or experience of this "trouble" we also have […] with truth and with essence'. As Clark describes, for Derrida, 'literary language […] puts to work an undecidability about the status of its language which both compels and resists interpretation'.[76] This gives literature a 'force of undecidability [which] always exceeds whatever may be conceptualised in any one reading or in any one context'.[77] As a result, the Derridean account of literature entails that it will always perturb any attempt to regularise or institutionalise it:

> Literary texts then, may bear a certain *coup de force* in relation to institutionality. They cannot merely be read 'as literature' precisely to the degree that they institute ways of

---

[74] Royle, p. 93.

[75] Ibid., p. 97.

[76] Timothy Clark, 'Literary Force: Institutional Values', *Culture Machine*, 1 (1999) [n.p.].

[77] Ibid.

reading and, to that extent, must perform their own reader. For the same reason they cannot be simply parsed for their content or, if you prefer, translated into fully conceptual or philosophical terms. We are thrown into a cross-disciplinary space in which the modes of competence required are multiple and uncertain.[78]

My readings of contemporary literary texts show them mobilising this force to trouble institutionalised or programmatic appropriations of the literary.

This interpretive strategy also rests on Derrida's account of literature as a fictive institution. This formulation not only refers to literature or fiction as an institution, but describes the fabulous and self-grounding nature of institutions themselves. For example, Derrida has suggested that 'the people' which signs the American Declaration of Independence seems to be called into being *by* that document, raising the question of where the people's authenticating or signing authority comes from.[79] Noting that 'the signer is […] the people', Derrida goes on to explain: 'But these people do not exist. They do *not* exist as an entity, the entity does *not* exist *before* this declaration, not *as such*. If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer, this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer.'[80] As such, the authorisation of the signature is 'fabulous' and authorises the signer 'after the fact or belatedly—henceforth, I have the right to sign, in truth I will already have had it since I was able to give it to myself'.[81] The instituting moment is itself a fiction: a circular, self-authorising structure. The language of fictive institution therefore also refers to the way in which the inauguration of a concept, idea, or institution is a 'fabulous event' or 'fable'.[82] Just as Pieter Vermeulen argues that the contemporary novel uses its cultural powerlessness to theorise the weakening of democratic institutions, my readings of recent British novels show them mobilising their fictional status to theorise the fabulous nature of literary institutions.

---

[78] Ibid.

[79] Jacques Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence', in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. by Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. by Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 46–54 (p. 49).

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid., p. 50.

[82] Ibid.

This reading of contemporary aesthetics is distinct from the postmodern assertion that everything is fictional. Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, and Alison Gibbons have argued that contemporary cultural texts—while deploying characteristically postmodern effects—have a different relation to truth or reality. Postmodernism is the 'dominant cultural belief in the loss of the real', and its 'techniques function […] to override the real, in essence doing away with the category altogether'.[83] As a result, 'rather than a distinction between fiction and non-fiction, postmodern logic only recognises fiction'.[84] While the postmodernist conception of fiction emphasises that everything is inevitably *shaped* by narrative (as signalled by fiction's etymological root, the Latin '*fingĕre*', 'to fashion or form'), my readings of contemporary texts show them to be more interested in construing fiction as the moment of institution, the installation of a fabulous, self-grounding origin.[85]

This account of fictive institution has a political valency. The aporia in ontological or veridical discourse which the literary mobilises is, Derrida argues, related to its democratic freedom: to its exemption from determinate truths, facts, aims or programs. As Jonathan Culler observes, fiction therefore has in common with democracy the right not to be held accountable to a 'totalitarian' demand for 'transparency'.[86] As Anne-Lise François has suggested, the structure of the 'open secret' also guarantees a democracy of reading by virtue of its 'givenness', which 'no degree of wealth or power and no technology of reading, however sophisticated, can increase'.[87] I call on this account of secrecy numerous times throughout this thesis in order to show how Smith's novels foreground fiction's lack of determinate meanings and its democratic availability to all readers.

---

[83] Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, 'Reality Beckons: Metamodernist Depthiness Beyond Panfictionality', *European Journal of English Studies*, 23 (2019), pp. 172–89 (p. 174).

[84] Ibid.

[85] 'Fiction, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/69828> [accessed 14 February 2020].

[86] Jonathan Culler, '"The Most Interesting Thing in the World"', *Diacritics*, 38 (2009), pp. 7–16 (p. 13).

[87] Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 7.

As François points out, this accords with Jacques Rancière's contention that all readers are equally capable of understanding and learning from a text.[88] According to Kristin Ross' introduction to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière intended the book as a riposte to Bourdieu's characterisation of education as the reproduction of inequality.[89] Rancière argued that an 'emancipated' pedagogy begins by presupposing an 'equality of intelligence' between all people, including between the master and the student.[90] Rather than assuming the need for an 'explicator', Rancière argued that teachers should credit students with the capacity to understand a text by themselves.[91] Rancière's emancipated pedagogy holds that the student is just as capable of working out a text alone because 'all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature'.[92] There is nothing in the text which the master sees that the student cannot. Rancière's description of the role of textuality and reading in his emancipated pedagogy therefore echoes the Derridean secret, and both theories are strikingly similar to Smith's model of fictionality. As such, I often draw on *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in order to emphasise the model of open, accessible and egalitarian reading articulated in Smith's fictions. In accordance with Boxall's account of the value of the novel, this thesis therefore argues that Smith's defence of literature is implicitly a defence of its democratic possibilities.

Chapter breakdown

Each chapter of this thesis examines how texts by Smith and either one or two other author(s) foreground the work of a particular institution in promulgating certain literary values and discourses. All four chapters begin by situating these readings in the context of the sociological, material or economic functions of these institutions.

---

[88] Ibid, pp. 7-8.

[89] Kristin Ross, 'Translator's Introduction', in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. vii-xxiii (p. xi).

[90] Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 15, 45.

[91] Ibid., p. 5.

[92] Ibid., p. 9.

This is supplemented by discourse analysis of the role of criticism, prizes or publishing in British literary culture. Following this analysis, the latter part of each chapter is devoted to close readings of the ways in which the novels' thinking of fictive institution redounds on cultural institutions.

Since I myself am writing out of one such institution, the university, I have started with a chapter on literary criticism, which allows me to prepare some ground by reflecting on the involvement of my own project in the institutional tensions it describes. Both Smith and Bennett have expressed antipathy towards the academic study of literature in general and theory in particular, positioning these discourses as parasitical on the practice of literature. As a result, these authors' literary and critical writings can be meaningfully placed in the wider context of postcritique and the aesthetic turn. However, reading their antipathy towards theory very much against the grain, this chapter argues that Smith and Bennett's texts mobilise an implicitly Derridean account of literature. Specifically, they put literature's 'trouble' with truth and essence to work by displacing the disciplinary and generic boundaries of literary criticism. This chapter establishes my own methodological framework, describing the power of fiction to trouble the logic of institution and demonstrating how such arguments can function as an alternative discourse of the good of the novel that meaningfully differs from the claims of postcritique and the aesthetic turn.

The next chapter, on public criticism, argues that three of Smith's novels—*Hotel World*, *The Accidental*, and *There but for the*—as well as Rachel Cusk's *Outline* all similarly turn the logic of fictive institution back on this institution of literary reception, showing its conceptual foundations and values to be fabulous. Both Smith and Cusk have critiqued the way public literary discourse is conducted—particularly the tendency to gin up controversies—and the values promulgated by popular criticism. Their novels and remarks in the media hint that public criticism's literary values are not particularly democratic, and are in fact determined by the market. My readings show how Smith and Cusk's novels identify the circumstance that—as Michael Warner argues—the public is 'a kind of fiction' which 'exists *by virtue of being*

addressed', and mobilise their own fictionality to address or call forth alternative, democratic literary publics.[93]

Chapter three extends the previous chapter's investigation of contemporary concerns about the literary market, addressing prevalent cultural anxieties about the tendency of literary prizes to establish a translatability between literary and economic value. This chapter attends to the ways in which Smith's *How to be Both* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* thematise the relationship between art and market at a time when book prizes are increasingly felt to commercialise literature. Recognising that, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues, '[a]ll value is radically contingent', Smith and Hollinghurst's novels represent it as a kind of fiction—without, of course, implying that it has no material existence or effects.[94] On the contrary, my readings show how these texts identify a similarity between the workings of value and the structure of fiction as Derrida describes it in relation to 'Counterfeit Money', portraying value as a secret or mystery: a meaningful, but ultimately fabulous, attribute.

Chapter four picks up the question of value, addressing renewed anxieties about the death of the novel in the face of technological and economic changes in the publishing industry. As Thompson and Bhaskar describe, new communication technologies are making it easier, faster and cheaper to bring books to market than ever before. Combined with the marketisation of the publishing industry that Crosthwaite describes, these changes increasingly pressurise conventional publishing's role as an economic, communicative, cultural and temporal mediator. Concomitantly, the novel itself is now often imagined to be a long, slow and outmoded cultural form. However, my readings of Smith's *Autumn*, Laing's *Crudo* and Burn's *Born Yesterday* show how these novels foreground the impossibility, or fictionality, of communicative and temporal immediacy. As such, they reject the premise underlying criticisms that conventional publishing and the novel are slow or archaic. Using their own status as works of fiction to foreground the fictionality of

---

[93] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), pp. 8, 67.

[94] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 30.

immediacy, these texts insist that the novel, far from being dead, has special qualities that make it peculiarly relevant for rethinking the exact conditions that appear to threaten its cultural relevance.

While twenty-first-century culture seems to suffer more and more from what David Shields calls 'reality hunger', and the rise of autofiction seems to augur the outmodedness of fiction, this thesis ultimately suggests that the contemporary novel as a specifically fictional form actually retains a kind of cultural power. As Derrida argues, '[a] "literature" […] can produce, can place onstage, and put forth something like the truth'; '[t]herefore it is more powerful than the truth of which it is capable'.[95] The contemporary literature studied in this thesis articulates this power by consistently putting the truth of institutions onstage, highlighting the fabulous origin of their discourses and values. Literature, rather than being fully subordinate to institutional values, has the capacity to put these values radically into question. In line with the millennial turn to metamodernism, this thesis delineates a shift in contemporary writing away from postmodern gestures and affects—such as despair, disengagement or negation—and towards a defence of literature.

---

[95] Jacques Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', in Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 413–19 (p. 419).

CHAPTER ONE: LITERARY CRITICISM

This chapter examines contemporary British literature's engagements with academic criticism. It investigates how Ali Smith and Claire-Louise Bennett's theoretically-informed writing practices mark a breakdown in the notion of professional authority and destabilise distinctions between literature, criticism and theory. It outlines the institutional character of literary criticism—how it has installed itself as a coherent, professional discipline—and shows Smith and Bennett mobilising the effects of literature and fiction to undermine this coherence. I have placed this chapter first in the thesis because some of my own most important methodological decisions have been solicited by criticism's crisis of professionalism, which, as I suggested in my introduction, has formed the backdrop to recent debates over reading methods. Postcritique and the aesthetic turn, I argue, are best understood as emerging from a longer conversation about the difficulties of institutionalising or professionalising literary criticism.

As such, Derrida's account of literature's power to trouble institutions can helpfully reframe these arguments—indeed, my readings of Smith and Bennett's

fiction and criticism show that contemporary literature has already anticipated and internalised some of the most pressing questions currently under debate in the academy. It is because literature anticipates, reframes, and disturbs the terms of such arguments that it retains a kind of power or force in the face of institutions. In making this argument, my thesis partakes of recent attempts to rearticulate the value of literature; my intervention lies in arriving at this point via Derrida's thought, which—as my introduction outlined—has been sidelined in the aesthetic turn.

This chapter therefore moves from a consideration of literary criticism's institutional existence to a reading of contemporary literature's destabilisation of its conceptual foundations. The first thing to consider, then, is how criticism can be understood as an institution in the first place. As I noted in my introduction, a certain *forming* power seems to be integral to our understanding of institutions: they give shape to life through convention and regularity. As the sociologist Anthony Giddens puts it, 'institutionalized features of social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stabilized across time and space'.[1] Accordingly, literary criticism can be understood as an institution in the sense that it defines a set of genres, conventions, discourses and values that shape the reading, writing and reception of literature. It articulates and reproduces these discourses through apparatuses such as professional bodies and documents like Subject Benchmark Statements. In this way, literary criticism maintains a degree of regularity across different contexts and reproduces its practices over time.

However, as a university subject, English Literature has always struggled to maintain its claims to disciplinary cohesiveness and authority. For example, scholars such as Terry Eagleton and Ben Knights describe numerous struggles in the history of the discipline to banish the spectre of amateurism.[2] These difficulties are now coming to the fore again due to changes in university hiring practices. As commentators such as Bill Readings and Stefan Collini have observed, the university is now called on to

---

[1] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. xxxi.

[2] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, anniversary edn. (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), p. 25; Ben Knights, 'Intelligence and Interrogation: The Identity of the English Student', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 4 (2005), 33–52 (p. 36).

account for the value of its work in either implicitly or explicitly economic terms.[3] As money and value become more and more pressing concerns in the discourse around higher education, British universities are increasingly relying on the disposable labour of part-time, temporary lecturers and tutors whose contracts place them in a marginal position to their institutions and to the profession at large. This change has coincided with the blurring of various disciplinary boundaries in contemporary literary culture; it is now harder to draw distinctions between academic, amateur and public criticism, or between creative and critical writing. While it is therefore clear that particular material factors are currently changing the face of literary criticism, this chapter is centrally concerned with how the literary texts examined here thematise (or theorise) *conceptual* destabilisations in the logic or discourse of the institution of literary criticism.

This chapter therefore moves from the material conditions of literary criticism to analysis of the particular discourses it promulgates, examining how contemporary developments perturb its conceptual or philosophical framing. In addition to addressing the values of disciplinary coherence and professionalism, this chapter also attends to the fate of critical theory, which—as Knights argues—has historically been bound up with the professionalisation of criticism in various ways.[4] While it has always divided opinion, theory suffers from a newly fraught status in the academy at the moment. This is perhaps most legible in the rise of 'postcritique', which—as Rita Felski describes—articulates a feeling that theory and 'depth "interpretation"' tend to overread and overindex, exerting mastery over the literary text.[5] My introduction to this thesis also described the related phenomenon of the aesthetic turn, whose proponents seek to reverse what they think of as a hierarchy privileging the discourses of criticism and theory over the special formal qualities of literature. This chapter traces how these critical formations emerged from concerns about the institutional, professional or disciplinary character of literary criticism, and how contemporary fiction might help us reframe these debates. The present chapter therefore has a special

---

[3] Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).

[4] Knights, 'Intelligence and Interrogation', p. 47.

[5] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 32.

status in my thesis, not only providing analysis of a particular literary institution, but situating my own theoretical and methodological choices—particularly my engagement with deconstruction—in their historical and institutional contexts.

Thinking about postcritique and the aesthetic turn in the context of a thesis on institutions draws attention to the underemphasised fact that these modes of reading are attempts to de-escalate the professional or institutional nature of literary criticism: they espouse the use of everyday language and advocate greater attention to personal aesthetic response and evaluation. The eschewal of the critical apparatus proposed by the related methods of 'surface reading' and 'just reading' can similarly be understood as a gesture of deprofessionalisation.[6] The fate of theory in the contemporary university is therefore intimately bound up with the resurgence of discourses of amateurism and aesthetic appreciation. As I set out in my introduction, the Derridean model of signification has often been blamed for the cancellation of the aesthetic. However, one of my central aims is to demonstrate how Derrida offers a rich and surprisingly timely account of the literary.

My readings of various texts by Smith and Bennett will establish numerous continuities between Derridean thought and contemporary literary aesthetics. These texts exemplify the way in which a good deal of contemporary fiction—regardless of whether the author has come directly into contact with Derrida—seems to precomprehend, or, in Judith Ryan's words, 'know about' his theories.[7] This chapter not only unpacks the consequences of this for the relationship between contemporary literature and academia, but shows how contemporary fiction's tendency towards a deconstructive thinking of institution can offer fresh perspectives on current debates about cultural institutions and their influence over literature. My readings of Smith and Bennett's work in this chapter therefore establish the theoretical framework I use throughout this thesis for thinking about the relationship between fiction and institutions.

---

[6] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108 (2009), 1-21 (pp. 9, 12).

[7] Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 1.

Smith and Bennett's writings suggest themselves for this analysis because they so overtly stage concerns about the academic study of literature, particularly the perceived dominance of literary theory. Both authors have portrayed fictional ex-academics in their writing, and these erstwhile professors often describe having chafed against the institutionalisation of the reading and writing of literature. Moreover, both Smith and Bennett abandoned literature PhDs and have criticised literary theory in interviews. They have also both written essays and critical pieces for the growing publishing market that occupies the space between professional and amateur or public criticism. As such, Smith and Bennett's writings and careers are typical of the contemporary blurring of literary criticism's professional, disciplinary and generic boundaries.

The contemporary university

In particular, Smith and Bennett exemplify recent destabilisations in the distinctions between author and critic, literature and criticism, amateur and professional. As I suggested above, many of these changes can be traced back—at least in part—to recent developments in higher education. For example, the growth of creative writing in UK universities has brought writers and critics into close proximity, providing opportunities for cross-pollination between critical and creative practices.[8] At the same time, teaching posts are more likely to be temporary, fractional contracts that motivate writers of fiction and criticism alike to take up non-academic piecework.[9]

This change in the academic labour market is part of a wider set of developments which have seen higher education institutions increasingly subjected to what Readings describes as a 'generalized logic of "accountability" in which the University must pursue "excellence" in all aspects of its functioning'.[10] As Helen Small describes, this regime applies 'a defined set of alternative needs and values (economic

---

[8] Michelene Wandor, *The Author is not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 1.

[9] 'I Just Got a Permanent Academic Job—but I'm Not Celebrating', *Guardian*, 22 June 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/jun/22/permanent-academic-job-university-system-unfair-exploitative> [accessed 5 February 2020].

[10] Readings, p. 3.

utility, for example; or an exclusive empiricism; or a narrowly quantitative estimation of human happiness)', and the humanities can often struggle to articulate their worth (or their worthiness for funding) in these terms.[11] Stefan Collini suggests that the new metric of 'impact' in the Research Excellence Framework is one such example; because the authors of the REF 'chiefly have in mind […] those scientific, medical, technological, and social scientific disciplines that are […] "closer to market"', there may be a 'potentially disastrous impact of the "impact" requirement on the humanities'.[12] This economic pressure on universities has destabilised the boundaries of the academic profession by creating an economic underclass of independent scholars and temporary, part-time lecturers.

The 'para-academic', as a recent book designates this kind of worker, has a foot in the door, but is not a fully paid-up member of the profession.[13] They are 'subjected to the callous mediocrity of temporary contracts that offer absolutely nothing in terms of "career development", or any kind of rung on the ruthless academic ladder'.[14] As Tony Keen has argued, the lack of secure, full-time academic jobs incentivises critics to publish in non-academic venues, which has implications for the genre, tone, and register of their writing.[15] Para-academics may work in the space between academia and amateurism, mixing scholarly modes with more demotic genres of criticism, reviewing or blog-writing, and their work may appear in scholarly journals or

---

[11] Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3.

[12] Collini, p. 171.

[13] Deborah Withers and Alex Wardrop, 'Reclaiming What Has Been Devastated', in *The Para-Academic Handbook: A Toolkit for Making-Learning-Creating-Acting*, ed. by Alex Wardrop and Deborah Withers (Bristol: Hammeron Press, 2014), pp. 6-13 (p. 7). The idea of the para-academic has some similarities with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's 'undercommons', wherein poorly-paid, insecure piecework is identified with the possibility of resistance to the university's official rationales and modes of thought. See: Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, 'The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses', *Social Text*, 22 (2004), 101-15.

[14] Withers and Wardrop, p. 7.

[15] Tony Keen, 'The Pros and Cons of Para-Academia', in *The Para-Academic Handbook: A Toolkit for Making-Learning-Creating-Acting*, ed. by Alex Wardrop and Deborah Withers (Bristol: Hammeron Press, 2014), pp. 243-49.

publications with a more general appeal—or both.[16] Their uncertain professional status is formally mirrored in their mixing of genres. As Aarthi Vadde optimistically puts it:

> The ease and ubiquity of digital publishing have enabled the 'mass amateurization' of the critical, creative, and communicative arts, allowing amateurs to bypass the gatekeeping practices of specific institutions (e.g. the gallery, the newspaper, the publishing house), and to perform acts of photography, journalism, or authorship without necessarily identifying with a specialized guild or benefitting from its resources.[17]

The accounts of precarious and exploitative labour detailed in *The Para-Academic's Handbook*, however, caution us to keep in mind that this breakdown in 'gatekeeping practices' has been caused, at least in part, by the marketisation of higher education institutions.

Literary critics are also increasingly interested in how theoretical questions about language, form, and genre redound on their own writing styles. As such, there has recently been a flourishing of critical modes inflected by literary practices. According to Mary Poovey, Saussurean linguistics and Derrida's reading thereof have contributed to a reformulation of critical practice:

> Following a philosophical reconsideration that began to influence U.S. critics in the 1980s, the business of criticism now seems to some not just supportive of and subordinate to, but exactly like, the business of the poet. In a set of practices called adaptation, creative criticism, and performative writing, the business of criticism is no longer to 'know what [the poet] is doing, and how,' but to do precisely what the poet does, and better.[18]

---

[16] Ibid.

[17] Aarthi Vadde, 'Amateur Creativity: Contemporary Literature and the Digital Publishing Scene', *New Literary History*, 48 (2017), 27–51 (p. 27).

[18] Mary Poovey, 'Creative Criticism: Adaptation, Performative Writing, and the Problem of Objectivity', *Narrative*, 8 (2000), 109-133 (p. 110).

In these new practices, 'the critic's task was not to determine "the" or even "a" meaning for a literary text but to elaborate the operations of language by which texts create the effect of meaning'.[19] This insight into the nature of creative works, however, extends to critical discourse, which is also constituted by these 'operations of language'. The distinction between the two kinds of prose begins to break down as criticism becomes as self-reflexively preoccupied with the workings of its own language as it is with those of the literary text.[20]

Contemporary British literary culture is therefore characterised by the conjunction of the crisis of professionalism in literary studies with the evolution of literary forms that cannot easily be categorised according to the critical/creative binary. The often complicated institutional situations of literary critics and creative writers is reflected in the emergence of forms of contemporary writing that are increasingly imagined as hybridised. Smith and Bennett, occupying ambivalent and marginal positions vis-à-vis the academy, have written various texts which perform this formal indeterminacy. Putting to work what my introduction described as literature's power to disturb institutions, these writings foreground the fictionality of discipline and genre.

Smith, Bennett and academia

My readings of Smith and Bennett's work somewhat contradict the authors' own comments on the subject of theory, which they have both sought to distance themselves from in interviews. At first glance, this refusal might seem to place the authors firmly on the postcritique/aesthetic turn side of the debate, and my readings do trace certain sympathies between their texts and postcritique—indeed, Smith's novel *How to Be Both* has already been claimed as a 'postcritical' work.[21] However, while Smith and Bennett have both shown a generalised dislike of academia and theory, their remarks obviously do not provide exhaustive accounts of their texts, and in fact I have often found a strikingly Derridean thinking underway in both of their

---

[19] Ibid., p. 119.

[20] Ibid., p. 120.

[21] Elizabeth S. Anker, 'Postcritical Reading, the Lyric, and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*', *Diacritics*, 45 (2017), 16–42 (p. 27).

writings. Since this chapter will identify a significant tension between the texts' engagements with theory and the authors' overt refusals of it, I think it pays here to spend some time unpacking Smith and Bennett's public comments on the matter.

Smith's distrust of literary criticism centres on what she sees as the discipline's institutional rigidity, and she has suggested that theory is a boring and superfluous discourse about literature. As Arifa Akbar describes: '[Smith] was a fledgling academic before she became a writer, but aborted that first career partly because she could not swallow the lie that lecturers were imparting definitive truths. "I'd be talking about To the Lighthouse and people would be waiting for an answer! [In giving it] I knew I was lying," she says.'[22] However, Smith did return to lecturing as Weidenfeld Visiting Professor in Comparative Literature at St Anne's, Oxford for the 2011-12 academic year.[23] The book which emerged from that lecture series, *Artful*, blends criticism and theory with fragments of fiction. Smith describes this as an attempt to get around what she sees as literary criticism's monological approach to interpretation: 'I knew I had to do something else. I had to appease the thing in me that says there is no one truth, and no one authority. That is the way things work with lectures.'[24] Here, Smith positions herself and her writing in an oblique relationship with literary criticism: what Derrida might term a 'counter-institutional' or 'with-against' angle.[25]

Her approach to theory is similarly ambivalent. In an interview with Tory Young, Smith said: 'I absolutely hated it. I managed to avoid theory I think almost completely, and of course that was one of the reasons I couldn't keep being an academic because I just wasn't interested in it at all. I'd rather go and read a Dickens

---

[22] Arifa Akbar, 'Conversations with the Undead: Ali Smith Gives the Lecture a Haunting Twist', *Independent*, 27 October 2012

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/conversations-with-the-undead-ali-smith-gives-the-lecture-a-haunting-twist-8226873.html> [accessed 4 February 2020].

[23] St Anne's College, 'Weidenfeld Visiting Professorship in Comparative European Literature' <http://www.st-annes.ox.ac.uk/about/weidenfeld-visiting-professorship-in-comparative-european-literature> [accessed 4 February 2020].

[24] Akbar.

[25] Simon Morgan Wortham, *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 2, 1.

novel I hadn't read. There's loads of books I haven't read yet and I'd much rather read them than theory.'[26] However, a few questions later, she remarks that storytelling is 'about the nature of the word, the Saussurean nature of the word: the random signifier when it meets the signified'.[27] Indeed, despite Smith's protestations, Monica Germanà and Emily Horton have described her work as '[e]ngaging with poststructuralist and postmodernist concerns'.[28] It seems that Smith's texts are instances of what Ryan has called 'novels after theory', which seem to '"know about" literary and cultural theory'.[29] Specifically, Smith is one of those 'writers who know theory but resist it'.[30]

This chapter will show that there is an extra complication here. In spite of Smith's contradictory rejection of theory and invocation of Saussure, a signifier-signified relation emerges in her fiction that is actually best understood in terms of a Derridean critique of semiotics. The 'random' meeting of signifier and signified that Smith describes sounds just slightly *too* arbitrary for Saussure, who insisted that the two terms had to be linked through convention. On the other hand, Derrida radicalises Saussure's principle of an arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified, with the consequence that we can no longer think of the signifier as having a fixed, determinable referent. By adducing a similar account of signification, Smith's works disturb the paradigm of knowledge production on which academic disciplines are premised, challenge the hermeneutic model of literary criticism, and disrupt the boundaries between creative and critical writing. It is this perturbance in the Saussurean model of signification which Derrida identifies with literature's capacity to 'deny or lift the law' of institutions.[31] Resonating with postcritique's claims to relinquish criticism's 'mastery' over literary texts, but ultimately diverging from them

---

[26] Tory Young, '"Love and the Imagination Are Not Gendered Things": An Interview with Ali Smith', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9 (2015), 131–48 (p. 136).

[27] Ibid., p. 142.

[28] Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, 'Introduction', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 1-8 (p. 2).

[29] Ryan, pp. 4, 1.

[30] Ibid., p. 6.

[31] Derrida, 'This Strange Institution', p. 36.

in important ways, what I alluded to in my introduction as Smith's *signature* use of language emerges as a defence of literature and the aesthetic.[32]

Bennett, another sometime academic, was 'doing postgraduate work in postdramatic theater at the University of Roehampton in London when she fled to Ireland' to write her novel-cum-short-story-collection *Pond*.[33] Bennett has described *Pond*'s phenomenological influence as an escape from semiotics:

> I came across a book some years ago called *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* and it was a godsend in many ways because I'd become by that time very fed up with semiotics and this notion that everything is a symbol or a sign. *Great Reckonings* introduced me to phenomenology, in the context of theatre performance, and it very much helped to reassert the value of sensory engagement, of personal, embodied, experience, and in doing so it helped me exit the theoretical realm, it revitalized me and it revitalized my surroundings.[34]

Bennett's scepticism of 'the theoretical realm' is belied by her recourse to phenomenology, itself a theoretical discourse. Again, it is worth distinguishing between structuralism or semiotics—'this notion that everything is a […] sign'—and the theoretical modes with which Bennett seems more at ease. In the sense that it tries to describe the world as it appears to us, rather than interpret its meaning or underlying truth, phenomenology is antihermeneutic. As with Smith, I therefore want to situate Bennett's preference for phenomenology over semiotics within the broader context of contemporary literature and theory's turn away from interpretation and towards a discourse of the aesthetic.

However, it is not as simple as saying that Smith and Bennett take the part of literature against theory and criticism. In fact, my readings show how their texts stage

---

[32] Felski, p. 34.

[33] Megan O'Grady, 'Claire-Louise Bennett Talks About Her Genre-Bending Debut, *Pond*, and the Magic of Solitude', *Vogue*, 6 July 2016 <https://www.vogue.com/article/pond-claire-louise-bennett-interview> [accessed 5 February 2020].

[34] Philip Maughan, 'The Mind in Solitude: An Interview with Claire-Louise Bennett', *The Paris Review*, 18 July 2016
<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/07/18/the-mind-in-solitude-an-interview-with-claire-louise-bennett/> [accessed 5 February 2020].

a complex relationship between literature and theory. Specifically, they mobilise what Derrida describes as literature's capacity to trouble the logic of institution. Derrida argues that '[t]he space of literature is not only that of an instituted *fiction* but also a *fictive institution* which in principle allows one to say everything'.[35] Literature's fictionality, then, allows it to access the fictionality of institutions. In contrast to the fashionable assertion that theory misses or cancels out the specificity of literature, this chapter shows that it is precisely through an implicitly deconstructive thinking of institution that Smith and Bennett's fiction and criticism elicit the power or force of the literary. Given the authors' engagements with semiotics, another crucial point here is that Derrida links literature's capacity to think the question of institution to his account of signification. Literature is the radical experience of a dysfunction inherent in signification: '[l]iterature "is" the place or experience of this "trouble" we also have with the essence of language, with truth and with essence, the language of essence in general'.[36] It is this trouble with signification which Smith and Bennett put into play in order to displace the disciplinary and generic boundaries of literary criticism.

In this chapter, I have opted to treat these two expressions of the logic of institution—discipline and genre—one by one. The first part of the chapter addresses the issue of disciplinary coherence. As a discipline, literary criticism depends on a differentiation between professional and amateur reading—a dichotomy which Smith and Bennett's texts call into question. The second half of the chapter examines the generic conventions of literary criticism. In order to be recognised as a specific type of writing, criticism must maintain a distinction between its own procedures, forms, conventions or registers and those of other genres. However, this difference is particularly tricky to uphold given the oft-remarked fact that criticism's medium, language, is also that of its object, literature. Working against the literature/criticism distinction, Bennett's 'I Am Love' and Smith's short piece 'Green' put to work a generic uncertainty which disturbs criticism's procedures and claims to knowledge. In this way, Smith and Bennett's texts deploy what Derrida describes as an effect of

---

[35] Jacques Derrida, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge, (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–75 (p. 36).

[36] Ibid., p. 48.

the literary to frame the institutional discourse of literary criticism as itself a kind of fiction.

Professional and amateur

The discipline of English Literature has always been plagued by anxieties that its activities are not distinct enough from everyday acts of reading, evaluating and interpreting literature. Early twentieth-century attempts to institute the discipline were characterised by a forceful refusal of amateurism and the installation of New or Practical Criticism as rigorous and professional techniques. We are now experiencing a reversal of this situation in the academy, with many aesthetic theorists, new formalists, and advocates of postcritique pressing for a return to aesthetic appreciation and ordinary, demotic language. While I am ultimately going to dispute attempts to claim Smith as a straightforwardly postcritical author, I do want to spend some time examining the potential sympathies between her writing and polemics such as Felski's. For one thing, Smith's texts are unquestionably postcritical in the limited sense of being aware of and reflecting on literary-critical practice. There is also a concerted effort in her works to rethink the distinction between professional and amateur modes of reading, which has often been rigorously policed in the discipline of English Literature.

The narrator of Smith's *Artful* is an arboriculturist whose partner, an academic in the field of literary or cultural studies, has died and left behind their uncompleted notes for a lecture series. Having decided to start reading again after a long period of not feeling able to, the narrator goes into the study and picks up *Oliver Twist*. This scene of amateur reading (pointedly juxtaposed with the professional criticism of the lecture notes) suggests a continuity between amateur reading and the work of academic literary criticism. The narrator initially refuses any critical framing of the text, remarking, 'I didn't really want to read someone's introduction, my introduction days were over thank god'.[37] However, their response to *Oliver Twist* shows that amateur reading can be just as interested, engaged and critical as professional interpretation.

---

[37] Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 4.

Artful quotes a long passage from Dickens' novel, both evoking the critical gesture of citation and fostering a sense that we are reading over the narrator's shoulder. Smith's narrative then stages the temporal succession of the narrator's responses to what they have read:

> First: why wouldn't Dickens name the town this was happening in? Then: the word workhouse reminded me of my father telling me once that his mother (my grandmother) worked in a workhouse laundry. That's how close this anywhere of a place was to me now all those years in the future. Then: how can a birthday mean nothing? Then: a reminder that time will tell.[38]

These thoughts are delivered in everyday language and posed in terms of family history rather than literary-historical contextualisation, but they could be translated into a critical idiom: these are questions about nineteenth-century realism, class and labour, narrative and plot. The point, however, seems to be that these questions need not be framed in a critical register in order to be valid. Additionally, their very proximity to literary-critical themes suggests that there is not so much difference between everyday and academic reading as we might habitually think.

In this way, *Artful* seems to be in tune with a current push to reintroduce the personal and the pre-critical, often articulated as the aesthetic, into literary criticism. The way the passage stages the temporal succession of the narrator's thoughts while reading also recalls Simon Jarvis' observation that our most immediate and personal responses to a literary work form the basis of our critical judgements, but this first stage of aesthetic response is then 'deleted' from critical writing.[39] Since '[p]rofessional writing demands not that we merely report our own subjective experiences, but that we produce knowledge', the literary critic cannot include 'anything that cannot also be proven to be an experience that all right readers […] should have'.[40] Instead, the critic tries to substantiate their reading with analysis and verifiable claims:

---

[38] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[39] Simon Jarvis, 'An Undeleter for Criticism', *Diacritics*, 32 (2003), 3-10+12-18 (p. 6).

[40] Ibid., pp. 3, 6.

So I must replace the lines in their context, within the concept of the entirety of a poem; I must replace that poem within the concepts of the entirety of a book, a genre, an authorship, a historical period—and so on through all the four-and-twenty horizons of philological totality. Now I have done all this, and I may think that I have made knowledge, of a kind. This making has depended upon the deletion of everything idiosyncratic about my experience and, with it, upon the deletion of everything that makes that experience an experience.[41]

Smith's tree surgeon, however, is subject to no such demands for knowledge production. This is ostensibly the difference between a professional response to literature and an amateur one. However, reading *Artful* through the lens of Jarvis' argument allows us to see the continuities between amateur and professional responses to literature, and the ways in which critical discourse relies on the repression of the amateur and the aesthetic. By staging a pre-critical response to a literary text, *Artful* mounts a similar recuperation to the one Jarvis advocates.

What the category of the aesthetic needs to be rescued from is, of course, the critique mounted by Terry Eagleton in his 1983 *Literary Theory* that '[t]he criteria of what counted as literature […] were frankly ideological'.[42] Eagleton argues that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, socially-embedded forms of writing were subsumed under the transhistorical category of 'the "aesthetic"'.[43] Literature, Eagleton contends, became a means of 'ideological control' stabilising the class system and an imperialist nationalism.[44] However, Andrew Hadfield has argued that the ascendancy of cultural studies following Eagleton's forceful intervention entailed 'the loss […] of expertise allied to an understanding of what was the point of the subject', leaving English Literature particularly vulnerable in the face of the 'new funding models for higher education', which require academic disciplines to articulate their value in concrete and quantifiable terms.[45] Similarly, Isobel Armstrong argues that,

---

[41] Ibid., p. 6.

[42] Eagleton, p. 15.

[43] Ibid., p. 18.

[44] Ibid., pp. 20, 24.

[45] Andrew Hadfield, 'Turning Point: Or, the Wheel Has Come Full Circle', *Textual Practice*, 28 (2014), 1-8 (p. 5; p. 4)

after critiques such as Eagleton's, the aesthetic was 'implicitly left to the reactionaries'.[46] Clearly, literary studies cannot do without an account of the aesthetic as something other than an ideological mystification.

Little more than a decade after Eagleton's critique, we began to see a retheorisation of the literary and the aesthetic: Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) was preceded, for example, by *Aesthetics and Ideology* (1994), a collection edited by George Levine which explored alternatives to the conservative model of the aesthetic Eagleton describes.[47] More recently, new formalism has claimed to recover formalist analysis by synthesising it with historicism.[48] Contemporary critics have tried to avoid reinstating an unproblematised model of the aesthetic, preferring instead a deliberately qualified or partial return. As John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas argue, 'although [the aesthetic] is without doubt tied up with the political, historical, ideological, etc., thinking it as other than determined by them, and therefore reducible to them, opens a space for an artistic or literary specificity that can radically transform its critical potential and position with regard to contemporary culture'.[49] This is, in other words, an attempt to recover the aesthetic without unlearning the lesson of the Marxist critique.

Similarly, having criticised Eagleton for stopping short of reconstructing a materialist aesthetics, Joseph North proposes a more palatable version of the aesthetic based on the work of I.A. Richards, for whom 'the critique of idealist aesthetics was to be considered a clearing operation, on the way to a reconstruction of the aesthetic in other, more materialist, terms'.[50] Armstrong's account likewise rests on the assertion that 'the components of aesthetic life are those that are already embedded in the processes and practices of consciousness—playing and dreaming, thinking and

[46] Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 2.

[47] *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. by George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

[48] Marjorie Levinson, 'What is New Formalism?', *PMLA*, 122 (2007), 558-569.

[49] John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas, 'The New Aestheticism: An Introduction', in *The New Aestheticism*, ed. by John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 1-19 (p. 3).

[50] Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 68.

feeling'.[51] These activities are already rooted in everyday life and 'common to everyone, common to what the early Marx called species being'.[52] Literary criticism's broad move to recover the aesthetic as a viable object for literary studies therefore retains the Marxist cancellation of a transcendental, ideological aesthetic.

Concomitantly, the figure of the amateur—which has been problematically associated with aesthetic appreciation ever since the introduction of English Literature as a university subject—no longer appears as a threat to the professional boundaries of the discipline, which are now acknowledged to be inescapably blurry. This acceptance was not always widespread, as Eagleton's account of the early days suggests:

> English was an upstart, amateurish affair as academic subjects went, hardly able to compete on equal terms with the rigours of Greats or philology; since every English gentleman read his own literature in his spare time anyway, what was the point of submitting it to systematic study? Fierce rearguard actions were fought by both ancient Universities against this distressingly dilettante subject: the definition of an academic subject was what could be examined, and since English was no more than idle gossip about literary taste it was difficult to know how to make it unpleasant enough to qualify as a proper academic pursuit.[53]

This early iteration of English, Eagleton recounts, seemed near-indistinguishable from what many non-academics did 'anyway'; it was based on aesthetic appreciation, unformalised and undertheorised, without much of a structure or disciplinary framework. Faced with a hostile academic environment, English was in dire need of reformulation along more traditionally academic lines.

The solution, Eagleton says, arrived in the form of Practical Criticism, which claimed that '[f]ar from constituting some amateur or impressionistic enterprise, English was an arena in which the most fundamental questions of human existence […] were thrown into vivid relief and made the object of the most intensive scrutiny'.[54]

---

[51] Armstrong, p. 2.

[52] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[53] Eagleton, p. 25.

[54] Ibid., p. 27.

Here, Practical Criticism institutes itself as a rigorous and professional discipline through the repression of amateurism. Ben Knights reads this turn of events in broadly the same terms, asserting that both the *Scrutiny* era and Eagleton's own moment were instances of disciplinary consolidation: both periods saw literary studies assert the value of 'intellectual procedures whose intentional or unintentional effect is to draw a line between the stuff of ordinary reading (escapism, character, identification, biographical knowledge about the author) and the more specialized activity of a group of professional readers'.[55] The privileged texts—modernist poetry in the earlier case and theory in the later—were difficult, barring amateurs from participating and implying that 'the critical minority produces true value and thus controls a scarce resource'.[56] Here, the maintenance of a disciplinary boundary relies on the banishment of amateurism and the inculcation of a specialised methodology.

On the other hand, North argues that Practical Criticism merely formalised the amateur aestheticism of the earlier period:

> It allowed the distinctive belletristic emphases on aesthetic appreciation, on cultivating the subjectivity of the reader, and on the connection between tastes and values to be taken up and insisted upon in a thoroughly new way, thereby laying the foundations for a new paradigm for criticism: a paradigm rigorous and scientific enough for the modern research university.[57]

In this way, amateur aesthetic appreciation is held as a memory, something latent, in the *techne* of Practical Criticism. The professional/amateur distinction, then, was instituted through the incorporation of the latter by the former, rendering the boundary insecure. Knights has proposed that this instability can never be evaded, since a key 'attribute of a "soft subject"' is 'its permeability, the leakiness of the membrane between everyday and specialised discourse'.[58] The values of

---

[55] Knights, 'Intelligence and Interrogation', pp. 36-8.

[56] Ibid., p. 40.

[57] North, p. 22.

[58] Ben Knights, *Pedagogic Criticism: Reconfiguring University English Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 11.

professionalism and disciplinary coherence that underpinned twentieth-century attempts to shore up English Literature are, in short, practical fictions.

This history clearly informs the claims made by postcritique, which moves in the opposite direction by emphasising the similarity of criticism and what we have seen Felski call 'the stuff of ordinary reading'. As the *Oliver Twist* passage in *Artful* shows, Smith's work can easily be situated in relation to this debate. Indeed, Elizabeth Anker has argued that Smith's novel *How to Be Both* is a 'postcritical' novel in the sense that '[i]t follows its main character, George […] as she comes to interrogate and reject certain axiomatic interpretive assumptions and moves that Smith's narrative overtly ties to academic literary culture'.[59] Anker suggests that, like proponents of postcritique, Smith is invested in revoking the dominant critical paradigms in favour of 'a materialist, sensory, and embodied immersion in the experience of reading that short-circuits whatever negative distantiation [Michael] Warner and others attribute to critique'.[60] My readings of Smith's fiction and criticism will show that this comparison—while valid to an extent—elides Smith's complex (if disavowed) engagements with theoretical questions.

One of the alternative forms of aesthetically-appreciative critical practice that Smith represents is a mode of attachment to literature which Rebecca Pohl describes as 'enthusiasm'.[61] Historically, Pohl writes, 'enthusiasm represented "an idea of knowledge unmediated by 'forms, ceremonies and traditions'"'; an enthusiast is an amateur, someone whose relationship with the loved object is not pre-coded or determined by a particular institutional discourse.[62] According to the OED, enthusiasm originally denoted non-institutional religious faith: 'False or pretended divine inspiration, or an instance of this; a belief in or emphasis on private divine revelation as opposed to revelation through scripture. From the 18th cent. also in wider sense: excessive religious emotion or fervour; mystical, fanatical, or radical

---

[59] Anker, p. 20.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Rebecca Pohl, 'Ali Smith, Enthusiasm and Market', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 63 (2017), 694-713 (p. 695).

[62] Ibid., p. 700.

religious delusion.'[63] Enthusiasm therefore suggests a resistance to official knowledge and protocols.

According to Pohl, Smith uses this anti-institutional affect to suspend the literary-critical frame. Referring to an anthology of writing that Smith curated, Pohl argues:

> *The Book Lover* turns citation into a formal principle, in the sense that it is a collection of excerpts loosely arranged into topical clusters without any commentary, explanatory or celebratory, except for the relationship proclaimed in the title: the common denominator of this collection is not of author, period, or topic but rather of the fact that they are all loved by the same person. This foregrounding of feeling is crucial to the text's work, and it positions Smith as an amateur in the positive and literal sense of a passionate enthusiast. Smith's enthusiasm, then, has become so much a part of her author-function that a publisher can successfully publish a substantial book based solely on her passion for books.[64]

Here, Smith dispenses with the usual critical apparatus of the anthology ('commentary' or any organising principle such as 'author, period or topic') in an attempt to promote the free relation of the reader to texts. *The Book Lover*, implicitly a valorisation of amateurism and a refusal of critical frameworks, testifies to Smith's commitment to promoting non-institutionalised forms of reading.

While Smith's work therefore resonates with postcritique's eschewal of institutional or professional discourse, and while she performs an antipathy towards theory that echoes the mood in some quarters of the academy, my next readings of her work suggest that her thinking of the relationship between literature and institutions is strikingly in tune with Derrida's. This is because she arrives at the possibility of amateur reading through an account of signification in which meanings are not fixed. This lack of fixity resists the institutionalisation of meanings in a regularised disciplinary model, disrupting criticism's claims to knowledge production. This model is closer to Derrida's critique of semiotics and his theory of

---

[63] 'Enthusiasm, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2018

<www.oed.com/view/Entry/62879> [accessed 5 February 2020].

[64] Pohl, p. 703.

literary language than it is to the Saussurean model which we have seen Smith claim allegiance to.

I earlier quoted Smith describing 'the Saussurean nature of the word: the random signifier when it meets the signified', and Saussure does indeed argue that '[t]he bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary'.[65] However, this does not translate to the level of freedom that Smith imagines for language and its users. For Saussure, the arbitrary relationship between the two parts of the sign only means that there is no necessary reason why a particular word should refer to a particular object or concept. However, this does not mean that Saussure thinks speakers can use any signifier they like: these signifiers refer to particular signifieds by convention—otherwise, we would not know what other people meant when they used a word: 'The signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it.'[66] This '[i]mmutability' of the sign regulates language in a predictable way which is amenable to models of teaching and criticism which demand the production of stable knowledge.[67] Smith, however, mounts a critique of these models of language and learning, imagining an alternative order not regulated by convention.

This critique is clearly staged in 'Last', the first story in Smith's collection *Public Library and Other Stories*. In the Smith imaginary, the public library is an institution of reading which is not like the others. It provides access to books without a governing framework for reading: no syllabus, no theory, no exams. In 'Last', the narrator—one of Smith's many dysfunctional or erstwhile literary professionals—pauses over the wording of a sign and launches into an improvised analysis which advocates for a kind of wild reading. In this 'freer' relation to textuality, the reader traces the ways in which language calls to other language, tracing an anarchic movement of meaning across puns without the mediation of formal learning.[68] This is also bound up with a thinking of the sign which diverges from Saussure's account.

---

[65] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 67.

[66] Ibid., p. 71.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ali Smith, 'Last', in *Public Library* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. 5-17 (p. 9).

The narrator of 'Last' seems to have been a literary scholar of some kind, someone who 'at another point in my life […] had liked words immensely and thought a lot about using them and about how they were used', but has not 'had the urge' to think about language 'in quite a while'.[69] Their rethinking of signification is occasioned by a railway sign proclaiming: '[i]f we find you trespassing you will be fined'.[70] The narrator wonders of the sign's author: 'Did they, or he, or she, pause for a moment at all over find and fined?'[71] Since the narrator 'hadn't a clue' about these homophones' etymologies, they wonder 'why, anyway, did the word fine mean a payment for doing something illegal at the same time as it meant everything from okay to really grand?'[72] Having done the dictionary work myself, I can report that the two senses derive from two different Latin root words: 'classical Latin *finis* boundary, object, destination, goal' and 'post-classical Latin *finus* of excellent quality', respectively.[73] The etymology yields a dead-end in terms of a relation of significance between the two words.

What the narrator indulges in, however, is what Jonathan Culler describes as 'the call of the phoneme'.[74] This is the magnetism of a similar-sounding word to its differently-meaning homophone. As Smith's narrator knows, there is a similarity between etymologies and puns. In Culler's words, 'both use related forms to connect disparate meanings, and, as in punning, the interest of etymologies lies in the surprising coupling of different meanings'.[75] Etymologies, however, are 'respectable puns, endowing pun-like effects with the authority of science and even of truth, as

---

[69] Smith, 'Last', pp. 9, 8.

[70] Ibid., p. 7.

[71] Ibid., p. 8.

[72] Ibid.

[73] 'Fine, n.1', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2016 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70359> [accessed 5 February 2020]; 'Fine, adj., adv., and n.2', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2016 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70361?> [accessed 30 April 2019].

[74] Jonathan Culler, 'The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction', in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. by Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 1-16 (p. 3).

[75] Ibid., p. 2.

when we say that *education* means "to lead out"'.[76] In contrast to this scholarly propriety, however, puns are unlicensed etymologies, in a way that Culler identifies with the demotic:

> Folk etymologies and puns show speakers intently or playfully working to reveal the structures of language, motivating linguistic signs, allowing signifiers to affect meaning by generating new connections—in short, responding to the call of the phoneme, whose echoes tell of wild realms beyond the code and suggest new configurations of meaning: 'Even the stable boy will find / This life no stable thing.'[77]

This describes the narrator's punning almost exactly: they imagine 'The Travelling Etymologies', 'a tribe of people […] reprobates, meaningful dropouts, living a freer, more meaningful life than any of us others was able to choose'.[78] These are people for whom meaning is made in accordance with the 'wild' and chance illogic of the call of the phoneme, rather than through proper etymological scholarship.

In a similar vein, writing on the etymology of the word 'guitar', Sarah Wood has argued that historical fact underwrites the discipline of etymology, installing the origin of the word's meaning: 'Referential dictionary thinking takes that prosaic cithara [the root word of guitar] to be the original and key element that makes sense of and gives rise to all those variant words and forms of instrument.'[79] Under this regime, '[d]ifference becomes historical deviation' from this origin.[80] By contrast, Wood proposes that in rhyme—like in punning—'[w]ords diverge from themselves'; '[s]yllables improvise subtle bonds beyond those that are allowed to exist at the level of the written word'.[81] Rather than deviations from an original, these differences are constitutive of the structure of language itself. Similarly, in 'Last', the narrator imagines 'the long thin neverending-seeming rolling-stock of words […] word after

---

[76] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[77] Ibid., p. 3.

[78] Smith, 'Last', p. 9.

[79] Sarah Wood, 'Anew Again', in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 277-92 (p. 281).

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid., p. 283.

word after word coupled to each other by tough little iron joists', theorising language as working not by strict correspondence between signifier and signified, but through a chain made by repetition and variation.[82] This image evokes what Wood calls '[r]hyme's wild glue', which 'attaches one to the other regardless of etymology'.[83] Meaning is made through the movement of textuality, not the dissemination of institutionalised meanings or ways of reading.

Smith's description of language in 'Last' also resonates with Derrida's account of difference and the trace. As Derek Attridge explains, Derrida identifies in Saussure's semiotics a distinction between spoken and written signifiers in which the former are privileged as having a 'natural' relationship to their signifieds, while the latter are considered 'arbitrary'.[84] However, if 'arbitrariness rules the field, there must be no natural hierarchy'.[85] Rather:

> Writing […] is a precondition for arbitrariness, which cannot be thought outside of its horizon. We cannot begin, as Saussure wanted to do, from the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign (Saussure's '*Principle I*'), because there is something more fundamental, something that makes the principle of arbitrariness thinkable in the first place. Here Derrida calls it *writing*; he will give it other names in the pages that follow, including *trace*, *differance* and *supplementarity*.[86]

The 'instituted trace' is 'the possibility common to all systems of signification' for difference to arise: the precondition not merely for language, but for any system of meaning.[87] The distinction between speech and writing on which Saussurean semiotics depends is not itself a natural one, but one which—like all difference—is generated by the institution of difference itself, by the trace. Despite Smith's description of her use of language as 'Saussurean', the open and chainlike system of

---

[82] Smith, 'Last', p. 9.

[83] Wood, p. 283.

[84] Derek Attridge, 'The Arbitrary', in *Reading Derrida's Of Grammatology*, ed. by Sean Gaston and Ian MacLachlan (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 58-68 (p. 59)

[85] Ibid., p. 61.

[86] Ibid., pp. 61-62.

[87] Derrida, qtd. in ibid, p. 64; ibid., p. 65.

differences imagined in 'Last' evokes the logic of differance more strongly than it does Saussure's sign function.

What Derrida identifies about language here applies more broadly to structures of meaning in general. The conventional nature of Saussurean signification recalls Derrida's account of structuralism, in which the 'play' in any system of meaning is grounded on a fixed centre, 'a fundamental immobility and reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play'.[88] However, Derrida observes, the 'center' which fixes the structure has been given different names throughout the 'history of metaphysics', with the result that it became 'necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus within which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play'.[89] It was at this moment that 'everything became discourse […] that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences'.[90] This insight applies not only to language, but to any system for creating meaning that is thought of as a structure, and this in turn has consequences for the institutionalisation of interpretive practices and meanings. The impossibility of fixing and regularising meanings at the level of signification also means that a discipline or institution is always susceptible to the kinds of disturbance Derrida describes.

If meanings cannot be fixed and institutionalised, the role of teaching institutions can no longer be understood as simply disseminating or handing down predetermined information. As a result, Smith's public library offers what Jacques Rancière calls an 'emancipated' pedagogy.[91] As discussed in my thesis introduction, Rancière argues in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* that an emancipated pedagogy presupposes that everyone is equal in intellect and equally capable of learning, not

---

[88] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 351-70 (p. 352).

[89] Ibid., pp. 353-54.

[90] Ibid., p. 354.

[91] Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 15.

that the teacher is superior to the student in intelligence or knowledge.[92] Unlike Bourdieu, who viewed knowledge as a form of capital that is passed on through education, Rancière contends that it is precisely this tendency to view education as 'the transmission of the master's knowledge to the students' that creates a stultifying effect.[93] In 'Last', reading emerges as an alternative to this transmission model of learning, with the Travelling Etymologies finding and making their own meanings in texts.

Rancière's emancipated pedagogy similarly emphasises texts and reading, asserting that books are an egalitarian medium mirroring the equality between the student and master's capabilities: 'all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature'.[94] Recalling the Derridean account of the secret discussed in my introduction, this account of reading emphasises the text's lack of underlying or secret meanings:

> Understanding is never more than translating, that is, giving the equivalent of a text, but in no way its reason. There is nothing behind the written page, no false bottom that necessitates the work of an *other* intelligence, that of the explicator; no language of the master, no language of the language whose words and sentences are able to speak the reason of the words and sentences of a text.[95]

Similarly, for Smith, the public library offers anyone the chance to teach themselves in an intellectually emancipated way by reading—and a non-professional interpretation cannot be subordinated in a hierarchy of importance to a literary-critical interpretation. There is no secret meaning in a text which can only be accessed by the initiated or educated, and it is for this reason that the student can learn from it without the aid of the master's intelligence.

There is also an echo of Rancière's insistence on the importance of the text in Smith's vision for *The Book Lover* as a kind of library:

---

[92] Ibid., p. 7.

[93] Ibid., p. 14.

[94] Ibid., p. 9.

[95] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

It stayed a wonderful idea full of possibilities and excitement, with writer after writer and piece after piece and book after book all coming together to make a book as big as a building, no, as big and various as a library, yes, a library in itself, no, several libraries, yes, a whole community of libraries all lending out books to one another so that books flew, as if with wings, from mind to mind.[96]

Just as Rancière ascribes the capacity to teach to the content of the book, Smith privileges the status of books as conduits for passing ideas and possibilities 'from mind to mind'; textuality becomes the medium of intellectual emancipation in the figure of the public library. In both Rancière's emancipated pedagogy and Smith's public library, education is routed through the text, rather than an interpersonal scene of teaching, and an antihermeneutic model of signification secures democratic access to the text.

There is perhaps a slight difference between these theories of reading and pedagogy in the sense that, while Rancière still casts the teacher as a central figure, Smith's model seems to exclude the teacher entirely. In line with her own rejection of the authority of the lecturer, we might read this as a concern on Smith's part to avoid any form of what Rancière calls 'domination'.[97] The danger, however, is that Smith risks eliminating the scene of teaching entirely; for Rancière, '[a] person […] may need a master when his own will is not strong enough to set him on track and keep him there'.[98] The master's role can be likened to what D.W. Winnicott calls 'holding' or maintaining a 'facilitating environment': providing the context, framework and stability which enable the student to learn.[99] This more generous account suggests that the teacher may be indispensable not as the superior intellect who transmits knowledge, but as the figure who institutes the very space of learning.

Indeed, while Smith's fictions are often sceptical about conventional educational institutions, particularly universities, and while texts like *Public Library* emphasise the importance of the book as a primary medium of emancipatory

---

[96] Smith, qtd. in Pohl, p. 697.

[97] Rancière, p. 13.

[98] Ibid.

[99] D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 141, 142.

education, her works do figure various 'ignorant schoolmasters'. As I discuss in the next chapter, Smith's novels are populated by characters—such as Amber in *The Accidental* and Miles in *There but for the*—who perform the function of Rancière's teacher by occasioning (rather than imposing) other characters' ethical and emotional educations. Amber is a stranger who makes herself at home in the Smart family's holiday cottage, presenting them with unconventional behaviour which challenges them to find new ways of understanding and responding to others.[100] Ulrike Tancke argues that Amber has a 'profound impact on each of the characters and […] unsettles their existing beliefs and senses of self'.[101] She does so in a pointedly non-didactic fashion, instead acting 'as a catalyst for change'.[102] Miles, meanwhile, locks himself in a bedroom at a dinner party and refuses to communicate or come out, leaving his hosts and friends to reckon with his actions, and an ethical community begins to coalesce around his absence.[103] His teaching therefore takes the form of a complete act of withdrawal which leaves the characters around him to reason and respond on their own: he enjoins them to learn.

In their figurations of ignorant schoolmasters and emancipated reading, Smith's texts are threaded through with an ethics and a politics of amateurism that assert the equal capacity for all readers to engage with and interpret texts. As my reading of 'Last' shows, Smith often approaches these questions at the granular level of a rethinking of signification and textuality. Her punning disarticulates the conventional signifier-signified relationship outlined by Saussure in a manner suggestive of Derrida's alternative account of the trace. My reading of 'Last' therefore shows how Smith's ethics of amateurism—which I first outlined in relation to aesthetic response and evaluation in *Artful*—can be traced down to the granular level of signification. The punning in 'Last' models the endless chain of differences as a force which disrupts the securing of meaning by convention. This theory of

---

[100] Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Penguin, 2005).

[101] Ulricke Tancke, 'Narrating Intrusion: Storytelling and Frustrated Desires in *The Accidental* and *There but for the*', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 75-88 (p. 77).

[102] Ibid., p. 76.

[103] Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Penguin, 2012).

signification asserts, at the minimal level of the instituted trace, that meanings cannot be fixed. Crucially, this also requires that they cannot be institutionalised. In 'Last', this is what secures the possibility of 'wild' or amateur reading. As Attridge says, this impossibility of fixed or conventional signification is a general property of all 'sign systems'—but it is also, as we have seen Derrida argue, something that is exacerbated in literary language.[104] Accordingly, my next set of readings shows how this effect of the literary works against the demand for the programmatic production of knowledge, against the very predictability and regulation necessary to make an academic discipline cohere.

Literature and discipline

As I described at the beginning of this chapter, Derrida speaks of literature as a use of language which foregrounds the fictitiousness of metaphysical concepts of being, truth and essence: it '"is" the place or experience of this "trouble" we also have with the essence of language'. This difficulty, Clark argues, has a direct bearing on the disciplinary coherence of English Literature. He argues that the discipline's very object of study is characterised by a 'generative undecidability' which leads to a hesitation over disciplinary boundaries; for example, it becomes impossible to predict which professional or disciplinary competencies will be required for the reading of a 'literary' text.[105] My readings of Smith and Bennett's work attend to disturbances at the level of signification which seem to foreclose the possibility of arriving at a definitive interpretation of a text. More broadly, these disturbances challenge the notion of a regularised, predictable program for knowledge production—thus undermining the idea of an academic discipline.

Artful stages the various ways in which language can fail to signify, but persists as what Derrida calls a mark or trace. Derrida argues that a mark can always appear without a determinate signified, as when the dead lecturer in *Artful* spouts what seem to be nonsense words: 'Then you'd say words I'd never heard of, words that didn't really sound like they were words. It was good, that things didn't have to mean. It

---

[104] Attridge, p. 65.

[105] Timothy Clark, 'Literary Force: Institutional Values', *Culture Machine*, 1 (1999) [n.p.].

was a relief. It was strangely intimate, too, you speaking to me and me having no idea what you were saying. | Guide a ruckus, you said now. Trav a brose. Spoo yattacky. Clot so. Scoofy.'[106] The narrator does not know it, but their partner is speaking Greek. However, as mishearings and phonetic renderings of linguistic signifiers, bits of language like '[g]uide a ruckus' exemplify the structure of the mark, which doesn't 'have to mean'. What Derrida calls the mark's 'force of breaking with its context' allows that it could always mean something impossible or fail to refer to a determinate signified.[107] This quality of the mark—which also underpins Derrida's account of the literary—always allows for the possibility that any given piece of language could resist being subjected to a disciplinary framework for producing knowledge.

Accordingly, *Artful*'s form speaks of an inability to make knowledge whole: it intersperses fragments of fiction with the dead lecturer's notes, which by their very nature only capture part of what the lecturer intended to say, and—due to their author's death—remain incomplete. We have already seen Smith account for this formal choice as a recognition of the fact that 'there is no one truth, and no one authority'. Indeed, *Artful* depicts a scene of teaching and reading where authority, reference and signification have all become dysfunctional. As with the Greek words, this manifests at a local level as a problem with language: the sign structure has broken down. When the lecturer's revenant first comes up the stairs, oddly corporeal for a ghost, 'covered in dust and what looked like bits of rubble', they also suffer from an aphasia which unmoors signifiers from signifieds, until words become like those bits of rubble: material and asignifying.[108] The first thing the ghost says is, 'I'm late'.[109] It is a partial memory of something they used to say in life, 'later than a rabbit in Alice', but the loss of the whole phrase makes it a pun: late as in dead.[110] Here, rather than a sign structure in which the signifier refers to the signified, language works by linking signifiers to other signifiers through their material (aural or graphic) similarity,

---

[106] Smith, *Artful*, p. 64.

[107] Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf), pp. 307-330 (p. 317).

[108] Smith, *Artful*, pp. 9-10.

[109] Ibid., p. 10.

[110] Ibid.

skating across the surface of language and making associative chains, as in Culler's account of the pun. Sense-making and pre-coded meanings give way to iterability and difference; this ever-present possibility of alteration maintains a resistance to totalising or authoritative readings.

It can hardly be an accident that the figure for whom language has become incomplete is a university lecturer, previously vested with a particular authority *vis-à-vis* language and literature. As Poovey observes, the New and Practical Critics, with their emphasis on professionalism and objectivity, 'devis[ed] critical terms capable of mastering their own responses' to literature.[111] In contrast to this authority, the linguistic theories of the 1960s delineated a different use of language, performative as opposed to constative, in which meaning was not stable but produced through a process that was susceptible to failure. One consequence of this, Poovey argues, was that critical discourse could no longer make claims to mastery over literature, instead developing 'a theory of writing that […] obliterates the distinction between creative and critical writing'.[112] The susceptibility to failure of the sign function, which is common to all uses of language, entails a breakdown of the differentiation between the two kinds of writing. Staging the failure of critical authority through the figure of the lecturer who can no longer string a sentence together, *Artful* shows an awareness that the mastery of criticism over literature is compromised by the shared nature of their linguistic (dys)function.

The broken sign function is mirrored in *Artful*'s organisation into many parts: the four lectures that Smith delivered are broken down into smaller sections, which are in turn interspersed with scenes from the fictional story of the dead lecturer's return. The text itself offers a suggestion as to what we should make of this use of the fragment: 'As Matthew Reynolds says in The Poetry of Translation, about Sappho and about the fragments that are all we have of her love poetry, "the longing represented in the fragments was doubled by a longing felt by readers for the fragments

---

[111] Poovey, p. 115.

[112] Ibid., p. 120

themselves to be made whole".'[113] The fragment, then, performs the ways in which meaning cannot be gathered into a coherent whole.

In this respect, Smith is very much in sympathy with the turn in literary criticism to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls reparative reading, which takes up 'the position from which it is possible […] to use one's own resources to assemble or ''repair'' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though, I would emphasize, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*'.[114] As Stephen Benson and Clare Connors observe, this use of the fragment is a distinctive feature of contemporary criticism, 'a matter of part writing, of writing in bits each of which, while ostensibly whole, is allied with other bits such that our sense of and desire for wholeness are unsettled'.[115] As such, the example of *Artful* shows how contemporary writing invokes the literary, conceived here as a dysfunction in the ontological or truth status of language, in order to displace the totalising coherence which academic discourse demands of criticism in order for it to qualify as knowledge.

Pond also foregrounds the dysfunction of language, and therefore exemplifies what Clark describes as literature's resistance to codified or disciplinary reading techniques. *Pond* becomes obsessed with this dysfunction precisely because, in trying to render direct experience by cutting through the mediation of what we have seen Bennett call 'signs and symbols', it arrives at the problem of its own existence as language. The protagonist is a former academic who moves to an isolated rural setting and spends much of her time on her own. In this environment, she often finds herself questioning the language we use to describe the world and the ways in which this language constructs our experience. Once again, this seems to take the form of an implicitly deconstructive critique of semiotics. Both Bennett's remarks (discussed above) and her narrator's suggest a frustration with the Saussurean model, in which

---

[113] Smith, *Artful*, p. 25.

[114] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, ed. by Michèle Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 124-152 (p. 128).

[115] Stephen Benson and Clare Connors, 'Introduction', in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 1-47 (p. 11).

a signifier is attached to its signified through the reliable function of the sign. Instead, *Pond* reaches for a Derridean system of differences, rather than one-to-one correspondences.

This is more or less explicit in the narrator's frustration with a sign erected by her neighbours: 'If it were up to me I wouldn't put a sign next to a pond saying pond, either I'd write something else, such as Pig Swill, or I wouldn't bother at all.'[116] The problem with 'literal designations and inane alerts' and 'meddlesome scaremongering signs' is that they enforce a strict, one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified.[117] This echoes the Saussurean model in which the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and signified is regulated by convention. It is this 'literal' correspondence — 'a sign next to a pond saying pond' — which enrages *Pond*'s narrator. Interestingly, given the present currency of metaphors of surface and depth in debates about reading strategies, the narrator's refusal of literalism also corresponds to a thinking of surface: the pond 'has absolutely no depth whatsoever'.[118] There is a sense in this passage of a homology between the Saussurean sign function, in which the signified lies behind or below the signifier, and a depth model of reading where the truth of the text lies behind its linguistic surface. The centrality of this question to Bennett's writing practice is signalled by the fact that the incident with the sign furnishes her text with its title: we are to read *Pond* as having, like the pond, 'absolutely no depth whatsoever', and to consider the possibility that there is something amiss in the relationship between the title *Pond* and the thing it names, some lack of coincidence.

In contrast to the pond sign with its literalism, the narrator imagines a language that would not be codifiable: 'English, strictly speaking, is not my first language by the way. I haven't yet discovered what my first language is so for the time being I use English words in order to say things. I expect I will always have to do it that way; regrettably I don't think my first language can be written down at all.'[119] This attempt to imagine a language which, in Derridean terms, would not be iterable, and therefore

---

[116] Claire-Louise Bennett, *Pond* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2015), p. 40.

[117] Ibid., p. 41.

[118] Ibid., p. 40.

[119] Ibid., pp. 44-45.

unable to signify, shows Bennett's narrator once again worrying at the limits of language and signification. In keeping with her attention to nonlinguistic marks—'the impressions her knuckles made', a line of 'very small holes', 'marks on the wall' left by fingernails—the narrator seems to be attempting to think something like the trace.[120] As I described earlier, the trace as the institution of difference is the condition of possibility for any sign system, which is why the structure of the mark and iterability are common to all forms of 'writing'—a word which for Derrida refers not only to language, but to the entire field of textuality and experience.[121] Attempting to imagine a language that would function at the very limits of language, *Pond* broadens its thinking of signification to the question of what Derrida calls the instituted trace, and evokes the nonlinguistic systems of marks that Derrida describes.

When the narrator speaks of a language which cannot 'be written down at all', she seems to mean something far more radical than an oral language. Her 'first language' in fact seems to be a completely private language—so private that she herself does not know 'what it is'. I therefore think that when she says it cannot be 'written down', she means that it cannot be inscribed or codified. Since inscription and repetition are fundamental to signification—we communicate by using signs that others will recognise from prior usages, not entirely novel or unrepeatable ones—a completely private language like the one the narrator describes could not actually function *as* language. This problem with the institution of language is identified for Derrida with the force of the literary, which "is" this very disturbance in the institution of signification.

We can see this force at work in the fallibility of language in one of *Pond*'s final fragments, 'Words Escape Me'. The verbs in this text often sit awkwardly with their objects: Bennett uses abstract or immaterial words to describe material, physical actions and phenomena. This creates an interpretive challenge: in what way does the verb apply to its object? Figuratively or literally? To take an example from 'Words Escape Me', the mysterious 'small sharp thing' that falls down the chimney is

---

[120] Ibid., pp. 175, 26, 132.

[121] Attridge, p. 65.

'absorbed at least, withdrawn, anyhow, from all visible possibility'.[122] We know that the small sharp thing has not been literally, physically absorbed (e.g. by the air), so some kind of metaphorical language is at work here. Yet the narrator does seem to be making a literal statement of some kind: that the object has been 'withdrawn' from her cognitive or phenomenological experience of it; that withdrawal or absorption is what has happened, conceptually or experientially. This uncertainty refers back to a problem or question in phenomenology itself, namely the matter of how language makes phenomena available for our understanding. As Clark explains in his reading of Derrida's encounter with Heidegger, the latter's term 'Dichtung' (literally 'poetry') 'concerned the structure of the ontological difference whereby things become present as such'.[123] Bennett's use of verbs creates a shimmering between literalism and metaphor—an uncertainty as to the referential or mimetic status of her language—which accords with Derrida's identification of an effect of the literary in Heidegger's prose.

Bennett as a reader of phenomenology has of course knowingly used Heidegger's term, 'withdrawn', for the unavailability of things in themselves. However, this very difficulty, the uncertain availability of being for language, suggests to Derrida that the Heideggerian 'Dichtung' cannot possibly entail that a figurative meaning is a supplement to an original, literal meaning. If 'Dichtung' is language which makes being available to us, the preliminary question for Derrida is whether this language is literal or metaphorical.[124] As Clark explains, 'Heidegger's repeated guide-phrase "Language is the house of Being" is *not* metaphorical in any received sense'.[125] The 'house' cannot be a metaphor for being because 'being, as it is effective as the appropriating power of language, *gives* the familiarity of the house as a matter for thought'.[126] Everything is made available through language as a disclosure of being, but being is what 'gives' things for language. This reciprocity

---

[122] Claire-Louise Bennett, *Pond*, p. 151.

[123] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 120.

[124] Ibid., p. 116.

[125] Ibid., p. 117.

[126] Ibid., p. 118.

makes it paradoxical for a metaphor to communicate something unknown by describing something already known.

Instead, Heidegger's prose works 'through this peculiar linguistic operation whereby the appropriation at play in language is brought to bear, as it were, upon itself'.[127] A theory like Heidegger's, in which the unknown is appropriated for knowledge through a linguistic medium which is not itself secured against a metaphysics of 'first cause', entails 'a kind of *doubling* of metaphor'.[128] Here, there is no binary of literal versus metaphorical meaning, but 'the sense of a re-fold […], of what retreats like a wave on the shoreline, and of a re-turn […], of the overcharging repetition of a supplementary trait, of yet another metaphor, of a double trait […] of metaphor'.[129] The literal and the metaphoric secure themselves against one another in a movement of doubling back. In this supplementary logic, there is no stable truth underpinning metaphorical language.

Similarly, in place of access to truth through metaphor, Bennett's language, like Heidegger's, keeps repeating itself: 'A small thing, and sharp maybe—the sound it made when it hit off the bucket suggested it was a small sharp thing'.[130] Here, as the narrator tries to discern the object, she first asserts that it *is* a 'small thing', with some doubt regarding its 'sharpness', but when she doubles back to the 'suggest[ion]' that has led her to make this attribution, she appears more confident: 'it was a small sharp thing'. The 'maybe' is gone, perhaps because the verb 'suggested' now carries the sense of doubt instead, but the sentence has shifted into a subjunctive mode which expresses certainty instead of doubt: the sound *does* suggest that the object *is* a small, sharp thing. The first description of the object is doubtful, but the return to the evidence yields greater certainty through repetition. The movement of Bennett's language doubles back on itself, folding meaning and reference back on other meanings, consolidating, moving on: two steps forwards, three steps back. When Bennett's verbs seem to hang, not properly taking hold of their objects, it is because their movement of appropriation is (perhaps necessarily) incomplete. For example,

---

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid., p. 119.

[129] Derrida, qtd. in ibid., p. 119.

[130] Bennett, *Pond*, p. 151.

the narrator's eyes 'just slid around, nothing was organised'; here, it is difficult to say what it is about vision that might be 'organised'.[131] Similarly, when 'there was something half-tucked inside the air perhaps', one wonders what kind of 'something' could be 'half-tucked inside the air', and how.[132] Derrida's reading of Heidegger implies that this uncertainty as to whether Bennett's language is literal or figurative is the effect of the literary as the dysfunction of truth and reference.

Emerging from Bennett's scepticism about 'semiotics', or the 'notion that everything is a symbol or a sign', *Pond* sets out to recuperate the category of 'personal, embodied, experience' from the apparent dominance of linguistic theories which insist on mediation through the structure of the sign. 'Words Escape Me'—like the passage about the pond sign—can be read as an implicitly deconstructive critique of semiotics, exploring the doubtful capacity for signifiers to refer to determinate signifieds in a regulated and stable sign structure. However, while Bennett positions phenomenology as a cure for semiotics, my reading of 'Words Escape Me' shows that the category of experience is also susceptible to a similar disturbance. Derrida argues that experience is interrupted by a similar deferral or spacing as the sign structure. Husserl's phenomenology, he argues, is grounded in the 'self-same identity of the actual now' perceived by a 'transcendental ego'.[133] However, 'the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and expectation'.[134] The 'now' is vanishingly, impossibly small: there is only the past or the present. The presence or continuity of the 'I' of the transcendental ego therefore contains a moment of nonpresence:

> As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the non-now, perception and non-perception, in the zone of primordiality common to primordial impression and primordial retention, we admit the other into the self-identity of the *Augenblick*; nonpresence and nonevidence are admitted into the *blink of the instant*. There is a

---

[131] Ibid., p. 151.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 62, 95.

[134] Ibid., p. 64.

duration to the blink, and it closes the eye. This alterity is in fact the condition for presence, presentation, and thus for *Vorstellung* in general; it precedes all the dissociations that could be produced in presence, in *Vorstellung*.[135]

Pond's description of a kind of ontological hiccup dramatises this closing of the eye, this moment of alterity which interrupts the presence or consciousness of the 'I'. As such, it stages an aporia in phenomenology which Derrida identifies with the effect of the literary. *Pond* therefore seems to mobilise a strikingly Derridean account of not only signification but experience.

While performing a wholesale eschewal of theory in their public personas, both Smith and Bennett have produced texts which undertake a deconstructive thinking of writing. Shunning 'semiotics' in order to try to render a more direct experience in and of language, Bennett finds herself returned to the questions deconstruction raises about the the possibility of such writing. Derrida identifies these questions with the literary itself, observing that there is something 'in the situation of writing or reading, and in particular literary writing or reading, [which] puts phenomenology in crisis as well as the very concept of institution or convention'.[136] He describes 'phenomenological language […] being dislodged from its certainties (self-presence of the absolute transcendental consciousness or of the indubitable *cogito*, etc.) […] by the extreme experience of literature'.[137] As a result, the very idea of a direct experience in or of language is displaced by an effect of the literary. As Clark argues, this effect also puts into doubt the notion that we could ever decide once and for all which methods, competencies, texts and skills are proper to the discipline of English Literature, and which are extraneous.

Pond and *Artful* therefore show how the dysfunction of language which Derrida identifies with the literary resists the call for cohesive disciplinary knowledge. As Clark describes, Derrida's contention that the mark is always separable from its context, and therefore susceptible to failures of meaning, undergirds his account of the literary. This is because '[w]riting is inaugural insofar as it emancipates meaning

---

[135] Ibid., p. 65.

[136] Derrida, 'This Strange Institution', p. 45.

[137] Ibid.

from the contingencies of immediate context and directs it towards a horizon of infinite possibilities'.[138] As we have seen, this argument proceeds from Derrida's theory of the sign function, in which he asserts that a mark must be recognisable beyond its immediate context in order to carry meaning. This creates the condition of writing, which, 'since it is constituted by the suspension of immediate reference, is freed from instrumental notions of language'.[139] Writing 'is thus "born as language" in an essential relation to nothing' and literature 'is the thought of this constitutive *nothing*'.[140] By virtue of this effect of the literary, '[w]e are thrown into a cross-disciplinary space in which the modes of competence required are multiple and uncertain'.[141] The effect or force of literature, then, makes it impossible to stabilise literary criticism as a coherent, self-contained discipline. My readings of *Artful* have suggested that this is precisely the insight at stake in the text's broken sign functions, fragmented chapters and portrayal of a lecturer who has lost control of their language.

Genre

My reading of *Artful* suggests that it is part of a wider move in contemporary writing towards forms whose generic instability stages a breakdown in disciplinary coherence and professionalism. Vadde, writing with Melanie Micir, has called this writing 'obliterature'.[142] Obliterature is characterised by 'the literary phenomenon of not being fully in control of one's words and the labor phenomenon of not being fully in control of one's work'.[143] As Vadde and Micir argue, 'these tactics [are] at the vanguard of an institutional critique that ties the professionalism of the university to larger capitalist transformations in the management of knowledge'.[144] Obliterature, they argue,

---

[138] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 110.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Ibid.

[141] Clark, 'Literary Force: Institutional Values', np.

[142] Melanie Micir and Aarthi Vadde, 'Obliterature: Toward an Amateur Criticism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 25 (2018), 517–49 (p. 520).

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid., p. 519.

'probes the irrational effects of rationalized knowledge production'.[145] This regime demands that critics assume control over the meanings of their own or others' texts, but the force of the literary renders this impossible. Vadde and Micir's article identifies a modernist lineage for obliterature, but also suggests a contemporary surge of interest in the effect of the literary on demands for institutional knowledge production. Obliterature approaches these questions at the level of form, and this final section of the chapter examines how literature's displacement of being or essence, which I described above as a force interrupting the logic of discipline, also manifests as a question about genre.

As discussed earlier, Derrida describes literature as 'the place or experience of this "trouble" we also have with the essence of language, with truth and with essence, the language of essence in general'. The effect of the literary disturbs the logic of genre, which—as a system for identifying types—relies on the notion of essence. Indeed, as has often been remarked in recent years, contemporary writing increasingly uses literary effects to subvert or rewrite the genre of literary criticism. Smith's 'Green', and Bennett's 'I Am Love' are two such texts; both pieces formally enact the capacity for an encounter with an aesthetic object to disturb critical frameworks. My readings in this section show how Smith and Bennett's critical writings mobilise an effect of the literary to foreground the fictitiousness of the generic distinction between literature and criticism.

The recent shifts in the discourse of literary criticism described above—the partial recovery of the aesthetic; the blurring of the professional/amateur boundary; the erosion of the distinction between creative and critical writing—have often taken shape as an implicitly deconstructive account of writing which aims to undo what Derrida calls the 'law of genre'.[146] I earlier proposed several possible reasons for the current popularity of these writing strategies, including the reading wars, the arrival of the para-academic, and the distinctive contemporary pressures on English Literature to define and defend its activities in certain ways. At the same time, however, this is a new iteration of a perennial theme: the contingent and unstable

---

[145] Ibid., p. 520.

[146] Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 55-81 (p. 57).

nature of genre (particularly the genre of literature itself).[147] The dysfunction of truth, essence and signification in Smith and Bennett's language opens out to the question of type or genre, as their creative-critical texts perform a refusal to adhere to the conventions which distinguish literature from criticism.

As Benson and Connors argue in their introduction to *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, the conventions of academic writing have often been thought of as a disciplinary code which restricts the kind of response that can be staged in criticism. The recovery of a wider range of responses, then, rests on a refusal of these conventions:

> But when we learn—in establishments of further and higher education, say—to read *critically*, and to respond *critically* in our own writing, we are losing something. What Proust calls 'that enchanting childhood reading' becomes disenchanted, grown-up, and jaded. It's as if, in disciplining our reading, and subduing it to learned protocols, we leach the life out of it. Threaded through the pages that follow is an animating desire, variously marked and variously performed, to stick with and attend to what is vital in our reading, and so to acknowledge aspects of reading that critical writing can sometimes repress, or dismiss, or neglect.[148]

This passage reiterates a sense in literary studies at large that something has been lost—a sense now so widespread and thoroughly articulated as to be a *topos* or structure of feeling. As in Jarvis' account, Benson and Connors suggest that the pre-critical response is revised according to the conventions of disciplinary knowledge, foreclosing much of the uncertainty and interest of the initial encounter. Their anthology selections dramatise numerous ways in which these lost or foreclosed possibilities can be readmitted into academic writing by lifting the 'repress[ions]' which found academic literary criticism as a discipline and genre.

Benson and Connors' choice of the words 'marked and performed' evokes a Derridean way of thinking about genre, in which the text reflexively marks itself out as one kind of thing or another through generic conventions. Creative criticism

---

[147] Raymond Williams has described the difficulty of defining the word 'literature'. See: Raymond, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), pp. 150-54.

[148] Benson and Connors, 'Introduction', p. 3.

exploits the fact that, while there is a 'law of genre' prescribing that genres 'are not to be mixed', there is no essential difference between them.[149] Instead, as Derrida argues, genre works through the logic of the mark, or recognisability: 'if a genre exists […], then a code should provide an identifiable trait and one which is identical to itself, authorizing us to determine, to adjudicate whether a given text belongs to this genre or perhaps to that genre'.[150] This principle of recognisability is similar to the necessity of a disciplinary delimitation: boundaries and criteria have to be drawn in order for work to be recognisable as a particular *kind* of work, in order for us make discriminations between academic discourses. Both discipline and genre, then, are predicated on a logic of essence and type.

Creative criticism explicitly challenges this logic by accessing the recursive question that Derrida raises: what genre of thing is the mark of genre? After all, 'the re-mark of belonging', anything which signals genre, 'does not [itself] belong'; rather, 'this supplementary and distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class'.[151] Marking itself with a generic mark which is deliberately unidentifiable — a mark that says: this text is neither strictly one thing nor the other — creative criticism exposes the recursion of the logic of the 're-mark' on which the law of genre depends. If the generic strictures of academic writing enforce the repression of all but a few types of critical response to a text, then this disruption of genre seems calculated to leave the field open to a wider range of unexpected responses — allowing the critic to stage experiences of the aesthetic object which are not pre-coded by disciplinary frameworks. This gesture of recovery does not set out to redeem the felt loss of the object of literary studies through the reassertion of the old categories of literature or the aesthetic. Instead, the emphasis is implicitly on a conception of writing or literature not unlike Derrida's: a kind of language which "is" the dysfunction of essence, origin or genre.

---

[149] Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', p. 55. I do have qualms about using the phrase 'creative criticism', which could so easily be taken as the name of a new genre, and my sparing use of the term should be read as strictly provisional or strategic.

[150] Ibid., p. 64.

[151] Ibid., p. 65.

This seems particularly the case for 'Green', which was written for a Courtauld Institute event called Writers on Artists.[152] Composed in response to Cezanne's *L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny*, the text presents itself as both a piece of criticism and a short story about a couple viewing the painting in the Courtauld. Echoing Jarvis' argument about 'undelet[ing]' our preliminary responses to aesthetic objects, this narrative element allows the text to stage the temporal progression of the narrator's encounter with the work. The form of 'Green' is therefore particularly suited to communicating its central insight, which is that an encounter with an artwork can disorganise the accepted frames for responding to, thinking about and writing on that artwork. This text, written for an institution of art criticism, therefore ironically finds itself unable to pretend that the accepted forms of criticism could capture the experience of Cezanne's work.

Cezanne's painting disorganises the narrator's attempts to interpret or understand it, an experience that is framed in the familiar spatial terms of recent debates about reading strategies: 'No illusion. That's it. The surface opens itself.'[153] As with *Pond*, the surface/depth metaphors which organise interpretation become confused. This insistence on the complete lack of depth and the primacy of surface might seem, at first glance, in tune with 'surface reading', which Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus describe as 'modes of reading that attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths'.[154] However, Smith's dramatisation of a disorientating encounter with an artwork complicates the binary spatial metaphor which Best and Marcus' refusal of depth depends on: 'The gallery falls away, leaves nothing but leaves and striplings in a landscape where the curve of the tree is the curve of the eye is the curve of the surface of the piece of gristle inside the chest that happens to be keeping me breathing.'[155] Here, the whole spatial and institutional context which

[152] 'Ali Smith on Paul Cézanne: The Truth about Green', *Guardian*, 8 November 2010 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/interactive/2010/oct/31/ali-smith-cezanne-etang-soeurs> [accessed 4 February 2020].

[153] Ali Smith, 'Green', in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 249-56 (p. 251).

[154] Best and Marcus, pp. 1-2.

[155] Smith, 'Green', p. 251.

determines the viewer's encounter with the painting is bracketed by the force of the experience. A gallery space organises the experience and reception of works—for example, by providing accompanying texts beside the paintings—but this context too has 'fall[en] away'. The subject/object division—already unstable in the Kantian subjective universal—is collapsed by the simple 'is' which equates the 'eye' of the viewer with the 'curve' of the tree.[156] In a further disorientation, the subject of the painting, its material surface, and the context in which the painting appears all collapse into one another: 'Tree enters air enters leaf enters light enters dark enters water enters paint enters every single person in this room whether they're looking or not, and nothing's not connected, nothing's not seen, nothing's not new, nothing's not ancient, nothing's just one thing alone.'[157] Recalling the structure of secrecy described in my introduction, 'Green' asserts that there are no hidden depths below the surface of the painting. However, the surface of *L'Etang* is complicated and non-linear: the painting's atmosphere permeates, 'open[ing] itself' into the room and 'enter[ing]' everything else.

'Green' describes how the painting affects the viewer in ways which cut across the conventions that structure our interactions with artworks, muddling the distinctions between subject and object, object and context. The painting poses the question: how to be with/in front of/next to/in this surface? Smith's answer is to narrativise the experience of this complication and estrangement of viewing. What 'Green' therefore makes clear is that discursive accounts of an aesthetic object are

---

[156] See: Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 39. Ngai remarks: 'Although it seems entirely possible to form judgments of aesthetic quality privately in our heads, as if aesthetic pleasure was not a feeling reflexively felt to require public confirmation by others, this is not the way in which Kant describes it […] in Kant's account it does not seem possible to judge something aesthetically without speaking, or at the very least imagining oneself speaking.' (p. 39) This unavoidably *inter*subjective condition of the aesthetic is further complicated by the fact that we attribute our subjective feelings to the object, 'putting [our] judgement in the form of a descriptive, third-person statement ("X is cute") rather than in the form of a first-person performative that looks more transparently like the subjective evaluation it is ("I judge X cute")'—*despite* an awareness that this is a 'necessary "error"' (p. 39). In these ways, the question of "where" the aesthetic "is", in the subject or object, confuses the distinction itself.

[157] Ibid.

always founded on a re-gathering of oneself into the persona of critic, despite whatever scattering of energies and affects have occurred in the encounter with the work. Smith's dramatisation of this process recalls Derrida's critique of Husserl, staging the blink or moment of non-presence which interrupts the continuity of the transcendental ego and of experience. 'Green' shows how, following such an encounter, the critical voice has to be reconstituted as a coherent (if implied) thinking subject. Criticism requires that we recover the context and knowledge surrounding the work and reinstate the frameworks according to which we normally analyse and interpret aesthetic objects—frameworks which the encounter itself might derange or put into question. While the academic demand for knowledge production might require that the potentially disruptive moment of an encounter is repressed in literary criticism, 'Green' stages the disruption itself.

Bennett's 'I Am Love' is similarly concerned with the ways in which aesthetic experience can disturb the critical paradigm. Bennett frames the essay as an attempt to write about love, which 'will not be contained, not by human shapes, nor by literary ones'.[158] Bennett therefore establishes a tension between literary form, which she sees primarily as a way of codifying experience, and the rawness of that experience. The question her essay asks is: 'How to reconcile such a destabilising and intransmutable subject [as love] with such a linear and categorical medium as writing, without utterly disfiguring it?'[159] Like 'Green', 'I Am Love' is therefore a meditation on what happens when the object of critical or literary representation disorganises the frameworks one might use to try and describe it.

This is, presumably, why Bennett chose the form of the essay, 'a series of personal, venturesome forays, and acts of tentative reading and thinking' known for its malleability and openness.[160] The essay's concern with the personal and contingent makes it suited to the kinds of serious art and literature journals which have recently enjoyed a renaissance, and which benefit from a crossover appeal to academic and non-academic audiences. As Benson and Connors observe, 'the personal, anti-

---

[158] Claire-Louise Bennett, 'I Am Love', *Gorse*, 2 (2014), pp. 37-58 (p. 58).

[159] Ibid., p. 55.

[160] Benson and Connors, 'Introduction', p. 6.

dogmatic and idiosyncratic qualities we find in Montaigne's essays live on today in essays written outside, or on the margins of, the academy, in literary periodicals and journals of art criticism, such as the *London Review of Books*, *Cabinet* or *n+1*, and in the occasional writings of poets and novelists who also produce critical prose'.[161] This description also fits the journal which published 'I Am Love': *Gorse* 'is interested in literature where lines between fiction, memoir and history blur, in the unconventional and the under recognised'.[162] Situated at the boundary between professional criticism and amateur or general interest, Bennett's essay probes a tension between literary form and the apparent formlessness of raw experience.

Bennett describes trying to write about an experience which seems to disturb and distort language's meaning-making capacities. The resulting prose is '[d]ifficult in the sense that occasionally there are pages, one after the other, which are quite incomprehensible, as if, at the time of writing, I'd lost my grip on things and my senses were in disarray, and going over these pieces can sometimes upset me'.[163] However, Bennett wonders 'if perhaps I was a better writer then, when I didn't have much of a grip on the world, before I had any ideas about being a writer'.[164] This is an example, perhaps, of what Derrida calls 'the very beyond of meaning giving rise to writing'.[165] Here, it is not that the subject matter resists being fixed or captured in writing; in fact, Bennett suggests, writing might name this very difficulty with codifying experience.

As such, Bennett values writing that manages to leave something of the structure of experience intact. Forster, she observes, thought about this in relation to Keats's 'negative capability', 'a term which describes the intrinsic capacity human beings have to experience the world and its phenomena directly, outside of any predetermined interpretative categories and theoretical frameworks'.[166] Bennett cites a similar argument made by Geoff Dyer:

---

[161] Ibid.

[162] 'About', Gorse <http://gorse.ie/about/> [accessed 4 February 2020].

[163] Bennett, 'I Am Love', p. 40.

[164] Ibid.

[165] Derrida, 'This Strange Institution', p. 36.

[166] Bennett, 'I Am Love', p. 49.

> In *Out of Sheer Rage*, Geoff Dyer admits to preferring the notebooks and letters of D.H. Lawrence to his novels, and the reasons he gives are mostly to do with the unmediated expressiveness of personal writings which emit a bracing immediacy and bring the reader into direct contact with an extraordinary range of rich and complex experiential modes. It is as if the act of writing is a medium through which sensation and experience is processed, deconstructed, reimagined.[167]

In writing of this kind, '[t]here is no obligation […] to build towards an enduring subject or to remain steadfast to a cogent theme'; without these structural constraints, writing can retain the 'immediacy' and 'ambiguity' of experience.[168]

However, while Lawrence's writing holds out the hope of an 'unmediated expressiveness' and 'direct contact', Bennett also remarks that 'the act of writing is a medium'. While no writing can be completely unmediated, Bennett argues that what Dyer finds in Lawrence is a kind of writing in which 'experience' is 'deconstructed'. This resonates with Derrida's observation that experience is often wrongly thought of as prior to and the referent of writing, which in turn is considered supplementary.[169] While it would be easy to read Bennett's argument as privileging raw experience over the mediated and devitalised supplementariness of writing, Bennett assigns writing the power to query and rewrite experience, recalling Derrida's contention that writing and 'experience' are structured in the same way: not by an 'experience of *pure* presence', but by 'chains of differential marks'.[170] Rather than returning fractured or disorganised experience to a coherent whole, Bennett identifies writing with this very disorder.

Smith and Bennett's texts set out to recuperate something that is normally repressed in critical writing. Smith's account of *L'Etang* recovers a sense of the encounter with the artwork. Similarly, 'I Am Love' privileges the 'experiential'. However, while the phenomenological categories of experience or the encounter might be thought of as primary, and critical writing as secondary or supplementary,

---

[167] Ibid., p. 42.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', pp. 312-13.

[170] Ibid., p. 318.

'Green' and 'I Am Love' show that literary texts have the power to re-write experience. In their dissolution of critical categories, these texts show that writing can be the "place" of the derangement of experience; they attribute an ability to rethink or reformulate experience to writing. Both texts suggest that we experience the world through certain categories, and it is through writing as a sensemaking (or unmaking) medium that these categories can be 'deconstructed, reimagined'. 'Green' and 'I Am Love', then, put to work a force of the literary which foregrounds the contingency of the categories that organise critical work.

Conclusion

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that Smith and Bennett's antipathies towards literary theory can in fact be identified with a particular quarrel they each seem to have with semiotics as a structuralist theory of signification. My readings of *Artful*, *Public Library* and *Pond* show that these texts are keenly aware of the possibility for the sign function to break down or fail to signify. *Artful* and *Pond*, which both feature characters who are erstwhile academics, thematise a contemporary breakdown in the discourse of academic professionalism that seems to proceed from the impossibility of secure, programmatic and predictable communication. In Smith and Bennett's writing, the dysfunction of language and essence forecloses the delineation of (and mastery over) a field of knowledge. Smith and Bennett's writings therefore locate what Clark refers to as 'literary force', which acts in a counter-institutional movement against 'disciplinary values'.[171] Smith and Bennett's works show how literary criticism institutes itself as a professional, coherent discipline, but use their literary language and fictional status to foreground the fabulousness of the discourses of professionalism and disciplinarity. This capacity of literary language to disturb institutions also necessarily leads to questions about genre. The logic of genre is a way of making distinctions between different kinds of things, but these distinctions rely on the very language of essence and truth that the literary puts into abeyance. My readings of 'Green' and 'I Am Love' show how these texts put the effect

---

[171] Clark, 'Literary Force: Institutional Values', np.

of the literary to work to disturb the logic of essence, type or genre and disrupt the conventions of criticism. Genre, then, emerges as another kind of instituted fiction.

As such, Smith and Bennett's writings can be identified with Royle's 'literary turn', a move to relinquish codified or hermeneutic modes of reading and rediscover a sense of the literary as a strange force that troubles language, institution and essence.[172] As Derrida argues with respect to the works of Joyce, Ponge, Celan and Kafka, Smith and Bennett's texts 'operate a sort of turning back, they are themselves a sort of turning back on the literary institution'.[173] In other words: 'They bear within themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: "What is literature?" or "Where does literature come from?" "What should we do with literature?"'[174] Smith and Bennetts' texts 'put to work' a 'turning back' on the very notion of institution by means of their literariness. They therefore stand as a reassertion of the power of the literary to reframe or displace the values and procedures of the institution of literary criticism.

Smith's critique of the academy is, as my reading of 'Last' suggests, grounded in a theory of the democratic openness and availability of texts. The next chapter addresses the institutions of the public and public criticism, which—far from offering a democratic space—are often portrayed in Smith's novels as having been colonised by the market. While criticism's disciplinary crisis thus seems to open up possibilities for the revalorisation of amateurism, the next chapter pauses to consider what is already undemocratic about public criticism as it currently stands. These are questions which have to be worked through before a theory of a properly democratic reading public (or public reading) can be espoused—a project which I show Smith's novels to be centrally concerned with.

---

[172] Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 92.

[173] Derrida, 'This Strange Institution', p. 41.

[174] Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO: PUBLIC CRITICISM

The previous chapter highlighted a significant shift in the academy towards more avowedly amateur critical modes. Postcritique, for example, advocates demotic language and intellectual accessibility; Felski describes it as a project of 'rethinking literary value in ways that do not cut it off from nonexpert readers and ordinary life'.[1] I now turn my attention to forms of public criticism such as book reviewing and literary journalism, assessing how accessibility and populism do not necessarily amount to egalitarianism or democracy. In fact, the realm of popular literary appreciation is dominated by what Paul Crosthwaite describes 'an ideology of the market that has arrogated the category of the popular to itself'.[2] As Crosthwaite observes, 'the notion of popularity has come to serve as a cover for the imposition of the iron law of the market: how (so this ideological argument goes) can there be anything wrong with markets if they are simply an unmediated manifestation of the

---

[1] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), p. 29.

[2] Paul Crosthwaite, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 28.

will of the people?'[3] This chapter shows how three of Smith's novels—*Hotel World*, *The Accidental,* and *There but for the*—evoke fears about the breakdown of the public sphere under the conditions of late capitalism, and thematise concerns about the implications of this for the status of literature and literary debate in British culture.

This chapter identifies reviews in national newspapers and major literary journals as key exponents of public literary opinion, and I largely focus on these sources rather than the emerging sphere of amateur online reviewing fostered by sites such as Goodreads. The reason for this has more to do with how I am treating the concept of an institution than with the admittedly related issue of authority. Of course, as Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan observe, it is tempting to think that 'the authority of the literary critic has been dissipated by the internet'; Rónán McDonald similarly argues that 'the public critic has been dismembered' by 'the momentum for journalistic and popular criticism to become a much more democratic, dispersive affair, no longer left in the hands of the experts'.[4] However, I have focussed on reviews in publications with a national profile not because I necessarily believe that they do or should carry more weight than the views of bloggers, Goodreads users and Amazon reviewers, but because I am trying to build up a picture of public literary discourse in its institutional dimension. This chapter is interested, in other words, in how established and (relatively) widely-read publications institutionalise literary discourses and values, rather than in the 'dispers[al]' of opinion and authority.

While the public is a more diffuse institution than the others examined in my thesis, it is one of the largest and most important bodies for the reception of contemporary fiction. As I will explore more fully in the next chapter, to publish literally means 'to make public'.[5] The public is therefore the addressee of published texts, the collective name for all the potential readers of a novel. Its purchasing habits determine sales trends, so understanding the public's tastes and opinions is crucial for

---

[3] Ibid.

[4] Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan, 'Introduction' in *The Good of the Novel*, ed. by Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), pp. vii-xiv (p. vii); Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. ix.

[5] Michael Bhaskar, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), p. 36.

publishers. Caroline Wintersgill argues that through a process of 'democratisation' of the British literary scene since 1980—characterised by the decline in importance of publishers as cultural gatekeepers and the growth in book festivals and online reviewing—'[r]eaders have become […] a significant institution of literary valuing'.[6] Yet while the public is in many ways the main addressee of a novel, it is not necessarily a pre-constituted or coherent body.

Michael Warner has argued, for example, that 'publics exist only by virtue of their imagining'; as such, and evoking Derrida's notion of fictive institution, Warner calls the public 'a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that'.[7] Publics have to be instituted, and Warner argues that this is achieved through an effect of textuality: 'the notion of a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity'.[8] If the public is a kind of organising fiction, then literature as a fictional mode would seem to be a prime site for reflecting on the textuality which produces the public.

Both Ali Smith's 'author-function' and her novels present interesting questions about the relationship between literature, the public and criticism.[9] For one thing, Smith is already subject to popular acclaim; in his contribution to the 2013 collection *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Dominic Head remarked that Smith was 'already identified as canonical in some preliminary way', citing the various prizes her early novels had already won or been shortlisted for, and this list has lengthened a great deal since then.[10] As Christina Patterson observes, Smith is often spoken of as an author who crosses the divide between high culture and popular appeal: 'Smith is

[6] Caroline Wintersgill, 'Institutions of Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980-2018*, ed. by Peter Boxall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 105-133 (p. 116).

[7] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), p. 8.

[8] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[9] Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. by Josué V. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 141-60 (p. 148).

[10] Dominic Head, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency: Ali Smith and the Contemporary Canon', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 101-114 (p. 102).

a writer's writer, but increasingly—as her sales and the size of her postbag indicate—a reader's one too.'[11] This speaks to a high level of public recognition of and enthusiasm for Smith's works.

A discourse has also emerged in public criticism that there is something democratic about Smith's novels. The *Evening Standard*, for example, describes *There but for the* as '[i]nteractive and wilfully democratic', while the *Telegraph* writes of the same novel that '[t]here is something deeply democratic about its interest in the little words, conjunctions and prepositions, and how they change the way we construe the world'.[12] The *Times Literary Supplement*, again in reference to the same book, reports: 'One of the great pleasures of [Smith's] work is its harmonious mixture of pure lyricism and straightforward demotic.'[13] As Raymond Williams has argued, the term 'democratic' is highly overdetermined by conflicting meanings, making interpreting the reviewers' comments more complicated than it might first appear.[14] However, given that 'demotic', 'democracy' and 'public' all have as their etymological root a word meaning '[the] people', we can at least say that the reviewers are describing a feeling that *There but for the* engages with the idea of a public through its generality or openness of address.[15]

---

[11] Christina Patterson, 'Ali Smith: The Power and the Story', *Independent*, 7 June 2005 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/ali-smith-the-power-and-the-story-226080.html> [accessed 4 February 2020].

[12] Melanie McGrath, '*There but for the* is a Lift for the Soul', *Evening Standard,* 2 June 2011 <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/books/there-but-for-the-is-a-lift-for-the-soul-6407647.html> [accessed 10 February 2020]; Lucy Daniel, '*There but for the* by Ali Smith: Review', *Telegraph*, 24 May 2011 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8523762/There-But-For-The-by-Ali-Smith-review.html> [accessed 10 February 2020]

[13] Edmund Gordon, 'The Dinner Guest', *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 August 2011, pp. 19-20 (p. 20).

[14] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), pp. 83-84.

[15] 'Demotic, n. and adj.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2020 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/49863> [accessed 31 March 2020]; 'Democracy, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/49755> [accessed 10 February 2020]; 'Public, adj. and n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/154052> [accessed 10 February 2020].

Indeed, Smith's sustained attention to questions of community, democracy and the public is a central focus of much of the scholarship on her work. For example, Emma E. Smith argues that the 'communally' narrated novel *Hotel World* carries in its formal arrangement an attempt to imagine alternative, non-hierarchical social orders.[16] Patrick O'Donnell likewise argues that the novel's 'accidental, ad hoc community […] evinces signs of the global cosmopolitanism the novel's title implies'.[17] Emily Horton also describes Smith's short stories as 'depicting community as a necessary feature of utopic society'.[18] There is, then, a critical consensus that Smith's novels are centrally preoccupied with imagining egalitarian and inclusive societies.

However, in spite of Smith's explicitly democratic project, some of her formal techniques have been construed as inaccessible or elitist—a misfortune which, as I will shortly set out, can be traced back to the substitution Crosthwaite describes of the values of the market in place of those of the people. Giles Foden's review of *Hotel World* offers a typical example of the anti-experimentalist critique of Smith:

> For all its radical virtues, many readers will find Smith's a difficult book to swallow. 'Eh, no easy fo read, yah,' as Theroux's maintenance men would put it. The truth is, we like our falsely coherent subjects and illusions of unfractured language. Such snarled-up reality as we can bear must come disguised in traditional forms, its postmodern aspects symbolically rendered, as in Hotel Honolulu, rather than formally enacted, as in Hotel World.[19]

---

[16] Emma E. Smith, '"A Democracy of Voice"? Narrating Community in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 4 (2010), 81-99 (p. 83).

[17] Patrick O'Donnell, '"The Space That Wrecks Out Abode": The Stranger in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and *The Accidental*' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 89-100 (p. 94).

[18] Emily Horton, 'Contemporary Space and Affective Ethics in Ali Smith's Short Stories', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 9-22 (pp. 15-16).

[19] Giles Foden, 'Check in, Drop out', *Guardian*, 14 April 2001
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/apr/14/fiction.alismith> [accessed 10 February 2020].

Here, social critique and formal experimentation are thought to make novels 'difficult', and what is recognisably an emancipatory political project can therefore be judged aesthetically inaccessible—and, by extension, undemocratic.

This idea stems from a particular account of modernism which considers its democratic impulses to be negated by an aesthetic difficulty which makes it too confusing for the ordinary person to understand. John Carey influentially restated this argument in his 1992 *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, in which he argued that modernism was a reaction against the massification of British public life:

> The intellectuals could not, of course, actually prevent the masses from attaining literacy. But they could prevent them reading literature by making it too difficult for them to understand—and this is what they did. The early twentieth century saw a determined effort, on the part of the European intelligentsia, to exclude the masses from culture. In England this movement has become known as modernism. […] Realism of the sort that it was assumed the masses appreciated was abandoned. So was logical coherence. Irrationality and obscurity were cultivated.[20]

In his afterword, Carey extends this account across the late twentieth- and early twenty-first- centuries to encompass '"post-structuralism" or "deconstruction" or just "theory"', arguing that 'the new availability of culture through television and other popular media has driven intellectuals to evolve an anti-popular cultural mode that can reprocess all existing culture and take it out of the reach of the majority'.[21] But it is not necessary—nor particularly democratic—to understand modernism solely in terms of a 'difficult[y]' that is assumed to be too challenging for the general public. In fact, it is Carey who presupposes that modernism is too 'difficult' for the general reader, not modernist writers themselves. He takes it for granted that difficulty is a hostile act towards the public when, as Fredric Jameson argues, 'modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself'.[22] The target of modernist critique is the market, not the public.

---

[20] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 16-7.

[21] Ibid, pp. 215; 214-5.

[22] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. x.

It is only possible to think of modernism as being hostile to the general reader because the priorities and values of the market have become confused with those of the public, such that a critique of the former appears to be an attack on the latter. Indeed, Jürgen Habermas argues that during the twentieth century the space of the public was appropriated by the market: 'the public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption'.[23] However, Habermas makes it clear that the modern institution of the public only emerged as a requirement of capitalism in the first place, and I am not premising my analysis here on the assumption of a prior, prelapsarian public sphere. Rather, as Habermas's colleagues Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue, western society since the mid-twentieth century has been characterised by the ever-intensifying marketisation of the public and cultural spheres.[24]

Under these circumstances, Habermas argues, the consumption of culture as commodity has replaced rational-critical debate as the content of what is now only an ersatz public sphere. The culture industry commodifies and privatises literary culture:

> When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labour also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode.[25]

The public is not a democratic institution but, on the contrary, another sphere of capitalist production and consumption. As I discussed in my introduction, Sianne Ngai has recently described how this process has continued into the twenty-first century.[26] It is only in this context, with the market's cultural values masquerading as

---

[23] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 160.

[24] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 104-5, 116.

[25] Habermas, p. 161.

[26] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Cute, Zany, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 20.

popular democratic ones, that Smith's critique of the aesthetics of late capitalism can appear as anti-democratic in the sense of being against the public or the people.

My readings of Smith's novels therefore take her formal 'difficult[y]' not as an expression of hostility towards the public, but as a response to the occupation of the potential space of the public by the operations of the market. This chapter shows how *Hotel World*, *The Accidental* and *There but for the* pair thoroughgoing critiques of public language and the culture industry with a demonstration of fiction's capacity to interpellate a democratic public. The chapter closes with a reading of Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, which was explicitly written in response to the public outcry over her previous work. Refusing the popular critical values which underpinned the vociferous response to Cusk's memoir *Aftermath*, *Outline* resembles Smith's novels in its assertion of the democratic structure of fiction—which, Cusk asserts, accords the writer freedom from the kind of narrowly-defined ethical responsibilities espoused in public criticism. As such, this chapter delineates how Smith and Cusk critique the values of public criticism and mobilise the fictional status of their texts to address more open, democratic forms of literary or reading publics.

The public

The novel's capacity to dramatise the question of the public rests on the close historical and conceptual relationship between literature and the public. Key theoretical accounts such as Habermas' and Warner's identify the public as a phenomenon based on the circulation of texts. Habermas argues that the public was, from the first, a reading public, enabled and produced by the early capitalist necessity of circulating information and debate across wide geographical spans through the medium of print. More recently, Warner has argued that publics are instituted by the circulation of texts, and that a public is determined by the forms of discourse which address and constitute it. Literature, as an imaginative and linguistic medium, can therefore query or rewrite the terms of the public. Smith and Cusk's novels mobilise their status as fictional texts to address a sense that the public and public discourse are not really democratic institutions. While this appears to be an acutely contemporary problem, exacerbated by the workings of neoliberalism, globalisation and technology, it is not as though the idea of a public was ever truly egalitarian. While the term refers to '[t]he

community or people as a whole; the members of the community collectively', and therefore appears in the linguistic repertoire of egalitarianism and democracy, upon closer examination it turns out that publics can and do construct themselves in such a way as to make certain exclusions.[27]

According to Habermas, the public sphere arose as a result of the shift from feudalism to capitalism, and was primarily a means for property owners to articulate their agendas. In feudalism, he argues, there was no distinction like the modern one between public and private; the domestic sphere was also the sphere of production.[28] The early modern period, however, saw the emergence of a new sphere of productivity that did not come under the rubric of private or state: 'The economic activity that had become private had to be oriented towards a commodity market that had expanded under public direction and supervision; the economic conditions under which this activity now took place lay outside the confines of the single household; for the first time they were of general interest.'[29] The market created the need for a sphere in which private commercial interests could be articulated and the actions of the state critiqued. This public sphere took the form of the exchange of news, information, and 'rational-critical debate'.[30] The public extended beyond the bounds of an immediate, physically-located community by means of the circulation of culture as a 'commodity': the public 'always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who—insofar as they were propertied and educated—as readers, listeners and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion'.[31] For Habermas, then, the public was 'from the outset a reading public'.[32]

Crucial to Habermas's account of the genesis of the public is the driving necessity for a certain class of person—capitalists—to communicate their economic and political requirements. Not everyone was eligible to be part of the public: 'The

---

[27] 'Public, adj. and n.'.

[28] Habermas, p. 7.

[29] Ibid., p. 19.

[30] Ibid., p. 51.

[31] Ibid., p. 37.

[32] Ibid., p. 23.

fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple.'[33] Regardless of the OED definition, the 'public' has never included everyone. Significantly, this question of who is eligible to be a member of the public is closely bound up with the emergence of the liberal humanist subject as the predominant model of selfhood.

The relationship between the idea of the public and the genre of the novel thus comes into view. As Pieter Vermeulen observes, the novel has historically played a role in imparting the modern Western division between public and private life: 'The novel is assumed to have inculcated and sustained a particular distribution of interiority, individuality, domesticity, and community—a constellation that has defined the modern life.'[34] However, the twenty-first-century novel bears witness to the disorganisation of this order and the emergence from the fissure of different, more amorphous (and possibly less hegemonic) forms of social relation: 'Contemporary fiction's dramatization of the end of the novel conveys a sense that neither these modern forms of life nor the novel's cultural power are quite what they used to be.'[35] Twenty-first-century novels bear witness to the demise of one kind of public—Habermas' institution of rational-critical debate—at the hands of the market, but this very undoing opens up possibilities for the articulation of alternative forms of public.

As a discursive medium, contemporary literature can foreground the fact observed by Warner that the public is a kind of fiction invoked by certain kinds of address: 'A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*.'[36] We can see this thinking at work, for example, in *There but for the*, a novel which is profoundly concerned with public discourse and community. The

---

[33] Ibid., p. 56 [emphasis removed].

[34] Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Fiction and the Death of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Warner, p. 67.

central event of the narrative is precipitated when Gen and Eric Lee hold a dinner party and invite a deliberately explosive combination of guests. A friend of a friend named Miles locks himself in their spare bedroom—in response, it seems, to the nastiness of the other guests. At the table, a weapons dealer named Richard has made a string of distasteful announcements, rounding them out by saying: 'well, no point in being naïve about it, it's a nasty old world out there and it strikes me all sensible people will feel the same way as I do about it and if they don't they ought to'.[37] Richard's address calls on the public as an ostensibly all-encompassing body while nevertheless excluding certain people, combining a general, inclusive address ('all') with a qualifier ('sensible').

This manipulability of address and assent has always haunted philosophical discussions of common sense. In 'The Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement', Kant derives the existence of common sense from the way he understands aesthetic judgements to solicit and gain assent. According to Kant, '[s]ince an aesthetic judgement is not an objective or cognitive judgement, this necessity is not derivable from determinate concepts'.[38] An aesthetic judgement cannot be based in concepts, otherwise it would not be subjective. However, there must be something which makes aesthetic judgements universal; '[t]herefore they must have a subjective principle, and one which determines what pleases or displeases, by means of feeling only and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity'.[39] This feeling 'could only be regarded as a *common sense*'.[40] Because aesthetic judgements are universal without having an objective basis in 'concepts', there has to be such a thing as a common sense in order for these judgements be able to gain assent: 'the universal communicability of a feeling presupposes a common sense'.[41] Kant, in short, argues that subjective universal judgements of beauty are possible because we have a shared sense of what is beautiful. Common sense is therefore deduced from the existence of the concept it

---

[37] Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), p. 119.

[38] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. by Nicholas Walker, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 67.

[39] Ibid., p. 68.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., p. 69.

is supposed to ground (the subjective-universal nature of aesthetic judgements). This circularity recalls Warner's description of the public as 'autotelic' and Richard's definition of 'all sensible people' as people who hold views that he deems sensible.

The fictitious nature of common sense or public opinion leaves these concepts open to the kind of manipulation that Richard specialises in. There is no pluralism in Richard's invocation of common sense, and the public is not a sphere of debate, but a homogenous institution composed only of those who conform to a preordained set of beliefs. This example from *There but for the* demonstrates how a particular kind of public can be interpellated or invoked as a function of address. Construing the public as an autotelic, self-instituting fiction also allows Smith's novels to suggest that alternative publics or communities might be similarly instituted: they would be no more fictional, no less material, than the present forms of public.

Public discourse

In addition to exploring the autotelic nature of the public, Smith's novels also express concerns about the nature and status of public language. As the example of Richard's invocation of 'all sensible people' shows, the pliability of address means that publics can be called forth and constituted in politically-loaded ways. Similarly, if a public is constituted by its language, then bad-faith uses of rhetoric will have a pernicious effect on the community. Smith's novels frequently pair anxieties about the linguistic manipulation of the public and democracy with concerns about the status of art—particularly literature as a linguistic medium—in a society whose values are increasingly dictated by the market and whose language feels increasingly crass and cruel.

Smith's own participation in public discourse has often left her with a sense of its dysfunctionality. Her introduction, written with Toby Litt, to the 2005 edition of *New Writing* caused a row that exposed what Smith perceives to be wrong with public discourse. The offending passage read: 'On the whole, the submissions from women [to *New Writing*] were disappointingly domestic, the opposite of risk-taking—as if too many women writers have been injected with a special drug that keeps them dulled, good, saying the right thing, aping the right shape, and melancholy at doing it,

depressed as hell.'[42] Reviews and columns in publications including *Time Out*, the *Observer* and the *Independent* derided Smith and Litt's 'gross generalisation' and 'uncharitable remarks'.[43] The *Guardian* compiled responses from women writers, who argued (amongst other things) that Smith and Litt had overlooked female experimentalists; that women subvert gendered assumptions in their writings about domesticity; and that analysing writing in terms of gender itself produces and perpetuates stereotypes.[44]

The way in which the row blew up feeds into Smith's critique of public discourse, as the *Independent* recounts:

> The wound […] is clearly still raw. 'I have a terrible urge,' [Smith] tells me later, 'to run away and live in a cave. Especially after the recent nonsense in the papers. It made me think well why the fuck would I be a public person at all? Why would I want to be? It makes no difference, people make up rubbish about you and it becomes true. I wonder,' she muses, 'if the only thing is to insist on context, or to remove yourself altogether'.[45]

The problem, as Smith sees it, is that the textuality of the public allowed her remarks to go astray, to be cited and taken out of 'context'. As Habermas and Warner both observe, the public is a medium which extends the field of communication beyond one's immediate community, context, time or location. In this way, the public as a field of communication is also structured by the possibility that Derrida identifies for all texts, marks, signs or communication to become separated from their original context.[46] This capacity entails that a mark can always mean something other its

---

[42] Smith and Litt, qtd. in Patterson.

[43] John O'Connell, review of *New Writing 13*, *Time Out*, 27 April 2005, p. 65; Stephanie Merritt, review of *New Writing 13*, *Observer*, 17 April 2005, p. 19; Laurence Phelan, review of *New Writing 13*, *Independent on Sunday*, 10 April 2005, p. 33.

[44] 'You Can Write about a Kitchen Sink in a Way that Challenges...', *Guardian*, 23 March 2005 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/mar/23/alismith> [accessed 4 February 2020].

[45] Patterson.

[46] Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf), pp. 309-330 (p. 318).

producer originally intended.[47] Smith argues that, in the case of *New Writing*, this attenuated communication allowed for damaging misunderstandings and bad-faith manipulation. The controversy, in her eyes, illustrates the atomising and dysfunctional potential of public discourse.

Cusk has also been at the centre of a literary controversy: her 2012 memoir *Aftermath* was roundly attacked for revealing details about her private life. This controversy is doubly relevant to my analysis of public criticism. Firstly, it provides a further example of the type of overheated row which Smith attributes to the dysfunctional nature of public discourse. Secondly, the *Aftermath* controversy explicitly concerned the relationship between literature and the public sphere. As well as illustrating some of popular literary journalism's ethical values, it tells us something about how the institution of public criticism is dependent on a philosophical or conceptual distinction between the public and private spheres.

Cusk's alleged crime was to publish—to make public—intimate details about her private life. As Kate Kellaway describes, the public reacted with fury:

> It was this intense, exposed, high-risk book that had people reaching for their knives. She enraged partly because she did not try to censor an animal instinct that the children remain with her, rather than be shared. […] Even her 'dearest friend', she says, tells her 'the thing you should never have done was write that book'. With *Aftermath* 'there was so much stuff in my own life that the divide [between life and the book] was completely breached, my marital arguments the subject of newspaper articles, criticisms of me in my personal life were being broadcast on Radio 4'.[48]

The *Times*' Camilla Long was one of the people reaching for their knives. She accused Cusk of 'exploit[ing] her husband and her marriage with relish' and criticised her for her portrayal of real people:

> I read the passage agog—a case of pure literary GBH. Is this woman real? Recognis-able [*sic*]? Possibly going to read it? There can't be too many one-legged

---

[47] Ibid.

[48] Kate Kellaway, 'Rachel Cusk: "Aftermath Was Creative Death. I Was Heading into Total Silence', *Guardian*, 24 August 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/rachel-cusk-interview-aftermath-outline> [accessed 10 February 2020].

witches running hostelries near Dartmoor. (Can there?) The irony is that Cusk was actually sued for a personal attack in her last book but one, when some people at a bed and breakfast in Italy recognised themselves in a description in The Last Supper.[49]

These responses are, in one sense, fair enough: the *dramatis personae* of a Cusk book is often composed of real people, and her writing makes aspects of these people's lives public, sometimes without their prior knowledge or permission.

However, the reviewers' responses are worth pausing over for two reasons. Firstly, Long's review is itself controversial in literary circles, having been given the 'Hatchet Job of the Year' prize.[50] According to the *Guardian*, this award 'was set up by the Omnivore website to "raise the profile of professional book critics and to promote integrity and wit in literary journalism"'.[51] While the prize is sincere in its aims to promote literary culture and is only a joke (the winner gets 'a year's supply of potted shrimp'), it also encourages the polemic, one-sided, and imprecise genre of reviewing connoted by the stubby axe with one blunt side which gives the prize its name.[52] This celebration of bluntness gives currency to precisely the kinds of rough and overblown commentary that Smith laments. The *Aftermath* controversy, like the *New Writing* incident, shows how public criticism can be prone to escalation and imprecision, sometimes even valuing these strategies as integral parts of literary journalism.

The second problem with popular criticism's response to *Aftermath* is that it was highly censorious about an issue which is far more complicated than reviewers seemed willing to allow. The controversy points towards a tension between an individual's right to privacy and a certain degree of license that has historically been understood as literature's purview. As Derrida observes, we habitually understand literature to benefit from an 'authorization to say everything'; an author 'is not

---

[49] Camilla Long, 'Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation by Rachel Cusk', *Times*, 4 March 2012 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/aftermath-on-marriage-and-separation-by-rachel-cusk-xn0xgt0lsp9> [accessed 10 February 2020].

[50] Alison Flood, 'Hatchet Job of the Year Goes to Assault on Rachel Cusk', *Guardian*, 12 February 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/12/hatchet-job-of-the-year-rachel-cusk> [accessed 11 March 2020].

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

responsible to anyone, not even to himself, for whatever the persons or the characters of his works, thus of what he is supposed to have written himself, say and do'.[53] This is not, Derrida is at pains to emphasise, a particularly avant-garde view of the matter, but a commonplace historical definition of literature, which has traditionally been understood as a space where certain kinds of responsibility are suspended.

As a result, regardless of whatever similarities or even names Cusks' characters may share with real people, the space of literature is supposed to guarantee her a certain freedom; 'each time a literary work is censured', Derrida observes, 'democracy is in danger, as everyone agrees'.[54] The tension between individual privacy and literature's license to say 'everything' is a particularly contemporary concern, having been at the centre of recent debates about the ethics of autobiographical fiction. Numerous recent incidents have tested the ethical limits of including real people and events in literary works; Karl Ove Knausgård's relatives threatened to sue him for his depiction of the family, for example.[55] In Robert Gill's study of autobiographical fiction, he argues that there is something amiss with way such incidents are framed as ethical problems in public discourse. He argues that the public's concern with how writers appropriate the stuff of real life says much more about 'the reading habits of a culture that is eager to view fictional stories as the veiled confessions of their authors' than it does about narrative ethics.[56] While *Aftermath*, as a memoir, makes a slightly different claim about its relation to the author's life than autobiographical fiction does, this relationship is still more complicated than the public's 'reading habits' will allow—a memoir is still a literary text, after all.

The furore surrounding Cusk's memoir shows how public criticism often fails to recognise that the relationship between literary narratives and real life is more complicated than it appears, and should not be subject to such rigorous policing. The

---

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Jon Henley, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard: "I Have Given away My Soul"', *Guardian*, 9 March 2012 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/mar/09/karl-ove-knausgaard-memoir-family> [accessed 11 March 2020].

[56] Robert McGill, *The Treacherous Imagination: Intimacy, Ethics, and Autobiographical Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), p. 3.

incident therefore furnishes us with two insights that are of particular interest in the context of my analysis of public criticism. Firstly, it illustrates the tendency Smith identifies for public discourse to misapprehend the stakes of certain literary debates and blow them up into a row. This is a propensity which Smith directly identifies with the public's open, unwieldy and circulatory structure: things get taken out of context, distorted and recirculated. Secondly, it shows how public criticism's assumptions about both its own practice and the nature of published (i.e. publicly circulating) literary texts are subtended by a rigorously-policed public/private binary. Both Smith and Cusk have staged explicit responses to these problems surrounding public discourse and criticism in their novels. I deal with Cusk's riposte to the *Aftermath* controversy in her novel *Outline* later in the chapter; for now I want to focus on the vexed questions around public discourse to which Smith's writing frequently returns.

It is perhaps the insight that the public is constructed textually that leads to an emphasis in Smith's novels on problems with public uses of language. For example, *There but for the*—published in 2011, just as a post-crash politics of austerity emerged and the Syrian refugee crisis began—registers anxieties about the reduction of linguistic nuance and complexity to unthinking, univocal meanings. Anna, who works in the asylum system and has been brought into the Lees' orbit by an old connection with Miles, strains to remember '[a] world before *Interim Dispersal Measures* and *Significant Knowledge Transfer*': 'A time before weapon sales initiatives were called things like Peace. Words, words, words. Freedom. Identity. Security. Democracy. Human Rights. *Deny your bin its rights*.'[57] (That last part about the bin is an anti-littering slogan.) Here, Anna expresses a belief that the liberal humanist discourse of democracy and freedom exists on a continuum with, or has become subsumed by, the overtly bad-faith sloganism exemplified by language like '*Interim Dispersal Measures*' and '*Significant Knowledge Transfer*'.

These kinds of words—freedom, identity, security, and so on—have of course always been situated in complicated and overdetermined fields of meaning. They are what Raymond Williams calls '[k]eywords'.[58] We know when we are dealing with a

[57] Smith, *There but for the*, p. 57.

[58] Williams, p. 13 [emphasis removed].

keyword, Williams writes, when 'the problems of its meanings' are 'inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss'.[59] These kinds of words therefore bring a 'sense of significance and difficulty': 'they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought'.[60] In the case of *There but for the*, the density of different competing meanings attaching to Anna's keywords—the very fact that they have a certain political, philosophical and semantic flexibility or indeterminacy—is covered over by their reduction to catchphrases.

To take the example of 'Democracy', which Williams analyses in *Keywords*, two historically competing definitions have emerged: '[i]n the socialist tradition, democracy continued to mean *popular power*', while in the liberal sense it only means a form of government rather than a broader political ideal.[61] As long as 'democracy' remains a catchphrase or slogan, circulated in public discourse as if its meaning were singular and obvious, the political conflict registered by the two different definitions is elided. Smith's novel also suggests that the reduction of this complexity, the foreclosing of political debate about the meaning and practice of concepts like 'democracy', allows an ideological bait-and-switch to take place. Anna's job is to screen asylum seekers' stories and produce reports on their credibility. Her employment therefore involves trying to ensure 'Security' for some (British citizens) by denying it to others (refugees). The keyword 'Security' therefore functions ideologically: it represents one relation that Anna can assume towards her work—she could take pride in helping to keep British society safe and secure—while covertly justifying and enabling an entirely different set of real conditions.

It is also significant that, as Vermeulen has shown, the discursive formation indicated by the words 'Freedom', 'Democracy', 'Identity' and 'Human Rights' is particularly related to the genre of the novel. Vermeulen proposes that, if there is a relationship between the novel and the distribution of public and private regulated by the philosophy of liberal democracy, then there is also a relationship between their

---

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., p. 85.

respective declines. As a result, *There but for the* not only exemplifies a widespread narrative about the degradation of public discourse, but reflects on the consequences for its own status as a novel. As Vermeulen argues, however, the contemporary novel does not imagine itself as a genre going extinct along with the forms of life it previously supported, but identifies new modes for articulating this disaggregation. Anna's quotation of *Hamlet*, '[w]ords, words, words', identifies a possibility in literature for meanings to remain open. Hamlet speaks this line while pretending to be mad, deliberately misconstruing meanings, hearing meanings other than those intended by the speaker, and redirecting the dialogue in unexpected ways. Hamlet, and by extension Anna, are alive to the possibilities for meaning to go awry—a potential which, as we have seen in chapter one, Derrida associates with the literary.

There but for the evinces anxiety about the status of the novel as a linguistic medium at a time when the politics of liberal democracy, which apparently secured the public as a sphere of rational debate, are giving way to an atomising individualism. But Anna's citation also identifies literature—a discourse in which you can 'say everything'—as independent from reference, truth, and monological interpretation. This openness to alternative significations differs from ideological manipulations of meaning: in the example of 'Security' in *There but for the*, the instability or equivocation in the word's meaning is politically determined, while literary language's potential for unforeseen meanings is an effect of the radical contingency of signification. In this way, Smith imagines literature as a discourse in which alternatives—whether these are different significations, or different ways of being with others—are always possible.

Reviews

Smith's novels mobilise this capacity of the literary against a set of cultural values which have been institutionalised as public opinion, but which she portrays as highly marketised. In this sense, her critique of public literary discourse is consonant with Habermas's assertion that the public sphere, which should be devoted to debate, has become privatised as a mass culture of consumption and enjoyment. We can see this concern at work in Smith's satire of reviews and reviewers in *The Accidental* and *Hotel*

World, and in the gimlet eye she casts over public or demotic forms of literary engagement such as book clubs.

The genre of the review suffers a ruthless parody in *Hotel World*. The novel is set in a branch of the fictional Global Hotel chain and encompasses the experiences of various workers and guests (invited and uninvited) who pass through it. One chapter is focalised through the character of Penny, who is tasked with producing a write up of the hotel. It isn't immediately clear if she is a reviewer or a PR copywriter: she seems unfamiliar with the hotel, and employs the 'we' customarily used by periodicals in reviews, but on the other hand she writes such a hyperbolic text that it comes off as a press release merely disguised as a review.[62] In the context of Habermas's critique — which, as we shall see, also gives an account of the commodification of literary debate — this lack of clarity over Penny's job is not accidental. The text she produces satirises the contemporary proximity of reviews to advertising copy.

The review's irony lies in the fact that it is a whole-hearted endorsement of the most objectionable aspect of the Global Hotel chain: its way of taking homogeneousness, globalisation and commodification to the extreme. As Penny remarks: 'It doesn't matter where you are in the world if you're anywhere near a Global Hotel. You could be, literally, anywhere. You could even be home.'[63] This sentence is both breathlessly enthusiastic (due to its repetitive and paratactic structure) and enervated by a kind of mindlessness; the repetition of phrases like '[i]t doesn't matter', 'anywhere' and 'anywhere' suggests that no importance is attached to specificity; in fact, nothing matters at all. This particular combination of enthusiasm and listlessness, which swirls into a kind of orgiastic consumer abandon by the close of the review, is a paradigmatic consumer affect, capturing the dialectic between desire for/enjoyment of the commodity and a dissatisfaction which drives the need for more consumption.

Meanwhile, the labour side of the capitalist equation is effaced. Penny's remark that '[y]ou could even be at home' frames the hotel's placelessness in terms of the spheres of domestic versus productive labour. Indeed, a hotel conflates these two

---

[62] Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 180.

[63] Ibid.

spheres, since it can only be maintained as a quasi-domestic environment for some by the (ideally) unseen work undertaken by others. The hotel is also an indeterminate space for workers like Penny and her readers, people whose leisure time becomes confused with their labour time on work trips. The carelessness invoked in Penny's review about where you are and what you are doing also speaks to this muddling of the boundary between work and leisure: Penny describes the Global Hotel as being '[f]or work, for relaxation, for the ideal get-away-from-it-all'.[64] This accords with Ngai's suggestion that post-Fordist labour exhibits 'a cross-coupling of play and work—one marked by an increasing extraction of surplus value through affect and subjectivity'.[65] Whereas Marx and then Adorno described how capitalism requires workers to use their "free" time to reproduce their labour power, contemporary workers are increasingly encouraged to deploy aspects of themselves formerly understood to be personal resources as capacities for labour.

Penny's review collapses the distinction between leisure and labour in order to portray an orgasmic experience of the commodity. The phrase 'the ideal get-away-from-it-all' represents the consumer ideal: to absent yourself from the real relations of production by being alone with the commodity or in the consumer experience. The review goes on:

> **Why stay there?**
> Because you won't be able to help it! New York, Brussels, Leeds, wherever, we practically guarantee you that if you're in a Global the temptation will be to spend your whole holiday (like we did) in your room, revelling in the lush, plush settings they do so well. You'll be so perfectly at home in whatever armchair you've happened to fall into that you'll find it hard to get out of the chair, never mind the room.[66]

This vaguely menacing picture of the individual withdrawing into the privacy of their room, isolated from the community or public, subdued to the point of not being able to rise from their chair, is the penultimate beat before Penny's ill-controlled tone finally pitches over: 'Why not let yourself get utterly oblivious? […] A transcendent

---

[64] Smith, *Hotel World*, p. 180.

[65] Ngai, p. 188.

[66] Smith, *Hotel World*, p., 180.

time is ready and waiting to be had by all.'[67] Penny's hyperbolic description of the obliterating experience of consumerism and globalisation offered by the hotel suggests that the language of reviewing has become completely coextensive with the language of the culture industry and advertising.

This situation, which Habermas describes and which we also find skewered in *The Accidental*, entails that—while before, you only paid for a book, and enjoyed a lively culture of public debate for free—both rational-critical debate and reviewing are now paid for. It has to be admitted at this point that Habermas has been criticised for idealising eighteenth century public debate and exaggerating the degradation of the post-industrial public sphere.[68] His line of argument also seems to ignore that the organs of eighteenth-century debate, from coffee shops to the *Spectator*, were commodities or services. However, his point is that commentary is explicitly a commodity now; it is 'administered' in a way it previously was not:

> Discussion, now a 'business,' becomes formalized; the presentation of positions and counterpositions is bound to certain prearranged rules of the game; consensus about the subject matter is made largely superfluous by that concerning form. What can be posed as a problem is defined as a question of etiquette; conflicts, once fought out in public polemics, are demoted to the level of personal incompatibilities.[69]

This is phenomenon is observable in the renewed popularity of literary events. Staged public debates about literature increasingly form part of the contemporary '[e]xperience [e]conomy', which Joseph Pine and James Gilmore describe as a response to the threat of the collapse of the exchange values of goods.[70] While the unit price of trade paperbacks in particular has been subject to downward pressure from Amazon and ebooks in recent decades, the value of experience is not so easily

---

[67] Ibid.

[68] Nicholas Garnham, 'The Media and the Public Sphere', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 359-76 (pp. 359-60).

[69] Habermas, p. 164.

[70] B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), p. 15.

deflated.[71] Literary events can therefore help to replace publishers' lost earnings, and have proliferated in recent decades: the UK has seen 'extraordinary growth' in this area since the nineties and now has at least 350 literary festivals a year.[72] Literary discussion is now indeed big business, with debate commodified as a valuable replacement for book sales. If we agree with Habermas, this means that we are increasingly paying to consume pre- and re- formulated positions and arguments, rather than actually engaging our critical faculties.

Several features of Habermas's critique of the way debate has become pre-codified can be seen in Smith's fictional reviews of Eve Smart's *Genuine Article* books in *The Accidental*. Eve is a successful author on holiday with her family in Norfolk, and she has plans to write another instalment in her series while there. Dogged by a sense that there is something distasteful or insincere about her books, she contracts a serious case of writers' block. The *Genuine Article* series imagines how the lives of real people who died during the Second World War would have turned out had they lived. For the most part, the series has been an absolute hit, and (showing a keen ear for the rhetoric of newspaper reviewing), Smith gives a taste of some of the books' rapturous reviews: '"Ingenious and moving" (Times). "A book which makes the metaphysical as much part of the everyday as a teacup on a saucer on a scullery table in the year 1957" (Telegraph). "Brilliant. Profoundly atoning. A deeply assuaging read" (Guardian).'[73] Like Penny's review of the Global Hotel, these responses portray the press merely confirming and celebrating some of the worst aspects of consumerism; even Eve knows that her books play into 'the distasteful rise in public interest in all things Nazi and WWII generally over the past few years', profiteering from the cheap pathos evoked by the Second World War and the Holocaust while upsetting the 'dead people's relations', whose consent she apparently has not sought.[74] The fictional

---

[71] John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), p. 369.

[72] Alex Clark, 'Fair Play: Can Literary Festivals Pay their Way?', *Guardian*, 28 May 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/28/can-literary-festivals-pay-their-way> [accessed 20 February 2020].

[73] Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 82.

[74] Ibid., p. 84 [emphasis removed].

reviewers, however, eschew their role in rational-critical debate by buying into this pathos.

On the other hand, giving credence to Habermas's assertion that the available positions in literary debate are increasingly pre-programmed, the *Independent*'s fictional write up anticipates and rebuts the responses of the *Times*, *Telegraph* and *Guardian* reviewers:

> 'When will writers and readers finally stop hanging around mendacious glorified stories of a war which may as well by now have happened planets away from this one? Smart's Genuine Articles are a prime example of our shameful attraction to anything that lets us feel both fake-guilty and morally justified. No more of this murky self-indulgence. We need stories about now, not more peddled old nonsense about then' (Independent).[75]

While this review punctures the enthusiasm of the others and seems to provide a necessary corrective to them, it also seems to be lampooning the same 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that Felski takes aim at.[76] Whereas other reviewers found the book 'moving' and 'deeply assuaging', taking its deployment of affect at face value, the correspondent from the *Independent* reads the *Genuine Article* books against the grain: they manipulate the reader's moral and emotional feelings. The reviewer's insistence on illusion and untruth—'mendacious', 'fake-guilty', 'nonsense'—similarly draws on the rhetoric of ideology critique. The fact that likely objections to the imaginary *Genuine Articles* series can be anticipated and parodied in this way suggests that even critique has become routine. Another way to express this would be to repeat what is now a truism, that the twentieth century saw 'the appropriation of critique by the market'.[77] The *Independent* reviewer's response is just as programmatic as the others; it is pre-coded by the available discursive positions within Habermas's sphere of administered debate.

---

[75] Ibid, p. 82.

[76] Felski, p. 1.

[77] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2 (2010) [n.p.].

Smith's parodies of reviews draw on a widespread suspicion about the genre's sincerity or rigour, suggesting that reviewers' evaluations are determined less by the actual content of novels than by the homogeneity of the market, which flattens out debate. As C.J. van Rees observes, the production of literary and commercial value is central to the reviewer's role: 'a critic not only produces belief in the properties and quality he has assigned to the cultural products he is concerned with; at the same time he aims at producing belief in his own value, that is his status as connoisseur, his ability to assess the properties and quality he deems peculiar to a work'.[78] The reviewer not only produces belief in the value of literary works, but in their own prestige. While the review would ideally participate in what Habermas calls rational-critical debate, Rees contends that it is actually a key mechanism for the circulation of various kinds of capital. *The Accidental* and *Hotel World* mark this shortfall, this absence of nuanced debate in public criticism, by parodying the shortcomings of contemporary reviewing.

Book groups

The Accidental also thematises the ways in which the values of the market permeate other forms of public literary discourse, featuring a comedic passage about Eve's book group. This mini literary institution is a microcosm of the British reading public, whose tastes are often characterised as bourgeois and middlebrow. A key source for this stereotype has often been the now-disputed critical narrative of a British postwar return to conservative literary values in which, as Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay put it, '[t]inkerings with realism propped up a creaking liberalism'.[79] The English middle classes, it is often said, prefer fiction in which the liberal humanist discourses of individualism and Enlightenment rationality are incarnated in a realist narrative discourse, thickly textured with fully fleshed-out characters and sturdy plots. This narrative also, of course, interacts with the cultural conversations outlined

---

[78] C.J. van Rees, 'How Reviewers Reach Consensus on the Value of Literary Works', *Poetics* 16 (1987), 275-94 (p. 284).

[79] Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay, 'Introduction: British Fiction after Modernism', in *British Fiction: The Novel at Mid-Century*, ed. by Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1-16 (p. 1).

earlier in the chapter concerning the apparently elitist difficulty of modernism. As a result, realism has often been framed as a popular aesthetic, both in the sense of being aligned with the market and in that it is thought to be more accessible.

Stonebridge and MacKay's book, along with the work of numerous other scholars such as Andrzej Gąsiorek and Jed Esty, has sought to complicate this picture of twentieth-century British literary values.[80] However, Smith's description of Eve's book group suggests that a certain genteel cultural conservatism is still the British reading public's dominant tone:

> Eve was a member of a very nice book group in Islington, six or seven women and one rather beleaguered man, who met in each other's houses—one of the pleasures of it was seeing the insides of a whole range of other people's houses. Over the last six months the book group had enjoyed two doorstop historical novels—both Victorian, mostly about sex—by contemporary novelists, last year's Booker winner about the man in the boat with the animals, a Forster novel, the big multicultural bestseller which most people in the group got only halfway through, and a very nice novel about Southwold. Michael disapproved of the book group. He thought it bourgeois beyond belief.[81]

The passage is littered with details which would seem to bear out Michael's verdict that the group is indeed a little bit bourgeois, although—as with the *Independent* review of Eve's book—the presence of this opinion within the text cautions us to think twice before judging the characters as if from a superior position.

One such detail is the tone of Eve's free indirect discourse: the diction is humorously anodyne (the one man is 'rather beleaguered') and often reliant on the discourse of taste—which, as Pierre Bourdieu argues, is a notoriously middle- and upper-class discourse.[82] This notably weak form of appreciation—a matter of merely liking or not, preferring or not—is reflected in Eve's intensifiers, 'very' and 'rather',

---

[80] Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[81] Smith, *The Accidental*, pp. 178-79.

[82] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 3.

which paradoxically convey a sense of triviality. As Ngai has argued, weaker forms of appreciation are a feature of the historical transition from artwork to commodity, as the pre-industrial aesthetic language of the beautiful and sublime gives way to far less powerful consumer affects.[83] Accordingly, the prevalence of a discourse of taste in Eve's reflections on her book club betrays an anxiety in *The Accidental* about the market logic which dictates the public's reading habits.

By referring to real novels that the book group has read, Smith also provides knowing readers with a highly specific set of cultural coordinates for understanding the group's taste. The particular choices made by the book group are often recognisable publishing phenomena from the nineties and 2000s. The Victorian novels about sex, for example, might refer to the trend kicked off by Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and Michael Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), both of which attained the kind of popular success that results in a BBC adaptation. As I discuss in the next chapter, the Booker is notorious for espousing 'middlebrow' values such as 'readability'; the winner referred to here, *The Life of Pi*, was a huge hit with the general public and has sold over three million copies in the UK (albeit aided by a film adaptation).[84] It is therefore implied that the book group's choices are highly dependent on the market.

In addition to conforming with the literary values of the market, the book group also seems to exhibit certain aesthetic preferences which carry a political implication. It seems likely that the Southwold book is Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Bookshop*, which features the town 'thinly disguised as "Hardborough"'.[85] The novel's apparently sleepy setting and evocation of bookselling as an idyllic bourgeois

---

[83] Ngai, p. 18.

[84] Meredith Jaffe, 'Middlebrow? What's So Shameful about Writing a Book and Hoping it Sells?', *Guardian*, 5 November 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/05/middlebrow-whats-so-shameful-about-writing-a-book-and-hoping-it-sells-well> [accessed 10 February 2020]; Catherine Scott, 'Oscars 2013: Life of Pi—A Book in Numbers', 25 February 2013 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9892360/Oscars-2013-Life-of-Pi-a-book-in-numbers.html> [accessed 10 February 2020].

[85] Christina Hardyment, 'The Bookshop by Penelope Fitzgerald', *Times*, 21 July 2018 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/review-the-bookshop-by-penelope-fitzgerald-w5tvf5w22> [accessed 10 February 2020].

occupation would seem to marry well with the image of a genteel, lyrical realist novel conjured by Eve's descriptor, 'very nice'. However, Smith once again seems to be having some fun with Eve: her (or the group's) assessment of the novel almost deliberately misses, in a typically middlebrow way, what is not 'nice' about *The Bookshop*, which Peter Wolfe has described as 'follow[ing] […] the socially acidic route blazed by the mid-1950s novels of Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Braine, and David Storey'.[86] Fitzgerald's novel is scathing about the provincialism and cruelty of Hardborough's inhabitants, foibles which appear to be linked to their unadventurous taste in books. The inclusion of Forster in the list similarly implies an anodyne appropriation of an author whose novels portray violence, sexual assault, and racism, and for whom, as Nicholas Royle argues, even 'heterosexual eroticism […] is always already queer'.[87] Both examples slyly introduce the notion that the book group and the British reading public which it is a synecdoche for are composed of unsophisticated middlebrow readers who are prone to taking novels literally, glossing over ironic tones and secondary meanings.

The 'big multicultural bestseller', meanwhile, is probably supposed to put us in mind of the then-recent publications *White Teeth* (2000) and *Brick Lane* (2003). Both the difficulty that the book group had with this novel and the designation Eve gives it hint at a provincialism which may well extend to form as well as content. I am thinking here of Mark McGurl's identification of modernist poetics with the politics of postcolonialism and race in 'high cultural pluralism'.[88] It seems possible, if not obvious, that the implication is not only that the book group struggled with the racial politics of the 'multicultural bestseller', but that the novel's cosmopolitanism struck them as aesthetically or interpretively difficult. In concert with Eve's remarks about the other books, this suggests that the book group privileges what are often thought of as middlebrow literary values such as entertainment and readability, and points

---

[86] Peter Wolfe, *Understanding Penelope Fitzgerald* (Columbia: South Caroline University Press, 2004), p. 93.

[87] Nicholas Royle, *E.M. Forster* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999), p. 40.

[88] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 32.

towards a predominantly white, middle-class, vaguely anti-intellectual and mildly conservative milieu.

If Smith's caricature seems slightly unfair, it is perhaps worth remembering that public criticism often articulates its values in explicitly liberal-humanist and culturally conservative terms. James Ley has defended this strain of criticism—most famously embodied in the twenty-first century in the work of James Wood—as a common-sense, democratic attitude which accords with the way ordinary readers approach fiction:

> [Wood] stands in a long line of critics who have conceived of the importance of literature in humanistic terms. That fiction is a mimetic art that takes as its primary subject matter the experiences of recognizably human characters (and even when its characters are not human they tend to be anthropomorphized) becomes the justification for the emphasis his criticism places on characterization and the depiction of consciousness.[89]

These commitments also allow Wood to maintain an interest in evaluation. As Ley observes, '[f]or the public critic […] the issue of value remains alive and, in an important sense, unavoidable', and the criteria of recognisability or realism furnishes Wood with a way of arbitrating this question: if a novel accords with one's sense of the real, then it has value.[90] However, Wood's critics argue that 'he has an arbitrary and limiting preference for fiction that endorses his sense of what he calls "the real"'.[91] As far as Wood's oeuvre can be taken as illustrative of some of public criticism's core values, Ley's description suggests a preference for realism as an accessible, evaluable and politically amenable aesthetic.

The next section of this chapter examines how Smith and Cusk contest not only the key values of public criticism outlined here, but the narrow and undemocratic conception of the public or demotic which animates them. My readings show how, despite her critique of public criticism, Smith's novels remain committed to a broad

---

[89] James Ley, *The Critic in the Modern World: Public Criticism from Samuel Johnson to James Wood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 186.

[90] Ibid., p. 186.

[91] Ibid., p. 172.

public engagement with literature, invoking new forms of reading public through their fictional address. It was perhaps this combination of innovative aesthetics with a certain level of accessibility for the general reader which led reviewer Theo Tait to label *There but for the* 'tepidly experimental', but my readings identify a powerful political and ethical claim in Smith's negotiations between popular values and experimental form.[92] Cusk, meanwhile, challenges public criticism's proprieties around privacy and literature.

Democracy

Before I begin on these readings, though, I want to make clear what kinds of arguments about fiction and democracy I am *not* interested in making. As I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, scholarship on Smith often describes her commitment to imagining alternative forms of community. Frequently centring on the multiple-narrator structures of novels like *Hotel World* and *There but for the*, these critical accounts of Smith's formal politics implicitly draw on an ethics of difference. According to many critics, Smith's novels are committed to imagining politically viable and ethically sound ways for people to live and act together as a community without requiring the erasure of difference characteristic of ethnically-, nationally- or religiously- constituted social bodies.

This argument accords with a general shift identified by Berthold Schoene towards the 'cosmopolitan novel', which typically portrays an emergent social body that is not held together by shared ethnic or national roots, but is fragile and contingent in its constitution.[93] These novels therefore begin from the sense that, as Peter Boxall puts it, 'the globalisation of capital and the deconstruction of the myths of cultural origin' seem to have 'rendered the world fluid, contingent, available for remodelling and reconstruction'.[94] However, Philip Tew, quoting E. San Juan Jr., has warned against recapitulating the dematerialising logic of global capital in articulations of modernity's emancipatory potential: 'Hybridity, heterogeneous and

---

[92] Theo Tait, 'The Absolute End', *London Review of Books*, 26 January 2012

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n02/theo-tait/the-absolute-end> [accessed 10 February 2020].

[93] Berthold Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 11.

[94] Boxall, p. 171.

discrepant lifestyles, local knowledges, cyborgs, borderland scripts—such slogans tend to obfuscate the power of the transnational ideology and practice of consumerism and its dehumanising effects.'[95] Because of Smith's utopian impulses, scholarship on her work is prone to such 'obfuscat[ion]', often overlooking the very real material obstacles preventing the realisation of utopian ideals. This is particularly apparent in criticism about community and democracy in Smith's work.

For example, Emma E. Smith argues that *Hotel World* is an example of 'the dispersal of narrative authority via strategies broadly labeled "multiple narration"'.[96] Echoing Schoene's description of the cosmopolitan novel, she argues that *Hotel World* imagines alternatives to homogenous, coherent communities: a 'communal "we" emerges by the juxtaposition and/or interweaving of multiple, differentiated voices and perspectives'.[97] The novel has 'a complex communal narrative structure that does not simply share or pluralize narrative authority but actively redistributes it, producing a "democracy of voice"'.[98] The novel's formal arrangement is taken to be coextensive with a reordering of the demos. This approach to form relies on either an equivalence or an analogy between aesthetic form and social order: 'comment upon the *social* structures of the hotel world is played out through the markedly innovative *narrative* structures of its textual world'.[99] This argument requires either that the redistribution of narrative authority *is* the material redistribution of power, or that it provides a model which can be transposed to social relations. Neither argument is premised on an account of the actual relationship between literature and politics. As a result, the central thesis of the article mirrors the function of ideology as described by Fredric Jameson: 'the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal

---

[95] San Juan, Jr., qtd. in Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum), p. 163.

[96] Smith, 'A Democracy of Voice', p. 83.

[97] Ibid., p. 84.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid., p. 82.

"solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions'.[100] Likewise, Emma Smith seems to understand *Hotel World*'s political project to be almost automatically effected though the work of literary form, with the wider question of literature's relationship to politics elided and the difficulty of real 'social contradictions' seriously minimised.

In contrast to Emma Smith's reliance on an analogy between form and politics, Jonathan Culler argues that 'Derrida's thinking of literature and democracy goes beyond analogy'.[101] For Derrida, the very fictionality of literature is itself political, ensuring certain kinds of freedom as well as responsibility. This is because any given instantiation of democracy—for example, the forms of governmental democracy observable in the world—can only partially embody the dream of the 'democracy to come'.[102] This phrase registers for Derrida the futural structure of the idea of democracy: its orientation towards people, situations, orders, and events which are as yet unknown. The democracy to come entails an openness and an ethical responsibility towards any indeterminate other. Crucially, imagining this other can only take place within the remit of fiction as the discourse where one can 'say anything', where reference, truth-status and teleology are suspended.[103] As a result, when we imagine the other to whom we are responsible in the democracy to come—an other who is not real, present, or known—we are thinking of a fictional other. As such, democracy exhibits a 'dependency' on the capacity to imagine fictively.[104] Both literature and democracy, then, are unthinkable without fiction.

Derrida's concept of the secret offers another, related way of understanding the relationship between literature and democracy. As I outlined in my introduction, the secret is an effect generated when a text gives something to be read or interpreted which cannot ultimately be known. Culler writes that the secret's 'unknowability depends on the superficiality of the literary phenomenon, as a surface without depth';

---

[100] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 79.

[101] Jonathan Culler, '"The Most Interesting Thing in the World"', *Diacritics*, 38 (2009), 7–16 (p. 15).

[102] Ibid., p. 9.

[103] Ibid, p. 8.

[104] Ibid., p. 15.

it is an 'exemplary secret without secret that assures the possibility of literature'.[105] Fiction's freedom from reference and verification, the lack of a truth to be discovered, is what structures this 'secret without secret'. A detective story, for example, might generate a mystery which seems to promise a solution, but this promise is only an effect of narrative.

The conception of literature as a 'secret without secret' entails that truth or meaning exists only on the "surface" of the text, and is no more or less available to one particular reader than to any other. As I recounted in my introduction, Anne-Lise François has argued that 'the open secret continues to resonate with the religious and aesthetic concepts of grace and to evoke the related trope of the "gift" of natural revelation as opposed to the work of reason'.[106] This givenness of the open secret, François argues, resonates with Jacques Rancière's theory—described at greater length in chapter one—of 'the "equality" of access of the printed page'.[107] The secret therefore offers a way of understanding Smith's democratic aesthetics.

The Accidental, *There but for the* and *Outline* stage literature's structure of open secrecy most obviously in their treatments of character, which is particularly striking given Wood's emphasis on 'recognizably human characters': character is the literary category which most clearly represents public criticism's liberal humanist values. In addition, the discourse of individualism to which character is so closely tied also has a dialectical relationship with the public: as we have seen Vermeulen observe, the novel has historically been understood to play a role in distributing the categories of the individual and the social. Similarly, Habermas argues that early modern literature helped to develop ways of articulating the private self in the public sphere: 'the literary precursor of the public sphere', he argues, 'provided the training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself—a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness'.[108]

---

[105] Ibid., p. 13.

[106] Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 12.

[107] Ibid., p. 7.

[108] Habermas, p. 29.

Smith and Cusk, however, turn the interiority of character inside-out, showing that the appearance of depth or secrecy is generated through a fiction.

As several critics have already noted, and as I discussed in the previous chapter, in both *The Accidental* and *There but for the* it is the appearance of a stranger, a character who presents an interpretive difficulty, which occasions a rethinking of the public or community. Amber and Miles confront the households they enter with a radical alterity that demands new and different ways of relating to others. Patrick O'Donnell argues that Amber's arrival in *The Accidental* is an example of the 'unforeseen events' in Smith's work which cause 'a *sudden* overturning that signals […] an opening onto a recognition of others as members of a community founded on contingency'.[109] Amber thus represents the Derridean other to whom the demos has to remain open.

Moreover, Smith's two stranger novels stage the fictionality of character as an exemplary form of secrecy. In these texts, character illustrates something about the very structure of fiction as a kind of secrecy. As Sara Ahmed has remarked, there is a 'difficulty of separating the meaning of character from the meaning of fiction', such that '[t]he fictional character might help us to reveal the fiction of character'.[110] To understand someone—whether they are real or in a novel—as having a character is to attribute consistency to their behaviour and identity: in other words, to have a narrative about them. There is therefore a kind of reversibility between the concepts of fiction and character: 'To fiction (we may want to restore the verb here) is to give shape and form; fiction could be understood as giving character, whether or not that character is given an individual form.'[111] This is something which Smith's novels often recognise; in *There but for the* and *The Accidental*, character becomes an exemplary type of fiction.

Each of the novels begins with a moment of 'fictive institution', both instituting itself as fiction and showing the fictionality of origins. This is, according to Culler, a power peculiar to literary texts: 'in literary reading we experience not just the event

---

[109] O'Donnell, p. 90.

[110] Sara Ahmed, 'Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character', *New Literary History*, 42 (2011), 231–53 (p. 231).

[111] Ibid., p. 232.

itself but its happening as linguistic event, in a show of linguistic power'.[112] Since its content or narrative is not real, literature has to bring itself into being, instituting its own scene or context; Culler cites the example of *Moby Dick*'s opening line, 'Call me Ishmael'.[113] *The Accidental* introduces Amber—whose origin and identity remain mysterious throughout the novel—in a way which similarly marks the beginning of the novel as the institution of a voice, a character, and a fiction.

The novel opens with Amber's voice as she describes her conception: 'My mother began me one evening in 1968 on a table in the café of the town's only cinema.'[114] By setting its first scene at the pictures, the novel announces its preoccupation with beginnings and their fictionality. The opening's teasing promise to account for Amber's origins is counterposed by the self-conscious literariness of her voice: 'Hello. | I am Alhambra, named for the place of my conception. Believe me. Everything is meant. | From my mother: grace under pressure; the uses of mystery; how to get what I want. From my father: how to disappear, how not to exist.'[115] Here, Amber's '[h]ello' addresses the reader as a voice speaking to them from the non-place of fiction, instituting itself in the act of interpellating the reader. The notion of a non-existent father—recalling Stephen Dedalus' description of '[p]aternity' as a 'legal fiction'—likewise suggests that Amber came from nowhere, calling herself up into being.[116] Shifting between different fictional incarnations throughout the novel, Amber is not supposed to feel like a real or recognisable person, emphasising the lack of reality or reference in the convention of character.

This is not to say that the novel wants to expose fiction as an empty illusion, or character as a meaningless construct; on the contrary, the effect of Amber's fictionality is to generate an endless complication of the question of truth and belief. This is, perhaps, what she means when she says that from her mother she learned 'the uses of mystery'. Like Derrida's secret, Amber can never be unravelled. Moreover, her

---

[112] Culler, p. 14.

[113] Ibid., p. 14.

[114] Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 1.

[115] Ibid, p. 3.

[116] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 199.

fabrications, misdirections and mysteries are powerful in their effects. Amber's exhortation '[b]elieve me' establishes a dynamic which repeats throughout the novel: the addressee is asked to buy into the fiction, suspend their disbelief, rather than being convinced of its literal truth. For example, having told Eve that she lives the way she does because she once killed a child in a road accident, Amber later responds to Eve's question about the little girl: 'What child? […] What accident?'[117] However, having discovered that Amber is a "liar", Eve begins to emulate her behaviour at the end of the novel.[118] This shows how Amber's interventions in the lives of the Smart family depend not on the truth of what she says, but on her interlocutors' willingness to reassess their own understandings of truth and fiction.

The way Miles functions as a character in *There but for the* brings about a similar intractable mystery, and the novel's opening pages also foreground the same questions of origin and institution as *The Accidental*'s. For example, Miles is introduced at the start of the novel in a kind of dream-sequence:

> The fact is, imagine a man sitting on an exercise bike in a spare room. He's a pretty ordinary man except that across his eyes and also across his mouth it looks like he's wearing letterbox flaps. Look closer and his eyes and mouth are both separately covered by little grey rectangles. They're like the censorship strips that newspapers and magazines would put across people's eyes in the old days before they could digitally fuzz up or pixellate a face to block the identity of the person whose face it is.[119]

In the first sentence, the reader is asked to 'imagine' what is being represented. As such, the novel stages the institution of its own fiction. It marks the fictionality of its own narrative discourse and the inciting act of bringing a story into being. The contradiction between fact and imagination is also marked by a grammatical discontinuity, the anacoluthia which first tells us in the indicative that we are going to hear a 'fact', before the sentence switches to an imperative, 'imagine'. The groundlessness of the fiction is therefore mirrored by the failure of the second clause

---

[117] Ibid., p. 201.

[118] Ibid., p. 297.

[119] Smith, *There but for the*, np.

of the sentence to follow on logically from the first. Instantly gainsaying the discourse of 'fact' by asking the reader to 'imagine', the first line of *There but for the* resembles the way *The Accidental* stages its own beginning as a strange moment of institution in which the fictional world is called up out of nothing.

These surreal opening lines fittingly bind together privacy, censorship and identity through a fictional conceit that can only work on the surface of the text: it does not seem to be an allegory or metaphor for another kind of scene that is "really" happening in the novel. The substance of the conceit, moreover, establishes the novel's ongoing concern with the relationship between privacy, publicity, interiority, character and fictionality. Miles—as a character who remains largely absent from the narrative except in second- and third-hand accounts—exemplifies the structure of the secret by withdrawing from view, driving both the reader and other characters to try to solve the mystery of his behaviour. Indeed, as Edmund Gordon identifies in his review of the novel, Miles's action in sealing himself off in Eric and Genevieve's house is centrally concerned with the public/private binary; Gordon speaks of 'his commitment to solitude and privacy, contrasted with his immediate reception as a public figure, written about in newspapers, blogged about, the subject of a play'.[120] Gordon reads Miles's actions as an assertion of a radical kind of privacy: not only privacy from view, but the privacy of not being known or understood as a "character".

We can see the effect of the secret at work in the ways in which the journalism, blogging and creative writing generated around Miles are all attempts to read his behaviour and gain access to his point of view. These are things the novel denies the reader, telling Miles's story only from the outside perspectives of Anna, Mark, May and Brooke and rendering the central character a narrative 'cipher'.[121] As Ben Davies has argued, Miles 'presences' himself 'as a quasi-absent "presence"', yet '[his] dwelling clearly provokes and stimulates those who come to gather outside the bedroom window, even if the latter somewhat co-opt him for their individual causes, projecting onto him a variety of desires and needs; "Miles" and "Milo" are ultimately

---

[120] Gordon.

[121] Charles McGrath, 'After Hiding, He Becomes a Celebrity', *New York Times*, 18 October 2011 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/19/books/there-but-for-the-by-ali-smith-review.html> [accessed 4 February 2020].

empty signifiers'.[122] Smith therefore portrays a contemporary British public that cannot tolerate the unresolvable Derridean secret, but demands to know it, demands that there *be* a secret to be known. In fact, Miles' apparent presentation of a secret *causes* his public to coalesce, though not everyone in it responds to his provocation in the same way. Those intent on reading a message into Miles' actions (or projecting one onto them) camp outside the house with 'banners that say Milo for Palestine and Milo For Israel's Endangered Children and Milo for Peace and Not In Milo's Name and Milo For Troops Out Of Afghanistan'.[123] On the other hand, Miles manages to call up a different kind of public in the form of Anna, Mark, and Joe, strangers who join forces to fetch May—Miles' ex-girlfriend's mother—from the hospital and arrange for her care.[124]

Gordon's review almost falls into the same trap as the people with the banners, quoting with slight disappointment a passage in which the key to understanding Miles's actions fails to emerge:

> 'Brooke looks down at the water then up at the sky, which is blue with clouds today. Then, with the historic river flowing at her back, Brooke sits on the little bit of wall below the railing. She unfolds the piece of paper in her hands and she reads again the story written on it.'
>
> But turning over to read Miles's story for ourselves, we find only a blank page. This refusal to follow the pattern, to complete the sequence, leaves the reader with a slight sense of deflation; but it is an appropriate ending to a book that prompts us to consider, from its title onwards, what has been left out.[125]

While struggling with this 'sense of deflation', as if the novel has somehow failed its reader, Gordon is right to ultimately suggest that the point is that we do not find anything out.

---

[122] Ben Davies, 'The Complexities of Dwelling in Ali Smith's *There but for the*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58 (2017), 509-520 (pp. 511, 512).

[123] Smith, *There but for the*, p. 315.

[124] Ibid., p. 268.

[125] Gordon.

The blank page is easily read as an empty signifier, to use Davies's language: a signifier which is missing its signified. However, what it ultimately suggests is that there is no secret or missing signified, only the surface or givenness of the signifier. In this way, it seems to accord with Derrida's description of the secret:

> *There is something secret.* But it does not conceal itself. Heterogeneous to the hidden, to the obscure, to the nocturnal, to the invisible, to what can be dissimulated and indeed to what is nonmanifest in general, it cannot be unveiled. It remains inviolable even when one thinks one has revealed it. Not that it hides itself forever in an indecipherable crypt or behind an absolute veil. It simply exceeds the play of veiling/unveiling, dissimulation/revelation, night/day, forgetting/anamnesis, earth/heaven, etc.[126]

The blank page is a simultaneous suggestion and withdrawal of the possibility of a hidden but discoverable truth. There is something democratic about this figure of the blank page: the answer it teases us with but fails to offer does not exist, and therefore cannot be disclosed selectively according to who is an initiated reader or not. In its sheer nonexistence, the secret is an open book, blankly presented to anyone and everyone.

These examples show how *The Accidental* and *There but for the* explicitly offer the reader 'a secret without secret'. While Derrida argues that literature in general is structured by the secret, Smith's fictions put this open secrecy to work in very specific ways. It will be useful to return to John Carey's critique of modernism in order to understand what is markedly democratic about Smith's strategy here. Carey argues that 'modernism', 'poststructuralism', 'deconstruction' and 'theory' are all 'too difficult for [the general public] to understand'. This implies a depth model of reading. There is a determinate meaning which can be grasped or not: the educated will get it and the masses will not. In *The Accidental* and *There but for the*, however, there is only the appearance or structure of the secret; Amber and Miles are fictional, and as such there is no possibility of getting to the bottom of the mysteries they offer. There is no question of understanding the "correct" meaning, which is acknowledged not to exist.

---

[126] Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering"', trans. by David Wood, in *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 3-31 (p. 26).

In this way, Smith's novels refuse the depth-reading model which excludes some readers by requiring particular hermeneutic techniques.

Moreover, while Carey's argument is only supposed to critique the unequal distribution of educational capital, it also unavoidably shades into the question of intellectual capital. His position entails that only with the right learning can you tackle the 'difficulty' of modernist texts, and therefore that people's innate intelligence is of no consequence when it comes to reading a book. He therefore deprivileges what Rancière asserts as the fundamental tenet of democratic pedagogy: the assumption of 'the equality of intelligence'.[127] Everyone, Rancière argues, is already equally capable of learning and interpreting. Carey, on the other hand, assumes that people are incapable of understanding certain texts unless they have been taught how—quite an undervaluation of the intelligence and capabilities of the general reader, considering Carey's anti-elitist stance.

Smith's novels, on the other hand, show a democracy of address: they isolate the effects of the literary to the play of the surface of the writing, opening the text to all comers equally. Smith's novels make their fictionality an unavoidable feature of the reading experience, seeming to offer but ultimately refusing the possibility of a hidden secret to be uncovered; this, I argue, is what makes them properly democratic. By foregrounding the structure of the secret, Smith's novels address all readers as equally capable. If, as Warner argues, publics are constituted by particular modes of address, then the availability of Smith's texts, their insistence on a form of general address open to all readers, calls forth an egalitarian reading public. While public criticism's responses to contemporary fiction are currently structured by a set of discourses around readability, difficulty, accessibility and elitism—discourses which borrow the language of egalitarianism, but have the effect of narrowing the range of acceptable forms and styles—Smith's novels refute these values and instate an alternative model of democratic literary engagement.

Cusk's novel *Outline* similarly models the open-secret structure of fiction through its portrayal of character. While Smith's emphasis very much seems to be on

---

[127] Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 45.

interpellating, and opening her texts to, an egalitarian reading public, Cusk's concerns are slightly different. *Outline* was written in the wake of the *Aftermath* crisis, and its treatment of character seems calculated to intervene in the popular critical discourse surrounding interactions between biography and fiction. As I described earlier, Cusk's critics proceed from the assumption that they understand precisely the relation between her literary works and her private life. While their insistence on taking everything in her memoirs as straightforwardly true is a refusal of the literary as such, Cusk's change of direction from memoir to autobiographical fiction in the wake of *Aftermath* complicates the relationship between life and writing, maintaining a space of secrecy or fiction where the truth-value of a text's content is not at issue.

The events in *Outline* seem to draw on Cusk's own life, following an author named Faye on her trip to Athens to teach creative writing at a summer school. However, the novel's handling of character is a direct riposte to anyone who might seek to draw a direct line from the author's identity to that of the protagonist; in fact, it calls the very notion of identity into question. This is apparent from the very first, with the novel's title referring to its formal conceit—similar to that of *There but for the*—of structuring the narrative around the narrator's absence; like Miles, Faye has been described as a 'cipher'.[128] She is present only in outline, through her interactions with others. A character's outline, as '[t]he (real or apparent) line or lines defining the contour or bounds of a figure for a viewer', is the point of contact, the membrane, between private interiority and public visibility or availability.[129] Most characters in the novel voice a feeling that they have become simply their own outline: their senses of interiority and selfhood are missing, leaving only the façade or face they present to others, to public view: their character.

Outline's thinking of character is thus intimately linked to questions of publicity and privacy. By modelling character as a form of publicity with a withdrawn or absent interiority, *Outline* stages the structure of the secret. As with *The Accidental* and *There*

[128] Heidi Julavits, 'Rachel Cusk's "Outline"', New York Times, 7 January 2015 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/books/review/rachel-cusks-outline.html> [accessed 27 January 2020].

[129] 'Outline, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/133739> [accessed 10 February 2020].

but for the, character emerges as an exemplary form of fictionality, reflecting Hélène Cixous' observation 'that subjectivity *as* reality is continuously worked over by fiction'.[130] For example, Faye's neighbour on her flight to Athens describes suffering a loss of identity when he becomes emotionally estranged from his ex-wife: 'She could not be called upon to recognise him, and this was the most bewildering thing of all, for it made him feel absolutely unreal. It was with her, after all, that his identity had been forged: if she no longer recognised him, then who was he?'[131] Like the secret, character seems to offer something to be known—a shape, a form, a regularity or predictability—but there is no stable subjectivity underpinning this appearance. In this way, character exemplifies the structure of secrecy, and also confounds a certain model of public and private. While we typically understand someone's character not only as the public face they present to us, but as their private interiority, Cusk's novel suggests that this relationship is one of secrecy: one in which there is no stable and definitive "truth" grounding the fiction or appearance of character.

Faye's colleague Ryan similarly finds himself maintaining a fiction about his identity. During his time in America, Ryan suffers from what Boxall describes as the 'radical groundlessness' of identity, a recognition that national identity is based on 'myths of cultural origin'.[132] Ryan's 'feeling that no one really came from anywhere' induces profound anxiety, and as a result he finds himself reasserting the fiction of his national origin: 'His fellow students made much of his Irishness, he said: he found himself playing up to it, putting on the accent and all that, until he'd almost convinced himself that being Irish was an identity in itself. And after all, what other identity did he have?'[133] This recurrent lack of identity expressed in *Outline* is an evacuation of character's fullness, a deliberate staging of its fictionality.

Outline's articulation of character or selfhood as a kind of secrecy reaches its fullest expression towards the end of the novel, when Faye meets a fellow writer, Anne, with an anecdote which mirrors her own. Anne, who will be taking Faye's place

---

[130] Hélène Cixous, 'The Character of "Character"', *New Literary History*, 5 (1974), 383-402 (p. 383).

[131] Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 23.

[132] Boxall, p. 171.

[133] Cusk, pp. 42, p. 43.

as a teacher on the writing course, also 'happened to get talking to the man sitting next to her' on her own flight to Athens:

> He was describing, in other words, what she herself was not: in everything he said about himself, she found in her own nature a corresponding negative. This anti-description, for want of a better way of putting it, had made something clear to her by a reverse kind of exposition: while he talked she began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident a sense of who she now was.[134]

What is interesting to note here is the way the outline simultaneously suggests and refuses a surface/depth model for understanding character. Anna experiences herself as an interior absence, but the outline provides an exterior boundary, giving shape to her 'sense of who she now was'. Character and subjectivity are portrayed not as matters of private interiority, but of the boundary where the mysteriously withdrawn interior meets the social world. The replaceability between Faye and Anna exacerbates this sense of estrangement from interiority and identity.

In describing Anna's experience of herself, this passage subjectivises Derrida's insight that literature seems to offer depth, answers, meaning, a secret to be discovered, while lacking any dimension of truth other than the surface it offers. An outline is necessarily incomplete, but Anna's insight seems to be that there is no more to be given. The workings of Cusk's novel foreground the fact that even if there were more detail, then it would only produce more fiction, more surface, and not the ultimate truth about character or subjectivity. Faye has a similar insight when looking around her host's home: 'There was no confusion or secrecy: things were in their correct places and complete. […] I kept looking for something else, a clue, something rotting or breeding, a layer of mystery or chaos or shame, but I didn't find it.'[135] Like many of Smith's characters, Faye finds that depth-reading yields no answers; everything that is there to be seen is 'complete' and on the surface.

---

[134] Ibid., pp. 239-40.

[135] Ibid, p. 57.

This treatment of character is explicitly a response to accusations that Cusk's earlier books simply translated real life onto the page, without the complex fictionality of character mediating her representations of real people and events; Cusk herself has described *Outline* as a response to the public reception of *Aftermath*. Following that furore, she asserted the writer's prerogative to suspend the conventional public/private divide and use whatever she likes from real life—a prerogative which rests on literature's exemption from the proprieties that restrict other discourses. In an interview with Alexandra Schwartz, Cusk described the Miranda warning American police give their suspects on arrest as 'the only sort of culturally available place in which, when you say something, you render it public and everyone owns it'.[136] Cusk argues that the material of 'real life' should be subject to the same availability for literature:

> It's rare that [the public availability of what you say is] recognized. In our personal lives, when we tell someone something, we're really annoyed if they tell someone else. And, as a writer, that's a constant pitfall because people talk and that's the life that's in front of you and it may well end up in your work. That is apparently a form of, not theft exactly, but of using real life. When I write a book, I don't feel I should decide who's allowed to read it. It's put out into space, and speaking is like that.[137]

Recalling Derrida's remarks about literature's democratic authorisation to say everything, Cusk relates the public—defined here as a sphere in which language and stories are divorced from the context and control of the speaker—to literature's exemption from discourses of referentiality, authorship, authority and truth.

There is an irony to the fact that Cusk secures this freedom for herself by integrating autobiography with fiction; as she told Kellaway, in the run-up to writing *Outline* she had begun to find the idea of making things up in her books ridiculous:

---

[136] Alexandra Schwartz, 'I Don't Think that Character Exists Anymore: A Conversation with Rachel Cusk', *New Yorker*, 18 November 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/i-dont-think-character-exists-anymore-a-conversation-with-rachel-cusk> [accessed 10 February 2020].

[137] Ibid.

More and more—like Karl Ove Knausgård, whom [Cusk] cites—she felt fiction was 'fake and embarrassing. Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous. Yet my mode of autobiography had come to an end. I could not do it without being misunderstood and making people angry.'[138]

I do not want to use Cusk's account of her writing practice to suggest that she simply introduces a layer of fictionality to shield herself from criticisms about her use of her private life. Cusk's remarks about the Miranda warning in fact suggest that her understanding of the public/private divide is bound up in complicated ways with the relationship between fiction and real life. As Kevin Brazil has argued, what is at stake in *Outline* is precisely the tension between the two:

Far from collapsing life into fiction by assuming an inherently fictive autobiographical self or performative constitution of identity, Cusk's work, as in many interactions between life-writing and fiction after postmodernism, is haunted by the distance between life and literary form while pursuing their ever close[r] fusion.[139]

McGill similarly observes that autobiographical fiction is a way of complicating the public/private divide:

In the present confessional age, when people are publicly disseminating personal narratives all the time, privacy is at once rampantly defended, relinquished, and invaded. In this context, autobiographical fiction's currency emerges less from the revelations it makes and more from its strategic ambivalence: the simultaneous disguises and confessions it offers reproduce a broader social ambivalence about public disclosure and private life.[140]

It is *Outline*'s manipulation of the structure of the secret which most obviously contributes to its 'strategic ambivalence' over privacy and publicity. This ambivalence complicates the oversimplified model of the relationship between literature and the

---

[138] Kellaway.

[139] Kevin Brazil, 'Form and Fiction, 1989-2018', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980-2018*, ed. by Peter Boxall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 89-104 (p. 96)

[140] McGill, p. 15.

public sphere on which earlier criticisms of Cusk's work were premised. The assumption that *Aftermath* was simply a direct, unmediated portrayal of Cusk's real private life is at odds with her conception of literature as a medium where certain forms of responsibility should be suspended. *Outline* asserts this by showing that the structure of fiction or secrecy is such that the relation of a work's content to truth or reality is finally undecidable.

Cusk's use of memoir and autobiographical fiction exposes how this conception of literature clashes with received wisdom about what should remain private and what is suitable for public disclosure. Her literary practice therefore intervenes in public criticism in two ways. Firstly, as Cusk implies in her interview with Kellaway, *Outline* is a direct response to reviews of and public debate about *Aftermath*. Secondly and more fundamentally, *Outline* contests the way that public criticism conceptualises literature, privacy and the public itself. Both in interviews and in her work, Cusk can be seen using the institution of literature or fiction to rethink the very notion of what a public is and what it means to publish—to make public— certain kinds of writing.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced a 'counter-institutional' movement towards public criticism in Smith and Cusk's novels.[141] These novelists can be said to work both with and against the form of the public, in the sense that they are both popular authors, but have each been at the centre of controversies which made them push back against the terms of public discourse. They have also both fallen foul of popular criticism's literary values; Smith has been denigrated as a difficult or elitist experimentalist, while Cusk has been criticised for the kinds of things she has made public in her literary works. My readings of their novels have traced how both authors responded by contesting the values promulgated by public criticism: Smith by asserting the democratic availability of all texts and refusing the market's anti-experimentalism, and Cusk by questioning the very foundation of public speech itself.

---

[141] Simon Morgan Wortham, *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press), 2006, p. 2.

In this way, Smith and Cusk's novels exemplify a contemporary tendency for literature to deploy its own fictionality to access the enabling fictions that underpin institutions. As Derrida observes, institutions always have to be founded—which is another way of saying that they are fictional. Indeed, this is Warner's key argument about the public: rather than an unproblematised, pre-existing sphere, it is something which has to be called up by certain kinds of rhetorical address. Smith and Cusk's novels both identify the ways in which the public is a kind of fiction and mobilise their own fictionality to imagine or call forth different forms of literary publics. Smith's is an open, democratic reading public; Cusk's emphasises literature's license to say anything publicly without censorship.

The following chapter extends this discussion by addressing literary prizes, which are ways of institutionalising public opinion. As what James F. English calls mechanisms of 'capital intraconversion', prizes also foreground the anxieties about the marketisation of culture discussed in this chapter.[142] Chapter three examines how prize discourse latently recognises that literary value is subjective or fictional, while also naturalising certain tastes and values through an ostensibly democratic appeal to popular opinion. As discussed in this chapter, there is a widespread sense that these values emerge from the demands of the market rather than from genuine public discourse. While *The Accidental*, *There but for the* and *Hotel World* express fears over the status of the aesthetic in the culture industry, the following chapter assesses how Smith's Goldsmiths Prize -winning novel *How to Be Both* figures possibilities for aesthetic invention outside of the dictates of the market.

---

[142] James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 10 [emphasis removed].

CHAPTER THREE: PRIZES

Chapter two began by addressing a widespread sense that the market has colonised public literary discourse, and the present chapter continues that discussion by examining the relationship between art and commerce through the lens of literary prizes. Prizes establish a translatability between aesthetic and economic value by handing out money to authors and boosting book sales. As such, they are another key focus for the anxieties raised in chapter two about the marketisation of the cultural sphere. My analysis of the literary prize approaches these question by comparing the narrow, economistic measures of value deployed by book awards with the broader defences of the aesthetic mounted by two prizewinning novels, Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*.

As has been the case with the other institutions discussed so far, Smith emerges as a particularly prominent figure in the debate around literary prizes. Dominic Head, for example, notes that she has won numerous book awards, but that her body of work is permeated by scepticism towards such institutions: 'Smith's form of satirical writing […] gives her an original purchase on her context: it is an aesthetic (a literary value)

which facilitates a critique of vested interest (that other kind of value)'.[1] He suggests that this wariness reflects back on the machinery of cultural valuation which sanctions and celebrates Smith's work:

> I read this self-consciousness—which I am presenting, chiefly, as a formal attribute—as an implicit aspect of the novelist's anxiety in the era of literary prize culture: that he or she may be a beneficiary, or even a product of the entrepreneurial post-consensus society that is responsible for that cultural moment where the literary prize achieves a new form of pre-eminence, and becomes a dominant factor in the literary marketplace.[2]

Smith's work, then, responds to and reflects on prize culture as a cause of nervousness about art and artists being complicit with the market. This chapter will expand upon Head's observation that Smith's work is particularly attentive to the implication of art with commerce, taking the Goldsmiths Prize-winning *How to Be Both* as a prime example. The novel, which features a Renaissance fresco painter who demands to be paid more for their work, is intensely concerned with the relationship between aesthetic and economic value. It problematises the key ideology that the institution of the literary prize is grounded in, and which award culture continues to promulgate: aesthetic value.

As Head notes, such questions are highly significant for the study of contemporary fiction, because 'critics of the contemporary are responding to the canon that emerges from the predilections of agents, publishers and reviewers, all of whom are pre-empting the emphases of literary prize culture'.[3] As a result, 'the field of analysis of the contemporary is inextricably linked with commerce and the control of cultural capital'.[4] Because the contemporary canon is emergent, it is strongly influenced by the immediate economic factors that Head highlights. As a result, the

---

[1] Dominic Head, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency: Ali Smith and the Contemporary Canon', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 101–14 (p. 102).

[2] Ibid., p. 112.

[3] Ibid., p. 102.

[4] Ibid.

contemporary canon attracts particular concerns about the assignment and circulation of value of all kinds—be it aesthetic, symbolic, or economic. This chapter asks how twenty-first-century novels have anticipated and internalised these concerns.

Smith's oeuvre, while insistent in its critique of institutions and their discourses of value, is by no means unique in its attention to these questions. In this chapter, I also examine how Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* takes as one of its central concerns the process of value-formation which is so integral to prizes. Soo Yeon Kim argues that *The Line of Beauty*'s protagonist, Nick Guest, adheres to an aestheticism which occasions a critical reflection on the very logic of prestige that underpins the novel's Booker win:

> According to the logic of cultural capital, the 'aesthetic value' of *The Line of Beauty* is no more than its canonicity, consecrated by, among other indicators of aestheticism, the Man Booker prize Hollinghurst won in 2004. Similarly, the marvelous artworks that fascinate Nick in the novel are owned by those who can afford them and exhibit their cultural status through them.[5]

The novel is highly attentive to the ways in which aesthetic value functions as cultural capital, implicitly reflecting on the mechanisms of institutional evaluation which the novel itself is subject to.

These texts therefore probe what James F. English describes as 'the tension […] between the ever more complete and intimate way that prizes have come to occupy the fields of our cultural activity, and their continued capacity to provoke our feelings of alienation or repulsion'.[6] Prizes are a source of anxiety about the insinuation of an economic logic into the aesthetic sphere, which is supposed to be autonomous:

> [This tension] involves fundamentally the question of art's relationships to money, to politics, to the social and the temporal. It involves questions of power, of what constitutes specifically cultural power, how this form of power is situated in relation to other forms, and how its particular logic and mode of operation have changed over

---

[5] Soo Yeon Kim, 'Betrayed by Beauty: Ethics and Aesthetics in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 58 (2016), 165-88 (p. 167).

[6] James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 3.

the course of the modern period. It involves questions of cultural status or prestige. How is such prestige produced, and where does it reside? […] What rules govern its circulation?[7]

This chapter addresses a widespread feeling that book prizes produce, assign and circulate literary value in an implicitly economic fashion, but also traces an equivocation in prize discourse itself over the nature of this value. While judges, authors and commentators are clearly aware that the activities of the literary award produce certain kinds of value (most obviously, economic value in the form of increased sales and cash prizes), they often latently acknowledge the fictive nature of this value. Similarly, I propose to read the portrayal of aesthetic value in the novels as a kind of Derridean secret: value offers itself, promises itself, and even functions and circulates, but its essence remains ultimately mysterious or unavailable. Accordingly, I argue that *How to Be Both* and *The Line of Beauty* mobilise their own status as fictional texts to frame the discourse of value promulgated by literary prizes as itself a kind of fiction.

Contemporary British prize culture

Smith and Hollinghurst's novels undertake a thinking of aesthetic value at a time when the arbitration of artistic merit seems to be increasingly institutionalised in the form of cultural prizes. As English argues, this recent explosion in the number of prizes has often been taken as an indicator of the commercialisation of the cultural sphere:

> The rise of prizes over the past century, and especially their feverish proliferation in recent decades, is widely seen as one of the more glaring symptoms of a consumer society run rampant, a society that can conceive of artistic achievement only in terms of stardom and success, and that is fast replacing a rich and varied cultural world with a shallow and homogeneous McCulture based on the model of network TV. Prizes,

---

[7] Ibid.

from this vantage point, are not a celebration but a contamination of the most precious aspects of art.[8]

British literary culture is certainly in the grip of a 'feverish proliferation' of prizes. Since 1969, when we had relatively few book awards and the Booker was established to remedy this, British prize culture has grown into a behemoth.[9] In addition to those still-extant prizes which predated the Booker—the Hawthornden Prize, the Somerset Maugham Awards, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prizes—we now have the Goldsmiths and the Women's Prize for Fiction (both set up to correct perceived deficiencies in the Booker); the Costa Book Awards; the British Book Awards; the Ondaatje Prize; the Saltire Society Literary Awards; the Betty Trask Awards; the Arthur C. Clarke Award; the Republic of Consciousness Prize; and the Rathbones Folio Prize. (There are, of course, many more.) Prizes have become a major form of patronage for authors in Britain, and by rewarding certain novels and not others, they also play a role in shaping literary tastes.

However, as English's remarks suggest, this function is frequently understood as a commodification of literature, and this has never been more apparent than in the case of the 2011 Booker prize. Chaired by former Director General of MI5 and novelist Dame Stella Rimington, the judging panel became notorious for its anti-academic, populist and commercial values. As John Self recounts, the controversy was sparked by the judges' comments: 'Judge Chris Mullin declared that, for him, the books "had to zip along". Rimington herself said: "We want people to buy and read these books, not buy and admire them" (a shock dichotomy to those of us who like to read and admire good books).'[10] Self observes that these remarks betrayed not only a prejudice against experimentalism, but a market-orientated populism:

---

[8] English, pp. 2-3.

[9] Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 56.

[10] John Self, 'Booker Prize Populism May Well Backfire', *Guardian*, 17 October 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/17/booker-prize-populism-backfire> [accessed 11 February 2020].

> The shortlist may well be filled with fine novels—I think the Barnes is very good, and Stephen Kelman's Pigeon English better than some have claimed—but the issue is the equally fine, or even finer, novels that didn't get a look-in because of their experimentalism or non-zipalongability. The judges and administrators will claim the record sales of the shortlisted titles as justification for their choices.[11]

High-profile critic and seasoned prize judge Alex Clark has also argued, based on her own experience as a Booker panellist, that the award is increasingly geared towards the market, commenting on a 'ramped-up focus on how well shortlists and winners have sold'; this emphasis on sales, she argues, is 'not, surely, much of a concern for judges asked to select the best book of the year'.[12] In regards to the 2011 prize, she concludes: 'The problem is not with the books; the problem is that this year's hoo-ha suggests that the Booker is happy to be seen [more] as a marketing strategy than as an exercise—however flawed—in choosing and celebrating literary and artistic achievement.'[13] Clark and Self's comments testify to a growing concern that the Booker is increasingly a mechanism that reflects back the popular literary tastes and values of the market in the form of value judgements which are only ostensibly based on artistic merit.

The other award addressed in this chapter, the Goldsmiths Prize, was set up in direct opposition to the Booker following the 2011 controversy. As Bret Johnson writes in the *New Statesman*, which co-founded the award with Goldsmiths College, the prize was conceived of as an alternative to the Booker. Its aim is to reward the literary values that the more famous prize, with its populist emphasis and orientation towards the market, tends to ignore or even reject:

---

[11] Ibid.

[12] Alex Clark, 'Man Booker Prize: This Year's Judges Are Betraying Authors and Their Readers', *Guardian*, 16 October 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/16/booker-prize-judges-betray-readers> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[13] Ibid.

> Following the 2011 Man Booker Prize, in which the chair of judges Dame Stella Rimington championed 'readability' and books that 'zip along', literary prizes and the publishing industry experienced something approaching a modernist epiphany.
>
> After the 2011 Man Booker, the Goldsmiths Prize was established in association with the *New Statesman*. To say this was in retaliation would be to editorialise, but it certainly went against the grain of literary prizes and framed itself as distinct from the Man Booker by awarding innovative and experimental fiction specifically.[14]

Interestingly, however, Johnson frames this not as a lone crusade by his magazine and Goldsmiths College, but as 'a modernist epiphany' in the publishing industry itself, showing the extent to which the prize's commitment to 'innovation' partakes of a broader market logic.

This is also apparent in the wording of the prize rubric, which currently reads as follows:

> The Goldsmiths Prize was established in 2013 to celebrate the qualities of creative daring associated with the College and to reward fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form. The annual prize of £10,000 is awarded to a book that is deemed genuinely novel and which embodies the spirit of invention that characterizes the genre at its best.[15]

In an article for the *Guardian*, Blake Morrison, a Goldsmiths professor, explains that the founders of the Goldsmiths encountered some difficulty in choosing the right wording to describe the prize's aims, particularly because the language of 'invention' and innovation is now part of the corporate lexicon. Morrison first explains why the Goldsmiths eschewed the term 'experimental': 'Every novel is an experiment of some kind, but even the authors to whom it's attached tend to disavow the term "experimental", for fear of what it will suggest: impenetrability, cerebralism, art that's

---

[14] Bret Johnson, 'How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Modernism (Again)', *New Statesman*, 14 November 2017 <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/11/how-we-learned-stop-worrying-and-love-modernism-again> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[15] Goldsmiths, University of London, *The Goldsmiths Prize 2019* <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/> [accessed 11 February 2020].

more to be endured than enjoyed.'[16] There is, then, a cultural politics to the word 'experimentalism'; as discussed in the previous chapter, it often connotes a distinctly undemocratic or elitist difficulty, and the founders clearly wanted to avoid these negative implications. However, Morrison suggests that the more fundamental problem with the term 'experimentalism' is that all novels involve an element of unpredictability or originality. For Morrison, each novel is new, or works on its own terms, so the word 'experimental' is practically redundant. Indeed, the notion that a 'spirit of invention […] characterizes the genre at its best' registers the fact that the novel has been theorised at least since Mikhail Bakhtin's 'Epic and Novel' as a genre with undefinable boundaries.[17]

However, as Sianne Ngai remarks of the genre of the 'gimmick', as soon as something is marked as novel, this novelty becomes susceptible to repetition and another new technique has to be found.[18] For this very reason, Morrison shies away from newness as a stated value for the prize: '"Novelty" won't do, either—proverbially, it soon wears off, and it's associated with trifles and cheap knick-knacks.'[19] This reference to 'trifles and cheap knick-knacks' implies that the Goldsmiths Prize's wording has been chosen to avoid comparison with the market's drive to create new, gimmicky, quickly-outmoded commodities. Morrison observes that '"[i]nnovation" comes closer to the mark', but again, it is difficult to escape the corporate world's fetishisation of the new: 'when heard on the lips of politicians and business leaders [innovation] loses its lustre'.[20] Indeed, as Derrida remarks, 'what is called a patentable "invention" is now programmed, that is, subjected to powerful

---

[16] Blake Morrison, 'Blake Morrison on the Goldsmiths Prize for Fiction: "There Are Still Things to Say That Haven't Been Said Before"', *Guardian*, 11 November 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/11/goldsmiths-prize-mike-mccormack>
[accessed 11 February 2020].

[17] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 3-40.

[18] Sianne Ngai, 'Theory of the Gimmick', *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (2017), 466-505 (p. 485).

[19] Morrison.

[20] Ibid.

movements of authoritarian prescription and anticipation of the widest variety'.[21] The avant-garde language of invention and experimentalism is also the language of programmatic capitalist progress; Derrida argues that his reading of the term is 'as true in the domains of art or the fine arts as in the technoscientific domain'.[22] 'Everywhere', he argues, 'the enterprise of knowledge and research is first of all a programmatics of inventions'.[23] The careful deliberations over the Goldsmiths Prize's rhetoric that Morrison describes bear witness to the difficulty of articulating aesthetic principles that meaningfully diverge from the values and priorities of the market.

Each of the prizes addressed in this chapter has its own particular cultural politics and its own tensions and negotiations with the dictates of the market. The Booker emphasises popularity and accessibility, and might therefore be seen as the more democratic institution, but—as we have seen various literary journalists remark—these values are also suspiciously close to a kind of market populism. On the other hand, the Goldsmiths positions itself *against* market values, but finds itself sharing the vocabulary of invention and innovation with the corporate world. As these examples demonstrate, and as English's study of cultural awards shows, all prizes are inextricably linked with the operations of economic capital, as well as circulating their own kinds of symbolic capital.

Fictitious value

The previous section of this chapter outlined how the Booker and the Goldsmiths produce and assign cultural capital in accordance with their diverging literary values. The present section frames this process in terms of the question of fiction, arguing that we can meaningfully understand aesthetic value as a fabulous attribute that prizes help to confect and put into circulation. As such, works of literary fiction are well-placed to reflect on the mechanisms by which value of any kind has to be instituted and made credible in order to function.

---

[21] Jacques Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', trans. by Catherine Porter, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1–47 (p. 27).

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

As suggested by Self and Clark's reflections on the Booker, prize judging is not a case of measuring the pre-existing value of a novel, but of conferring value on it. English emphasises that value is not a natural attribute of certain artworks, but is produced or asserted. Prizes, he argues, are one of the most obvious ways in which value is produced performatively:

> Institutionally, the prize functions as a claim to authority and an assertion of that authority—the authority, at bottom, to produce cultural value. It provides an institutional basis for exercising, or attempting to exercise, control over the cultural economy, over the distribution of esteem and reward on a particular cultural field—over what may be recognized as worthy of special notice.[24]

The prize assumes control over the 'distribution' of prestige or cultural capital in the literary field. A prize does not simply find value in novels, but controls where it is assigned. Not only does value have to be instituted or produced, but the prize itself has to create its own 'authority' to attribute it. Value, and the authority to confer it, are not real or given; they are instituted by performative claims. This is not the same as saying that they have no force; on the contrary, prizes clearly hold enormous sway, and the cultural prestige they create can, as English says, be cashed in for material profit. Aesthetic value and authority, then, are enabling fictions which allow various forms of capital to circulate.

Similarly, Barbara Herrnstein Smith asserts that value is the effect of the relational structure of economic systems: 'All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables or, to put this another way, the product of the dynamics of a system, specifically an *economic* system.'[25] Value is produced through a set of complicated negotiations; these may be explicitly economic, or economic in the more metaphorical sense of taking place within a particular economy of meaning. The contingent, overdetermined and contested nature of value that Herrnstein Smith describes is

---

[24] English, p. 51.

[25] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 30.

particularly obvious in the case of cultural prizes, where the notoriously subjective nature of evaluation frequently gives rise to controversies.

The contingency of value—its dependence on a variety of dynamic relationships—is the subject of one of *How to Be Both*'s main plots, the story of Renaissance painter Franchesco del Cossa's demand for higher wages.[26] The demand for more pay is dramatised in one half of the novel, which is told from Franchesco's point of view. In the other half of the novel (set in the 2010s), Carol Martineau presents the story to her daughter George as a 'moral conundrum' during a visit to del Cossa's frescoes.[27] The latter section opens with George remembering the conversation:

> You're an artist, her mother says, and you're working on a project with a lot of other artists. And everybody on the project is getting the same amount, salary-wise. But *you* believe that what *you're* doing is worth more than everyone on the project, including you, is getting paid. So you write a letter to the man who's commissioned the work and you ask him to give you more money than everyone else is getting.[28]

George tries to tease out the different 'variables' or 'dynamics', as Herrnstein Smith calls them, in order to arrive at a judgement about whether Franchesco deserves more: 'Am I worth more? George says. Am I better than the other artists? | Does that matter? Her mother says. | Is that what matters? | Is it me or is it the work that's worth more? George says.'[29] Here, George identifies the unlocatable or contingent nature of value, wondering whether it resides in the finished artwork or in the artist themselves, in the form of symbolic capital or reputation.

This conversation elicits a thinking of what Derrida calls the signature; as discussed in my thesis introduction, the signature signs an action, gesture, text or artwork with an apparently unique and idiosyncratic mark of origination and

---

[26] Franchesco is based on the historical figure of Francesco del Cossa; the 'h' is Smith's addition. She also introduced into her fictionalisation a level of uncertainty about Franchesco's gender identity, which is why I use the singular 'they' when referring to the character.

[27] Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014), p. 189. George's section opens the novel in half of the print run, with Franchesco's part appearing first in the other half. The latter is the version I happen to own and the one to which my page numbers correspond.

[28] Ibid, p. 192.

[29] Ibid.

ownership. As George speculates, in the regime of authorship the signature authenticates and carries value. Yet, as Peggy Kamuf explains, the signature also submits the singular identity of the signer to a field of generality:

> When I sign, I am already dead because, according to the inexorable logic of the deictic or shifter, its singular referent—me—will have already submitted to the requirement of its generalization in order to signify itself. I cannot say—or sign—what I mean, and I say precisely what I do not mean. By the same token, 'I' spells the death of me; it is already the effacement of a singular nature in a common signature.[30]

As Carol and George's discussion implies, whatever currency attaches to the name of the artist does so by virtue of a particular historically-contingent system of authorship and ownership. For this and various other reasons, George and Carol never arrive at a consensus about where the value of the frescoes lies: it is not possible to answer questions about value in this way, because value is contingent upon all of the variables George considers (in addition to many others). By posing these questions about value as a 'conundrum' in a dialogic scene, the novel suggests that value is always an open-ended question, the answers to which are dependent on multiple fluctuating structures and relationships.

However, I want to suggest that—rather than simply dismissing aesthetic value as an ideological illusion—*How to Be Both* and *The Line of Beauty* mobilise their status as fictional texts to explore the complexity of an attribute such as value which can only be maintained by a publicly-held belief in something that is latently acknowledged to be fictitious. As such, value has the fictional structure of the Derridean secret. Smith and Hollinghurst's treatment of value particularly recalls Derrida's reading of Baudelaire's 'Counterfeit Money', which turns on whether the narrator's friend is lying about a coin being counterfeit.[31] Because of the particular way in which Baudelaire's story is framed—as a conversation between the friends—

---

[30] Peggy Kamuf, *Signature Pieces: On the Institution of Authorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 5.

[31] Jacques Derrida, '"Counterfeit Money" II: Gift and Countergift, Excuse and Forgiveness (Baudelaire and the Story of the Dedication)', in *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 108-72 (p. 151).

there is no possibility of "finding out" if the coin was really counterfeit or not. This, Derrida argues, 'tells us something about literature and about the place of *belief* or of *credit* from which it is written or read'.[32] Derrida's reading here focusses on the fold through which an idea in a literary text can seem to attain the status of a lie or fiction. My readings of *How to Be Both* and *The Line of Beauty* will show that these texts similarly represent value as a kind of secret.

With regards to 'Counterfeit Money', Derrida argues that the only way to settle the question of the coin's legitimacy would be to invoke 'a third party' to 'test the money and tell us whether or not and when […] the friend lied', but 'the third party is excluded by the secret of the dual scene'.[33] As a result, 'the possibility of this secret', the secret of the money's sound or counterfeit status, 'is readable without the secret ever being accessible'.[34] Derrida argues that this exemplifies the structure of fiction:

> Here we touch on a structure of the secret about which literary fiction tells us the essential or which tells us, in return, the essential concerning the possibility of a literary fiction. If the secret remains undetectable, unbreakable, in this case, if we have no chance of ever knowing whether counterfeit money was actually given to the beggar, it is first of all because there is no sense in wondering what actually happened, what was the true intention of the narrator's friend and the meaning hidden 'behind' his utterances. As these characters have no consistency, no depth beyond their literary phenomenon, the absolute inviolability of the secret they carry depends first of all on the essential superficiality of their phenomenality, on the *too-obvious* of that which they present to view.[35]

There is, in other words, no truth at the bottom of 'Counterfeit Money', only a play of fictional possibilities.

Interestingly for our discussion of value, Derrida also draws a comparison between fiction and money, both of which rely on belief (or credit) to function:

---

[32] Ibid., p. 150.

[33] Ibid., p. 151.

[34] Ibid., p. 152.

[35] Ibid., p. 153.

What we are saying here about literature could also be said of the money that, in this case, it talks about and makes into its theme: As long as the monetary *specie* functions, as long as one can reckon with its phenomenality, as long as one can *count with and on cash money* to produce effects […], as long as money passes for (real) money, it is simply not different from the money that, perhaps, it counterfeits.[36]

Mary Poovey has drawn a similar link between monetary credit and literature, arguing that 'at the end of the seventeenth century, one of the functions performed by imaginative writing in general was to mediate value—that is, to help people understand the new credit economy and the market model of value that it promoted'.[37] Money, she argues, 'constitutes one of the earliest, and most important, forms of representation in relation to which it seemed crucial to make and reinforce a distinction between fact and fiction'.[38] Fiction 'helped manage the problematic of representation by creating a non-factual form of representation that was nevertheless *not a lie*'.[39] As a result, the fictitious nature of value—its dependence on credit, on consensual and official belief in its truth—makes it particularly susceptible to being theorised by 'literary fiction', which, in Derrida's words, 'puts truth onstage'.[40] As Poovey points out, fiction is neither the truth nor a 'lie', giving literary texts a peculiar power to think through the question of aesthetic evaluation as a form of discrimination that wavers between subjectivity and objectivity.

Derrida argues that the effect of secrecy in 'Counterfeit Money' depends on the *framing* of the story as a two-character dialogue structure, which prevents external, third-party corroboration of the friend's claim that the coin was counterfeit. However, this frame can always be 'dislocated'; as a result, the 'place of *belief* or of *credit*' is always 'exchangeable', or subject to 'an endless circulation', which is why the secret

---

[36] Ibid.

[37] Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 1-2.

[38] Ibid., pp. 4-5.

[39] Ibid., p. 6.

[40] Jacques Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', in *The Post Card*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 413–19 (p. 414).

is characterised by an infinite succession of interpretive possibilities.[41] A similar thinking is at play in *How to Be Both*. Evoking this effect of the frame and its susceptibility to displacement, Franchesco muses: 'I like very much a foot, say, or a hand, coming over the edge and over the frame into the world beyond the picture, cause a picture is a real thing in the world and this shift is a marker of this reality'.[42] Franchesco understands that the frame is what ostensibly produces the fiction of their painting: it delimits the representation it holds inside.

However, in a trompe l'oeil effect like the one Franchesco describes, the frame and painting are actually made of the same material, so the frame is also a kind of fiction. It produces the effect of secrecy, the sense of something to be read, but is itself an effect of the secret. This confusion marks the materiality of the painting—it exists at the same level of reality as its frame—and exemplifies the givenness of the open secret. The trompe l'oeil frame is an antihermeneutic figure, suggesting not that there is a secret to be uncovered in the painting, but that we read the open secret that is given on the surface of the painting. This has implications for the questions raised elsewhere in the novel of where in an artwork its aesthetic value resides. George, we have seen, acknowledges that value seems to attach to Franchesco's paintings, but struggles with the issue of where this value is grounded: in the work itself or in the signature of the painter. The secret furnishes a model for how a groundless attribute such as aesthetic value might be created through a fold of fictionality. It creates a semblance of something intrinsic to the artwork, a sense of depth or truth which might seem to underpin a work's value, but this is an effect of fiction. *How to Be Both* therefore offers a way of rethinking the key premise of prize culture, the concept of aesthetic value. While the consecrating or legitimising effect of prizewinning implies the recognition of a work's already-extant value, Smith's novel shows how value is an elusive effect produced by the structure of secrecy.

Value is also a kind of secret or mystery in *The Line of Beauty*. The novel's protagonist is Nick Guest, the son of a provincial antiques dealer, who lodges with an Oxford pal's family after graduating. The quasi-aristocratic Feddens take Nick into

---

[41] Derrida, 'Counterfeit Money', pp. 150, 151.

[42] Smith, p. 121.

their circle warily; class differences and his partially-concealed homosexuality prevent him from being fully accepted. Unable, by virtue of his class formation, to adopt the family's detached and cheerfully ignorant attitude towards their expensive art collection, Nick positions himself as their tame aesthete, providing facts and judgements about various works on command; taste is his social capital. Value is something Nick is constantly in pursuit of, but never quite able to possess. His quest for a beautiful life is caught up with his desire to be included in his friends' aristocratic circles, tying aesthetic value to material wealth in his imagination.

The secrecy and inaccessibility of this life for Nick is palpable in the way the characters speak. Nick has a talent for mimicking his hosts' aristocratic affectations, but he notices that, while he can reproduce these idiosyncrasies, when performed by Gerald and Rachel they carry an unrepeatable sense of social exclusivity. Nick observes that '[i]t was Rachel's style that attracted him more, as a code both aristocratic and distantly foreign', a formulation which immediately invokes a Derridean secrecy.[43] Rachel's 'style' or signature presents itself as a surface effect, something completely visible, accessible and repeatable, but it also seems to 'code' or signify something: 'Her *group* sounded nearly Germanic, and the sort of thing she would never belong to; her *philistine*, pronounced as a French word, seemed to cover, by implication, anyone who said it differently.'[44] As shown by Nick's preoccupation with the way Rachel pronounces words to do with class or social belonging, her style holds out a promise of access to a secret, exclusive existence. However, as his surname 'Guest' foreshadows, Nick only knows that this promise 'seemed' or 'sounded' as if it was there; he himself remains on the outside, helplessly 'attracted' to a secrecy which remains inaccessible.[45] This establishes early on in the novel a structure of secrecy, or promise, with which Nick remains infatuated. He is driven by a hermeneutic desire to know and be fully in possession of what he finds so romantic about the Feddens' lives.

---

[43] Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 8.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., p. 40.

Similarly, as an inexperienced young gay man in the early 1980s, Nick fantasises about discovering the secrets of a particularly secret kind of sex. Both desires are highly aestheticised for Nick, who simultaneously views beauty itself as a kind of mystery. In the first movement of the novel, 'The Love Chord', Nick's dream of access to these mysterious and secret realms—the aristocracy, sex, and beauty—is repeatedly expressed as a kind of promise. Before he has sex with his first boyfriend Leo, Nick thinks that his 'warm hard body under the silky shirt was almost worryingly beautiful, a promise too lavish to believe in'.[46] The occurrence of the word 'beautiful', of course, demonstrates the degree to which this aesthetic category organises Nick's experience and understanding of the world, as well as emphasising beauty's futural, ungraspable status as a kind of 'promise'. Hollinghurst emphasises the importance of this futural or promissory feeling later in the novel, when Leo bends over in a shop to tease Nick, who sees this as 'the confirmation of a promise'.[47] The novel winds beauty and promise together in a structure of secrecy, which offers and allures, but ultimately withholds.

Imagining himself for a moment as the owner and master of the Feddens' house, Nick feels a similar frisson of promise:

> The girl with the white dog came back along the gravel path, and he thought how he might appear to her, if she glanced up, as an enviable figure, posed against the shining accomplished background of the lamplit room. Whereas, looking out, leaning out over the iron railing, Nick felt he had been swept to the brink of some new promise, a scented vista or vision of the night, and then held there.[48]

Hollinghurst also foregrounds the talismanic nature of the word 'promise' for Nick by naming the cologne he receives as a holiday gift from the Feddens 'Je Promets': *I promise*.[49] This first phase of the narrative, then, is structured by a kind of secrecy: by Nick's sense that something is promised to him, something he will come to learn, receive, or possess.

---

[46] Ibid., p. 37.

[47] Ibid., p. 110.

[48] Ibid., p. 19.

[49] Ibid., p. 22.

As Nick's fantasies suggest, this sense of promise is already an aesthetic feeling for him, whether it involves the sensuous pleasure he takes in Leo's body or his enjoyment of the Feddens' house and artworks. His sound aesthetic judgement is also his passport to the beautiful life he craves as the Feddens' guest and then as his rich lover Wani Ouradi's paid 'aesthete'.[50] Beauty and mystery often recur together in Nick's imagination, particularly when it comes to the family secrets of the Feddens and Ouradis. For example, on discovering that Wani had a younger brother who died, Nick reflects: 'It was the family mystery, hardly glimpsed, far stronger and darker than their little sexual conspiracy. And Wani was carrying that burden… He seemed instantly more touching, more glamorous and more forgivable.'[51] Nick's pursuit of beauty and his need to be part of Toby and Wani's quasi-aristocratic families, with their luxurious homes full of art and antiques, set him constantly in search of something he cannot quite lay his hands on. The aesthetic itself becomes a kind of secret or 'enigmatic signifier': something which, like Rachel's style, seems to signify (or promise) something, but which remains a mystery.[52] Beauty is something that Nick never feels himself fully in possession of: like the Derridean secret, it promises itself but remains finally inaccessible. Hollinghurst's novel dramatises the way in which beauty is the effect of a fictional fold like the secret.

How to Be Both and *The Line of Beauty*, then, both show that attempts to trace aesthetic value back to a firm basis in objective fact, to locate the source of a work's value, are liable to fail. Rather than simply suggesting that aesthetic value is therefore meaningless, however, these novels attend to the fictional production of value and

---

[50] Ibid., p. 209.

[51] Ibid., p. 281.

[52] As John Fletcher describes, the enigmatic signifier as described by Laplanche is a psychoanalytic term describing a sense that meaning is being conveyed despite a disruption of the signifier-signified relationship: 'The enigmatic signifier is based on "the possibility that the signifier may be designified, or lose what it signifies, without thereby losing its power to signify to". They are enigmatic, not just because the infant has no access to a code to determine their meaning, or because they outstrip its capacities for understanding, but because, compromised by the unconscious wishes of the other, they are opaque to the adult as well.' See: John Fletcher, 'Introduction: Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Other', trans. by Luke Thurston, in Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, ed. by John Fletcher, trans. by Luke Thurston, Leslie Hill, and Philip Slotkin (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1-85 (p. 12).

beauty, dramatising the varied and interdependent cultural negotiations through which value is produced. The novels, in other words, thematise precisely the anxieties about value which have recently become pressing due to the proliferation of literary prizes. Book awards have become touchstones for concerns about the ever-increasing points of contact between art and commerce in twenty-first-century British literary culture, and the novels examined here show a keen awareness of their place in these circuits of exchange by attending to how aesthetic value is produced and circulated as a kind of fiction. The next portion of this chapter studies in more detail the cultural anxieties that prizes seem to elicit because of their ability to translate between literary and economic value—two kinds of worth which, it seems, we would prefer to remain non-transferrable.

Capital intraconversion

As shown by the long but still partial list of awards above, British prize culture bears out English's observation that there is a 'sense that the cultural universe has become supersaturated with prizes, that there are more cultural awards than our collective cultural achievements can possibly justify'.[53] This suspicion is often merited: as English notes, prizes are often set up not because the founders believe that we need these institutions in order to celebrate literature, but to benefit the award's patrons by allowing individual and corporate wealth to be 'culturally "laundered"' (English cites Alfred Nobel's use of his proceeds from the invention of dynamite as one of the most famous examples).[54] What is perhaps more concerning to the general public, however, is that prizes 'are the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital—which is to say that they are our most effective institutional agents of *capital intraconversion*'.[55] Prizes mediate, control, distribute, and—most importantly—create value. In particular, they facilitate translations between aesthetic and other kinds of value.

---

[53] English, p. 17.

[54] Ibid., p. 11.

[55] Ibid., p. 10.

When it comes to actually measuring the scale of capital intraconversion, the impact of prizes on British literary culture became harder to quantify in the early 2000s as the advent of online bookselling, ebooks and other changes in publishing altered sales patterns, interfering with the key quantifiable index of the effect of prizewinning. As Richard Todd described in 1996, it was indisputable at that point that winning the Booker improved sales: 'Booker laureation, whatever the degree to which that is reflected in hardback success, was by now ensuring a place in the paperback top fifty, with paperback sales approaching or exceeding 200,000.'[56] However, by 2018, following the enormous changes to the publishing landscape wrought by factors such as Amazon and ebooks, the *Bookseller* lamented that 'the so-called Booker Bounce has gone flat—this year's shortlist has registered the lowest sales since 2000'.[57] Nevertheless, booksellers suggest that taking home the Booker may accelerate canonisation, since '[w]inning also helps the book stick in backlist'.[58] There is far less information and commentary on other prizes, but according to Claire Squires it is reasonable to assume that '[t]he place of the book award in literary development can have a vital role in encouraging literary production (and consequently manufacture, distribution, reception and eventually survival)'.[59] It is therefore clear that the book prize facilitates conversions between various kinds of capital: historically, awards such as the Booker have played a measurable role in boosting sales of winning titles, translating symbolic prestige into commercial success, and despite the lack of clarity about their impact on sales in the contemporary era, prizes almost certainly continue to confer a form of cultural capital that results in canonisation and therefore long-term sales.

How to Be Both addresses the institutional contexts of its own reception, particularly the propensity of prizes to establish a convertibility between aesthetic and

---

[56] Todd, p. 108.

[57] Philip Jones, 'Bookers, Burns and Bounces', *Bookseller*, 19 October 2018 <https://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/bookers-burns-and-bounces-876241> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[58] Allison Bone, 'Booker: Still Number One?', *Bookseller*, 15 September 2005 <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/booker-still-number-one> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[59] Claire Squires, 'A Common Ground? Book Prize Culture in Europe', *Javnost*, 11 (2004), 37-47 (p. 43).

economic value, by allegorising some of the twenty-first-century's most pressing questions about capital intraconversion in its Renaissance narrative. Franchesco's part of the novel fictionalises the role of art in the material culture of the fifteenth-century Duchy of Modena and Ferrara, attending to everything from the subtleties of the patronage system to the value of the artist's labour to the cost of the paint. As such, the novel contests what Mary Hollingsworth calls '[o]ne of the most forceful myths of the Renaissance': 'the idea that its artists freely explored their ideas and created their masterpieces for enlightened patrons eager to acquire their works of genius'.[60] In fact, as Hollingsworth argues (and Smith's novel attests), 'it was the patron who was the real initiator of the architecture, sculpture and painting of the period, and [...] he played a significant part in determining both form and content'.[61] The roles of artist and patron were different, as was the conception of the artwork: 'Fifteenth-century patrons were not passive connoisseurs: they were active consumers. Their commissions were not works of art in the modern sense of the term.'[62] By imagining a historical moment at which art was explicitly understood as part of the material and economic sphere, the novel can reflect on the relationships between art and money which, according to English, the contemporary public finds so uncomfortable.

For example, what Elizabeth S. Anker calls Franchesco's 'materialist ethos' emphasises the resources, money and labour required for the production of art, as well as the relations between these inputs and the ultimate value or cost of the frescoes.[63] Franchesco has a deep knowledge of and involvement with the production of their materials: 'For the making of pictures we need plants and stones, stonedust and water, fish bones, sheep and goat bones, the bones of hens or other fowls whitened in high heat and ground down fine : [...] we need gypsum : we need porphyry for grinding [...] above all we need eggs, the fresher the better, and from the country not

---

[60] Mary Hollingsworth, *Patronage in Renaissance Italy: From 1400s to the Early Sixteenth Century* (London: John Murray, 1994), p. 1.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Elizabeth S. Anker, 'Postcritical Reading, the Lyric, and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*', *Diacritics*, 45 (2017), 16-42 (p. 33).

the town mean better colours when dry'.[64] This catalogue of the animal and mineral components of paint evokes Franchesco's bustling lifeworld, linking the finished frescoes to the networks of production which they depend on. Anker suggests that '[w]hile philosophically minded, Francesco/a's [*sic*] relationship to art is deeply sensual and corporeal, establishing connections that collapse the material production of artistic objects into what might appear their abstract symbolic significance'.[65] Recalling English's language of capital intraconversion, Anker argues that the frescoes in *How to Be Both* are a point of exchange between material and symbolic value.

Franchesco's matter-of-factness about this interchange of value also extends to demanding fair pay for artistic labour. A key plot point concerns all the artists working on the frescoes banding together to demand more pay — and, as Franchesco argues, '[g]ood work, good pay, as the great Cennini says in his Handbook for picturemakers : this is a kind of justice too that if you use good materials and you practise good skills then the least you may expect is that good money will be your reward'.[66] The repetition of 'good' in Franchesco's reasoning creates a sense of rhetorical balance in the sentence, which formally mirrors the topic of 'justice' and creates an even-handed tone. The laconic and elliptical '[g]ood work, good pay' keeps the equally-weighted terms poised on either side of the comma, a simple sentence structure that communicates Franchesco's pragmatic view of things. The comma itself marks an asyndeton which omits the actual relationship between work and pay, as if to simply equate them without elaborating the exact mechanisms through which these different quantities are indexed to one another — no explanation needed, simple as that. The further repetition of the same adjective, 'good', to describe 'materials', 'skills' and 'money' in the following clause emphasises the comparability of these resources, while the moderation of the word (compared to 'best' or other superlatives), coupled with Franchesco's rhetorical understatement, 'the least you may expect', contributes to a measured and reasonable tone.

---

[64] Smith, pp. 58-59.

[65] Anker, p. 33.

[66] Smith, p. 130.

This example shows Smith reflecting on the contemporary institutional situation of art—its production and evaluation—by evoking an alternative understanding of art's relationship to the material or economic. Whereas prizes are currently surrounded by anxieties about the conflation of art and commerce, *How to Be Both* returns art to its material contexts. What English identifies as a source of anxiety in contemporary prize culture—the proximity of art and commerce—is treated in Smith's historical fiction as a mundane fact. Art is just another part of the material economy in Franchesco's world; it is always underpinned by an economics, by various kinds of exchange.

As Anker implies, the novel insinuates that Franchesco's 'materialist ethos' has an ethical relevance for contemporary readers; chapter one of this thesis discussed how she takes Franchesco's materialism as a model for postcritical reading strategies.[67] However, there are significant problems with reading the novel in this way. Franchesco's materialism, Anker argues, is supposed to return us to a more organic relationship with the artwork, bracketing our aesthetic experience from the institutional structures which otherwise mediate our encounter with the fresco or text. However, Anker's use of the word 'material' to refer simply to the sensuous properties of the text strangely misses the novel's *historical*-materialist bent: its attention to the contingencies of the particular economic structures of the period it portrays, and the ways in which these contingencies are imagined to have determined aesthetic production. Smith's key move is to historicise and relativise the aesthetic concepts and practices she portrays, with the novel juxtaposing the production and reception of art in two different historical periods through its dual-narrative structure. Moreover, Franchesco's matter-of-factness about the interrelation of art and money draws our attention to the institutional structures framing the production of artworks, rather than eliding them, as Anker's deeply individualised sensual reading experience does.

The novel is also explicit about the symbolic function of the frescoes as statements of power and ideology, or as agents of capital intraconversion between economic, symbolic and aesthetic value. The novel's engagement with a materialist aesthetics extends to considering how symbolic and political power might have

---

[67] Anker, p. 20.

shaped aesthetic production in the Renaissance. In a set piece which portrays the assembled fresco-painters being given their instructions, Borse, the Duke of Ferrara's representative, wants to avoid raising his voice and so asks a servant to repeat his directives at a shout. Borse breaks his instructions up into short chunks for the boy to repeat, with the result that what is supposed to be subtextual in the paintings ends up being shouted, with capitals and end-stops for emphasis. The painters are told to portray: 'OUR PRINCE. GOING ABOUT THE WORLD. A WORLD HE'S MADE. PEACABLE AND PROSPEROUS. IN HIS GENEROSITY. IN HIS SPLENDOUR.'[68] The symbolic and ideological function of the frescoes is rendered comically blatant, without style or suasion.

In addition to staging the interplay of power and art, and thus reflecting on the unavoidable interrelation of the aesthetic and the material, this scene recalls Franchesco's thinking of the frame and the materiality of meaning in artworks. The meaning of the proposed portrayal of the Duke is legible on the surface of Borse's speech, and will hardly take much decoding when the frescoes are complete. In keeping with the antihermeneutic tendency which chapter one identified in Smith's work, the frescoes are imagined as forms of open secret where the distinction between meaning and materiality is called into question. The scene in which Borse relays the intended meaning of the frescos suggests a significant difference between Smith's antihermeneuticism and that of postcriticism. In my readings of *How to Be Both*, I have tried to draw out what I see as the novel's very different brand of materialism. Beyond its obvious interest in the physical materials required for painting, we can see an insistent thinking of the artwork as an instituted fiction or open secret. Here, attributes such as value arise not from a deep, mysterious, metaphysical "place" in the work, but as a surface effect of the structure of fiction. Recalling my discussion of *Artful* in chapter one, my readings of *How to Be Both* show how the structure of the secret confounds the spatial model in which a material reality or signified is thought to underlie a linguistic signifier. The novel's materialism not only asserts the materiality of things we habitually class as material (stones, paint, fresh eggs), but devotes itself to a thinking of the materiality of sign systems, suggesting that the production of

---

[68] Smith, p. 110.

meaning—such as in the frescoes in the Duke's Palazzo Schifanoia—takes places through the creation of signifiers which have their own materiality.

Attending to the various kinds of exchanges or intraconversions that go into the making of Franchesco's frescoes, *How to Be Both* is explicitly concerned with the economic systems underpinning aesthetic production. As such, it recalls and allegorises the concerns about the relationship between art and commerce that surround contemporary literary prizes. However, Smith's use of a Renaissance setting foregrounds the fictitiousness of a certain idea on which twenty-first-century anxieties about the conflation of the economic and cultural spheres are predicated: aesthetic autonomy. Art, Smith suggests, always has a material existence, whether we mean by this the cost of the paint or the materiality of the signifier. The novel historicises not only Franchesco's understanding and practice of art, but the contemporary desire for aesthetic autonomy that underpins prize-related anxieties. Smith's dual historical narrative contrasts the contemporary collapse of this doctrine under the terms of postmodernism with the values of a society which had not drawn a strict aesthetic/economic distinction in the first place. The following section delineates a fuller account of the concept of aesthetic autonomy and examines the ways in which *How to Be Both* contextualises and historicises it as a way of understanding the relationship between art and commerce.

Aesthetic autonomy

The notion of aesthetic autonomy is central to the discourse around prizes. English's study emphasises how, despite a widespread sense that late capitalism has collapsed the categories of art and commerce, prize discourse maintains a claim for the distinctive function of the literary award by refusing to acknowledge the influence of the market on decision-making. 'Without disappearing,' English writes, 'the modern discourse of autonomy has become a tactical fiction, or at least an imperfectly sincere one'.[69] In other words:

> There is no question of perfect autonomy or segregation of the various sorts of capital, such that one might occupy a zone or margin of 'pure' culture where money or politics

---

[69] English, p. 236.

or journalistic celebrity or social connections or ethnic or gender advantage mean nothing, or such that one might acquire economic capital that is free of all implication in the social, symbolic, or political economies.[70]

Yet, as English notes, prizes continue to stake their claims on the discourse of purely aesthetic judgement.

As English explains, while prizes obviously link cultural and economic value together in various ways, they also work to maintain the ideology of aesthetic autonomy:

> Ideologically, the prize offers particularly rich opportunities to test and affirm the notion of art as a separate and superior domain, a domain of disinterested activity which gives rise to a special, nontemporal, noneconomic, but scarce and thus highly desirable form of value. Precisely because this notion of art and of artistic value requires continual acts of collective make-believe to sustain it, there is a need for events which foster certain kinds of collective cultural (mis)recognition.[71]

While aesthetic value is analogous and convertible to economic value, it also depends on a disavowal of the taint of the economic. Art that is deemed commercial is not valued as art; it is closer to a commodity or advertising. While cultural prizes in some ways show the continuity between art and commerce, then, they also rely on a fictive distinction between the two.

Prize discourse maintains this distinction by 'produc[ing], largely in the form of a negative reaction, agreement as to the special, nontemporal value of art as such': an ideology of the aesthetic.[72] One of the main ways in which the notion of aesthetic autonomy is promulgated, English says, is precisely through critiques of the judging process, which imply that there *is* a kind of political and economic disinterestedness to be had, if only certain conditions were met or principles adhered to: a prize judgement 'invariably becomes the occasion for disputes over how accurately the value has been gauged and how legitimately the sponsors and judges may claim the

---

[70] Ibid., p. 10.

[71] Ibid., pp. 52-53.

[72] Ibid., p. 53.

authority to perform the calculation—disputes whose rhetoric is predicated on, and so can only reinforce, faith in the symbolic economy of pure gifts'.[73] The legitimacy of prizes is therefore maintained through an assertion of aesthetic autonomy, despite the clear involvement of an economic logic in the process of aesthetic evaluation.

We can see the claim to autonomy at work in various controversies around the Booker. For example, the award's Literary Director Gaby Wood called on the discourse of disinterested judgement to defend the prize against the outcry over the 2013 expansion of eligibility to include any book published in English and available in the UK. Asked if the Booker did not have a special duty to support British and Commonwealth authors, Wood is reported to have replied that the prize's only duty was to arbitrate the value of the novels, free from other considerations: 'Why were the publishers talking of the prize's "duty" to authors? It has no duty. Its role is only to reward the best book.'[74] The discourse of autonomy dictates that aesthetic value is the sole remit of the prize.

However, the suspicion that certain non-literary priorities enter into the judging process frequently rears its head. This happened most recently in 2019, when the Booker panel split the prize between Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* and Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. The editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Stig Abell, speculated that the panel either wanted to give Atwood the prize, but felt that she was already highly acclaimed and that the prize might do a less famous writer more good, or that they wanted to bestow the laurels on Evaristo but were nervous of snubbing someone as famous as Atwood.[75] The decision to split the prize, then, raised suspicions that a set of social or cultural negotiations unrelated to aesthetic value had entered into the judging process.

Judges are typically steadfast in defending the purely aesthetic basis of their decisions against such speculation. See, for example, Stella Rimington's response in

---

[73] Ibid.

[74] Rachel Cooke, 'Has the Booker Prize Lost its Mojo?', *Guardian*, 7 October 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/07/has-the-booker-prize-lost-its-mojo> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[75] 'Prize Controversies', *Freedom, Books, Flowers and the Moon*, 17 October 2019 <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/freedom-books-flowers-moon-october-17/> [accessed 6 March 2020].

2011 when challenged about the judging process: 'Rimington said the question of whether Barnes was overdue to win the £50,000 prize never entered her mind or figured in the debate. "We really were, and I know you find it very boring of me to say so, looking at the books that we had in front of us," she said.'[76] Judging, in other words, is undertaken in isolation from non-aesthetic concerns such as an author being seen to have wrongly missed out in the past. Alex Clark has also emphasised the probity of the judging process: 'I didn't get my way. But nor can I whinge about it: there was no stitch-up, no horse-trading, no ganging up, no underhand tactics of any kind. We had a lengthy discussion about all six books and, eventually, three separate votes, from which Adiga emerged as the clear winner.'[77] As in the case of Rimington and Wood, Clark's comments show a desire to believe that prize judgements are made solely on the basis of pure aesthetic evaluation, with all other concerns bracketed.

It is also possible to see efforts to maintain the illusion of pure, disinterested aesthetic judgement in the remarks of 1994 Booker judge John Bayley:

> Highbrow critics sometimes object that although the Booker is the most prestigious in the world of the English novel, all such prizes tend to commercialize art. I find this rubbish. On the contrary I think that fashion and pretension are the great enemies of all fine art today […] In looking for good fiction I feel the Booker judges should make no distinction between different kinds of excellence in the genre. Personally I would be pleased to give the prize to a really good murder mystery or scientific fantasy or to a gripping tale about cooks or ikons, astronauts or tennis players—whatever had real and rare talent in its own line and is not merely modish junk, seeking to show off.[78]

Bayley associates political critiques of prizes with the 'highbrow', which is consistent with the modernist combination of avant-garde formal techniques with a critique of the marketisation of art. But Bayley also inverts the modernist paradigm by characterising the values of the avant-garde—aesthetic autonomy, experimentalism,

---

[76] Mark Brown, 'Booker Prize 2011: Julian Barnes Triumphs at Last', *Guardian*, 19 October 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/18/booker-prize-julian-barnes-wins> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[77] Clark.

[78] Bayley, qtd. in Todd, p. 70.

and resistance to commodification—as marketable or 'modish'. This allows him to promulgate his own conservative literary values while disavowing their marketability. In addition, he maintains his own claim to even-handed, disinterested judgement when he argues that 'Booker judges should make no distinction between different kinds of excellence in the genre'. However, in order to uphold this principle of disinterested judiciousness, he falls back on the conservative discourses of genius and inherent aesthetic value, promising to reward 'whatever had real and rare talent in its own line'.

As Herrnstein Smith remarks, keeping art discrete from social life and presenting aesthetic value as a natural, inherent property of the work requires the constant maintenance of an ideological misrecognition:

> The traditional—idealist, humanist, genteel—tendency to isolate or protect certain aspects of life and culture, among them works of art and literature, from consideration in economic terms has had the effect of mystifying the nature—or, more accurately, the dynamics—of their value. In view of the arbitrariness of the exclusion, it is not surprising that the languages of aesthetics and economics nevertheless tend to drift towards each other and that their segregation must be constantly patrolled.[79]

Bayley's argumentative contortions are symptomatic of just such a mystification—but as things stand they seem to be necessary if prizes wish to maintain the authority they draw from their apparent disinterestedness.

The way in which prize culture mobilises the concepts of aesthetic value and autonomy is therefore markedly different from the other strains of contemporary aesthetic discourse examined so far in this thesis. In particular, it resists the concerted attempt described in chapter one to rethink the metaphysical foundations of the aesthetic. The judges quoted above tend to deploy the concept of aesthetic autonomy in a more or less unreconstructed way, with their comments often betraying an insistence on something like Kant's conception of disinterestedness; Kant argued that properly aesthetic judgements of beauty are free from the determinations of 'interest',

---

[79] Herrnstein Smith, p. 33.

'concepts' or 'needs'.[80] This doctrine is echoed in the judges' comments above regarding the purity of their aesthetic evaluations.

Prize culture therefore represses a tension or aporia in the concept of aesthetic autonomy. It glosses over the fact that, as Rancière argues, a certain ambivalence structures the Enlightenment model in which the aesthetic is seen as distanced from everyday life, but related to it. Rancière says that this equivocation appears, for example, in Schiller's formulation of aesthetic autonomy:

> [Schiller] declares that 'Man is only completely human when he plays', and assures us that this paradox is capable 'of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living'. We could reformulate this thought as follows: there exists a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely *the aesthetic*.[81]

Doctrines of aesthetic autonomy, then, divorce the aesthetic from the present conditions of social life while at the same time deriving the notion of autonomy from the 'hope of "changing life"'.[82] Art is not bound to present conditions, but is capable of imagining alternatives. As a result, 'art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity'.[83] Since at least Schiller's time, art has been elevated for its lack of contamination by (and offer to transcend the conditions of) social life—yet this raises the question of how an art divorced from life could effect change. Rancière calls the dominance of this complex of ideas about art 'the aesthetic regime'—as opposed to the earlier 'ethical' and 'representative' regimes, which did not posit the aesthetic as a sphere of activity separate from social life.[84]

Rancière gives us a vocabulary for understanding the comparisons made in *How to Be Both* between different historical understandings of art. For example,

---

[80] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. by Nicholas Walker, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 36, 41, 42.

[81] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 115.

[82] Ibid., p. 116.

[83] Ibid., p. 133.

[84] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 22, 20, 21.

Franchesco finds it natural to view the frescoes in terms of work, worth and money because the aesthetic regime had not taken hold in the fifteenth century. By contrast, George finds herself reflecting on the way that museums and galleries organise our reception of certain objects *as artworks* in way that is typical of the aesthetic regime. George asks after the whereabouts of del Cossa's *St Vincent Ferrer* in the National Gallery, but the guide doesn't know where it is: 'Probably no one ever asks about anything here except the really famous paintings, which makes it fair enough, not to know, because a person can't be expected to know about every single painting in a gallery of hundreds, no, thousands, even if he or she just works on the information desk of what's just one wing of it.'[85] *St Vincent Ferrer* was originally a panel in an altarpiece, and was therefore made to be shown within a specific political, symbolic, and devotional context.[86] It is now understood to belong to the same category (that of 'painting' or artwork) as, say, a Rembrandt or a Cézanne. Notably, the fact that the aesthetic is a secular category—an artwork need not be religious—elides the historical purpose and function of the altarpiece. In a manner typical of the aesthetic regime, *St Vincent Ferrer* has been removed from its original religious setting by an archival logic which subsumes a wide variety of objects under the single category of artwork. It is the gallery's organisational system, dictated by the aesthetic regime, which has allowed the painting to become unlocatable and decontextualised.

George's observation that certain paintings become 'really famous' while 'hundreds, no thousands' sink into obscurity also shows an awareness that a culture's values arbitrarily shape the canonisation of particular artworks—a notion which obviously redounds on the contemporary prize culture which Smith finds herself part of. Carol voices a similar awareness that value is culturally constructed and subjectively assigned, remarking: 'Though, you know, it might just be that our eyes are more used to finding some parts of the room more beautiful than the others, because of what we now expect beauty to be. It might be *our* standards rather than *theirs*.'[87] By counterposing del Cossa's materialist aesthetics with the contemporary

---

[85] Smith, p. 338.

[86] Art UK, *St Vincent Ferrer* <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/saint-vincent-ferrer-115248> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[87] Smith, p. 244.

aesthetic regime, *How to Be Both* investigates the importance of institutional frameworks for making and evaluating art. The novel insists on the contingency and fictitiousness of the authority claimed and the value put into circulation by cultural institutions that govern the reception and evaluation of art. The book award's predominant function is evaluation, and, as English notes, it is also one of the most prominent cultural institutions in contemporary life. As such, the literary prize is a central part of the institutional framework thematised in Smith's novel.

Art and the market

As I intimated above, it seems that there is something belated about prize discourse's insistence on the purity of aesthetic judgements. While, as English describes, book awards continue to base their authority on the precept of disinterested judgement, the very existence of literary prizes testifies to the fact that the cultural and economic spheres are inextricably linked. Moreover, the twentieth century saw the notion of aesthetic autonomy come under sustained pressure from theorists who argued that cultural production was now totally driven or programmed by the logic of the market. In a further complication, contemporary articulations of the aesthetic are characterised by a strong disinclination to make claims of purity or disinterestedness. My readings of *How to Be Both* and *The Line of Beauty* in the following sections trace the ways in which these novels address concerns about autonomy raised by prize culture by delineating distinctively twenty-first-century accounts of the literary and the aesthetic.

Contemporary fears about prize culture are often informed by arguments such as Adorno and Horkheimer's contention that, as of the twentieth century, 'the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass production and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society'.[88] The historical conception of the artwork, they argue, involved difference, but the culture industry drives all cultural production towards sameness:

---

[88] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 62.

> The moment in the work of art by which it transcends reality […] does not consist in achieved harmony, in the questionable unity of form and content, inner and outer, individual and society, but in those traits in which the discrepancy emerges, in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for energy. Instead of exposing itself to failure, in which the style of the great work of art has always negated itself, the inferior work has relied on its similarity to others, the surrogate of identity.[89]

The twentieth century, in this account, saw the work of art downgraded to a commodity for cultural consumption in an industry which favours homogeneity.

Ngai argues that, as a result of the homogenisation of culture and the postmodern collapse of the artwork/commodity distinction, 'neither art nor beautiful/sublime nature remains the obvious go-to model for reflecting on aesthetic experience as a whole'.[90] These categories, and the powerful affects they evoke, have given way to the trivial and the diffuse: '[p]aradoxically, in tandem with the new commercial powers consolidating around the global production and consumption of art, the hyperaestheticized postwar society of the United States was one in which "art was to survive by virtue of being weak"'.[91] The forms of aesthetic experience and evaluation ascendant under capitalism, Ngai argues, do not trade on powerful feelings and unequivocal judgements, but register the inception of a new weakness and ambivalence in contemporary aesthetic discourse. As discussed in my introduction, however, Ngai argues that 'bourgeois art's reflexive preoccupation with its own "powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world" is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis'.[92] In fact, one of the key moves of this thesis is to invert Ngai's suggestion, arguing that it is fiction's power to put the truth 'onstage' which allows it to reframe institutional discourses as themselves a type of fiction.

It is this capacity of the literary which *How to Be Both* and *The Line of Beauty* put to work in order to contest critical narratives about the culture industry and

---

[89] Ibid., pp. 65-66.

[90] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Pres, 2012), p. 20.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 2.

postmodernism. These narratives often implicitly structure public discourse about contemporary British prize culture, which is repeatedly subject to criticisms that the same kinds of books tend to be rewarded over and over again. This is particularly apparent in commentary about the overlap between the Goldsmiths and other prizes. As Rachel Darling observes in an article about the proliferation of literary awards, *How to Be Both* picked up the Goldsmiths and a Saltire, while Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* took the 2013 prize for innovative fiction as well as the more populist Women's Prize for Fiction (then known as the Baileys). This overlap, Darling argues, raises the following question:

> That a novel celebrated for experimental and uncompromising narrative style can win both a prize for innovative fiction and also a much more mainstream award (and others besides) can be seen in two ways. Either it's a comment on the growing acceptance and demand for original fiction, or a cause to question the value of literary prizes when the same books repeatedly monopolise accolades.[93]

Similarly, author Nikesh Shukla has argued that '[w]ith three of this year's Goldsmiths shortlist already longlisted for the Booker prize, it's hard to see how Goldsmiths' search for the "qualities of creative daring" is any different from the Booker's aspiration to find the "best, eligible full-length novel"'.[94] This homogeneity, he thinks, exposes something potentially tautologous in the nature of prize culture: 'when these prizes start to blur together, you start to wonder whether there's any point to literary awards'.[95] Seen in this light, prize culture begins to look like either a symptom of or a mechanism for the market's homogenisation of literary production.

Prizes, then, are a particular focus of anxieties about the relationship between art and market in the wake of postmodernism. *The Line of Beauty*, a novel set in the era

---

[93] Rachel Darling, 'A Double Win for Ali Smith Indicates there Are Too Many Book Prizes—But So What?', *The Conversation*, 13 November 2014 <https://theconversation.com/a-double-win-for-ali-smith-indicates-there-are-too-many-book-prizes-but-so-what-33422> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[94] Nikesh Shukla, 'The 2014 Goldsmiths Prize Shortlist: Why It's Neither "Creative" Nor "Daring"', *Guardian*, 2 October 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/oct/02/2014-goldsmiths-prize-not-creative-or-daring> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[95] Ibid.

when postmodernism achieved ascendancy as a cultural diagnosis, explicitly addresses the status of the aesthetic under the conditions of late capitalism. Nick's lover Wani owns a 'vulgar' and 'postmodern' flat, 'full of eclectic features' and 'random cultural allusions' ('the Gothic bedroom had an Egyptian bathroom)', which exemplifies the treatment of history as a 'repertoire' of styles and recalls Jameson's identification of architecture as the prime medium for the expression of postmodernism.[96] This architectural pastiching is also found in the financial sector's expression of its new Thatcherite confidence: 'Kesslers [a fictional finance group] had just rebuilt their City premises, with a steel and glass atrium and high-tech dealing-floors fitted in behind the old palazzo façade.'[97] The aesthetic sphere becomes a marketplace of styles, which are treated as fungible commodities by architectural combination and recombination—a technique which Kesslers uses to articulate its neoliberal modernity without sacrificing its old-money heritage.

Nick also takes up an essentially postmodernist stance, translating his classical aesthetic ideals into a typically 1980s decadence. He articulates his vision through 'Ogee', a periodical he plans to publish with Wani: 'It's going to be an art magazine—very high quality photography—very high quality printing and paper—all extraordinary exotic things, buildings, weird Indian sculptures.'[98] Wani's exceedingly rich father, who holds the purse strings, demands: 'And who do you suppose is going to want to buy that?'[99] In response: 'Wani shrugged and spread his hands. "It will be beautiful."'[100] While the novel begins with Nick dedicated to a fin-de-siècle lionisation of art for art's sake, the middle section finds him unable to separate the experience of aesthetic beauty from capitalist luxury. Watching Wani rack up in the en-suite of his childhood bedroom while Sunday lunch goes on downstairs, Nick reflects on how he 'loved the etiquette of the thing, the chopping with a credit card, the passing of the tightly rolled note, the procedure courteous and dry, "all done with money", as Wani said—it was part of the larger beguilement, and once it had begun it squeezed him

---

[96] Jameson, p. 2.

[97] Hollinghurst, p. 203.

[98] Ibid, p. 224.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid.

with its charm and promise'.[101] The reappearance of that significant word 'promise' indicates that Nick's pursuit of the mystery of beauty has become conflated with his infatuation with money and decadence.

As Andrew Eastham argues, this is possible because 'post-modernism shares many of the tendencies of Aestheticism—the embrace of life-style and decorative form, the celebration of irony as a mode of freedom'.[102] The two modes differ, however, precisely over the question of aesthetic autonomy:

> The central difference is that whilst Victorian Aestheticism held the artistic sphere at a distance with the hope of dragging life into its orbit, post-modern culture tends to embrace the present as an already constituted total art-work, its flaws or vulgarities negotiated and ameliorated by irony. One of the consequences of this is that it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the aesthetic realm from the political and the economic.[103]

The Line of Beauty, then, can be read as a parable about the dangerous continuities between aestheticism and postmodernism, and how the slide from one to the other entails the loss of political and ethical possibilities: the former offers the hope of changing life, as Rancière puts it, while the latter collapses this utopian promise into an aestheticisation of the present social order. In narrativising this progression, *The Line of Beauty* addresses anxieties about the commercialisation of art which underpin criticisms of the literary award.

The novel also elicits a deconstructive thinking of aesthetics which works against the narrative of postmodernism. This thinking is augured by Nick's repeated return to the figure of the line, be it the line of beauty or a line of cocaine. While the narrative of postmodernism holds that the category of the aesthetic was subsumed under the logic of capital in the twentieth century, the line of beauty—originally described by William Hogarth—persists in Hollinghurst's novel as a deconstructive moment in the metaphysics of aesthetics. This is because the line is what Forbes

---

[101] Ibid., p. 216.

[102] Andrew Eastham, 'Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian Aestheticism and Post-Modern Culture in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*', *Textual Practice*, 20 (2006), 509–27 (p. 517).

[103] Ibid.

Morlock has described as 'the most minimal mark of reading'.[104] Like the various impressions and remnants that intrigue *Pond*'s narrator, the line is the scantest mark it is possible to make in a sign system. As Nick describes the 'onion-dome' double line of beauty that is the ogee, it is 'pure expression, decorative not structural'.[105] It is 'the snakelike flicker of an instinct', a momentary and fragmentary mark, its minimal relation to signification emphasised by the comparison to the bestial: to the movement of a snake's tongue, or the trail it leaves in the sand.[106] This line is 'an animating principle' for 'Ogee' and for Nick's own aestheticism.[107] His preoccupation with the minimal mark of beauty or signification suggests a resistance to the fully-elaborated aesthetic theory to which he might otherwise seem allied.

Indeed, for Hogarth, the line of beauty is a piece or part, and has to be assembled with other marks to create a beautiful artwork. Hogarth writes, for example, that 'by having partly shewn that those lines which have most variety in themselves, contribute most towards the production of beauty; we will next shew how lines may be put together, so as to make pleasing figures or compositions'.[108] The line of beauty *contributes* to 'the production of beauty', which requires more of an assemblage, a system, a conceptual framework. The value or concept of beauty itself is only thinkable within a structure or metaphysics, but—as Morlock says of another line, which became the subject of a competition between Apelles and Protogenes—the line 'depicts no story', '[n]ot even the element of a story, say, a character'; instead, 'the work measures the edge of what may count as work'.[109] While minimal, however, the line is still the incipience of a sign system:

> At the very least, it marks. Any mark—to be a mark—must be remarkable and Apelles' is exactly that. It will express personality, demonstrate ability and certify identity, but it must first be recognisable as a mark, as someone's mark. Its line is addressed,

[104] Forbes Morlock, 'Graphic Ambivalent', *Oxford Literary Review*, 31 (2009), 49–63 (p. 51).

[105] Hollinghurst, p. 200.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid., p. 225.

[108] William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. by Ronald Paulson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 42.

[109] Morlock, p. 52.

demanding from its audience recognition as a signature and, thus, as the inscription of a name.[110]

The line therefore takes the systems of authorship, artwork and aesthetics down to the level of the trace. In contrast to Nick's high Enlightenment aesthetics (his commitment to the beautiful and the sublime), his preoccupation with the line is best understood as a preoccupation with the edge or erasure of this metaphysics, signalled by the limit-case of the mark. While postmodernism is often understood as the evacuation or appropriation of the metaphysical concept of the aesthetic, the line, as a minimal and material mark, remains live and non-appropriable.

Postmodernism's narrative of the collapse of aesthetic autonomy under capitalism seems to foreclose any possibility of exceeding or escaping the logic of the market—but, as discussed above in and in chapter one, there are problems with grounding a radical aesthetics in the discourse of autonomy anyway. Nick's fascination with the line of beauty shows him attempting to think about the aesthetic at the minimal level of the mark or trace, as opposed to approaching it as a fully-conceptualised system of beliefs, values and institutions. In other words, the line of beauty offers an alternative to both the classical, metaphysical aesthetic and to postmodernism. This is, to echo Timothy Clark, the 'force' of the literary disturbing institution.[111] The line, as a deconstructive moment, as the minimal mark of reading, augurs the possibility that the chain could always be broken, and the order could always be otherwise. The last section of this chapter describes how Smith similarly mobilises fiction's institutive or inventive capacities against the programmatic demands of the literary market.

Invention

My analysis of British prize culture so far has surveyed various concerns about the impact of book awards on literature. English observes that the competitive nature of prizes often feels like an inappropriate way of approaching literary works, and describes the great sense of unease evoked by this comparative and economistic way

---

[110] Ibid.

[111] Timothy Clark, 'Literary Force: Institutional Values', *Culture Machine*, 1 (1999) [n.p.].

of evaluating aesthetic objects. The fact that book awards confer prestige, which is translatable to monetary gain, also stokes anxieties about the contemporary proximity of the cultural and economic spheres. Shukla and Darling's comments on the overlap between Goldsmiths and Booker nominees testify to a widespread concern that even prizes intended to circumvent the homogenising effects of the market are still strongly influenced by it. Indeed, as Morrison's article about the aims and wording of the Goldsmiths Prize shows, even inventiveness—the attempt to break with established convention—is a market imperative. My final reading of *How to Be Both* argues that it allegorises art's struggle to meaningfully break with convention in order to bring forth something genuinely novel, reflecting precisely the quandary played out in the wording of the Goldsmiths Prize rubric.

With its jaded disposition towards a contemporary visual culture whose icon in the novel is a surveillance camera, *How to Be Both* could easily be taken as a pessimistic, Frankfurt-style critique of the culture industry.[112] We might read this sentiment, for example, in George's response to an advert: 'Because, George thought […] how can it be that there's an advert on TV with dancing bananas unpeeling themselves in it and teabags doing a dance, and her mother will never see that advert? How can the world be this vulgar? | How can that advert exist and her mother not exist in the world?'[113] Adverts are often particularly uneasy cultural artefacts because they are examples of a capitalist genre but can take art-like forms: an advert can be an image, a small portion of text, a short film, or a song. Ngai even compares Adorno's aphorisms to 'advertising soundbites', and argues that Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* exemplify the similarity of the avant-garde fragment to the small and self-contained capitalist form of the commodity.[114] Loud, comedic and frivolous, the advert is a weak or "low" commodity form which contrasts jarringly with the seriousness of George's mourning.

However, George's opinion of the advert can be read differently. I think that George is genuinely lamenting the fact that 'her mother will never see that advert'

---

[112] Smith, p. 187.

[113] Ibid., p. 201.

[114] Ngai, pp. 101, 4.

because, while it is trivial, it is also whimsical and lively. Indeed, Smith's work often takes pop culture objects such as chart hits, Hollywood films and television shows quite seriously (the song 'Let's Twist Again' is another example in *How to Be Both*), showing a strong disinclination to dismiss them as meaningless commodities.[115] This refusal challenges us to understand how Smith's thinking of the cultural field cuts across the categories of artwork and commodity, and how her writing figures possibilities for invention or surprise within the powerfully determining arena of the market.

The questions posed by Smith's novel therefore recall the Goldsmiths Prize's particular struggles with the problem of invention. As Morrison observes, anything which appears genuinely innovative is immediately susceptible to becoming passé, and the drive towards novelty—while articulated in the discourse of experimentalism as a form of resistance to the commodification of art—is a market imperative anyway. Another challenge facing the Goldsmiths is that an experiment cannot be extracted from the context of tradition: 'The Latin verb "*novo*" suggests refreshment and alteration as well as invention. No writer can entirely break with the past. To depart from tradition you first have to know what it is.'[116] Similarly, the Goldsmiths Prize also has to negotiate the difficulty that it gives institutional recognition to writing that is supposed to break with systems of institutional recognition.

Derrida identifies all three of these problems as integral to the very concept of invention. An invention, he argues, 'will only receive its status of invention […] to the extent that this socialization of the invented thing is protected by a system of conventions that will at the same time ensure its inscription in a common history, its belonging to a culture: to a heritage, a patrimony, a pedagogical tradition, a discipline, a chain of generations'.[117] As such, '[i]nvention *begins* by being susceptible to repetition, exploitation, reinscription'.[118] Invention, then, has to be recognised and legitimised by the structures that it supposedly breaks with; it must be 'granted a patent, the title of invention—and that presupposes a contract, consensus, promise,

---

[115] Smith, p. 190.

[116] Morrison.

[117] Derrida, 'Psyche', p. 6.

[118] Ibid.

commitment, institution, law, legality, legitimation'.[119] This is another way of accounting for the truism that particular literary experiments soon become repeatable or old hat—that, as Morrison observes, novelty 'soon wears off'.

As I noted above, Derrida also identifies an analogy between literary invention and the programmatic search for innovation found in science and technology, a schematic approach more obviously allied to capitalist narratives of growth and progress:

> On the one hand, people invent *stories* (fictional or fabulous), and on the other hand they invent *machines*, technical devices or mechanisms, in the broadest sense of the word. […] Invention as *production* in both cases […] *Fabula* or *fictio*, on the one hand, and, on the other, *tekhnē, epistemē, istoria, methodos*, that is, art or know-how, knowledge and research, information, procedure, and so forth.[120]

The inventions of 'knowledge and research' or 'procedure' are the products of end-orientated programs. As such, they are not inventions in the sense of being genuinely new or surprising.

This is because, for Derrida, the new and unexpected, that which does not appear to be possible, is the only thing that can be properly called an invention: 'an invention has to declare itself to be the invention of that which did not appear to be possible; otherwise, it only makes explicit a program of possibilities within the economy of the same'.[121] This creates a paradox wherein 'the only possible invention would be the invention of the impossible', but 'an invention of the impossible is impossible'.[122] Out of this paradox, the only way to safeguard the possibility of invention is to be open to the 'new' or 'other'.[123] Inventiveness, then, is predicated on openness to the unexpected and unforeseen:

> This writing is liable to the other, opened to and by the other, to the work of the other; it works at not letting itself be enclosed or dominated by this economy of the same in

---

[119] Ibid., p. 5.

[120] Ibid., p. 10.

[121] Ibid., p. 44.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid., pp. 43, 46.

its totality, which guarantees both the irrefutable power and the closure of the classical concept of invention, its politics, its technoscience, its institutions. These are not to be rejected, criticized, or combated, far from it—and all the less so since the economic circle of invention is only a movement for reappropriating exactly what it sets in motion, the differance of the other.[124]

How to Be Both's portrayal of aesthetic creation suggests a similar ethics of invention: Franchesco is interested in what might be possible within, beside, or just beyond the generic conventions of fresco painting. Accordingly, the novel commits itself to the felicities of surprise, of things being other than expected.

The conventions Franchesco is supposed to abide by are made very clear. Wandering as a ghostly presence through the National Gallery, where some of their paintings are displayed alongside other similar examples of Renaissance art, Franchesco remarks: 'St Paolo's always bald cause bald's how you're supposed to do St. Paolo'.[125] However, we quickly learn that Franchesco had a penchant for deviating scandalously from the canonical portrayals of religious figures. Franchesco comes across one of their own paintings featuring an 'old Christ', 'when everyone knows Christ's never to be anything other than *unwrinkled eyes shining hair the colour of ripe nut from hazel tree* […] *no older than 33 and still a most beautiful child of men*'.[126] Franchesco is shocked by their own flouting of the rules: 'why would I paint an old (blaspheming)?'[127] These observations quickly establish the regulated and homogenous conventions within which Franchesco has to work.

For example, when Borse delivers strict instructions for the representation of the Roman gods, he emphasises the importance of sticking with the program and painting the deities with 'THEIR ASSOCIATED SYMBOLS' and 'USUAL ATTRIBUTES': 'THE DESIGN FOR THIS. CAN BE FOUND. IN THE ANTEROOM. […] STUDY IT CLOSELY. DO NOT DEVIATE. FROM ITS INSTRUCTION. OR ITS EXAMPLE. OR ITS DEMONSTRATION. IN ANY WAY.'[128] In conversation, his more

---

[124] Ibid., p. 46.

[125] Smith, p. 6.

[126] Ibid., p. 7.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid., p. 110.

casual tone suggests the degree of familiarity and iterability these 'symbols' and 'attributes' have accrued:

> Representations of the Fates—here. Spring image, fertility kind of thing, use your imagination—that area there. Apollo—there. Venus—there. Minerva—there. All in chariots. Minerva will need unicorns. Venus will need swans. Apollo will need Aurora driving and he'll need a bow and arrow. He'll also need a lute and the delphic tripod and the snakeskin.[129]

The repeated use of the future tense ('will need') implies a strict plan which must be fulfilled as directed: present conventions program future creation. Even the invitation 'use your imagination' suggests that 'fertility kind of thing' is a well-known and clearly-defined remit within which there can be minimal improvisation—though it does clearly leave some margin for divergence from the expected. By and large, Franchesco sticks to these conventions—there is little choice on the matter, given that they are what the patron has requested—but also breaks with them to make some additions: 'I began with May and Apollo : I worked hard on the horses : I *invented* 4 falcons all sitting on a birdframe : I added the bow and arrow but had to give a standing girl minstrel the lute'.[130] Similarly, stumped by some of the instructions, Franchesco wonders: 'What was a delphic tripod? | I painted a 3-legged stool with a snakeskin draped over it. | When he saw it, the Falcon nodded. | (Phew.)'[131] Through a combination of sanctioned improvisation and guesswork, Franchesco finds a margin for experimentation and invention.

Franchesco also includes inventions which have the feel of stranger and more serious deviations from the expected, such as when they 'painted all the citizens of the Ferrara court, not as they looked now but as an infinite crowd of babies swarming out of a hole in the ground as if conjured from nothing'.[132] As with the dubious tripod, Franchesco gets away with this: 'When he came up on the scaffolding and saw this the Falcon laughed out loud : he was pleased enough to drop his hand to my breeches

---

[129] Ibid., pp. 110-11.

[130] Ibid., p. 112 [emphasis added].

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

to take hold of me where something or nothing should be. | Ah! He said. | I'd surprised him. | He sobered. | I see, he said.'[133] The courtly babies strike the Falcon as a delightful surprise; then he discovers that Franchesco is also a surprise. Recalling Sarah Wood's interpretation (discussed in chapter one) of rhyme's capacity to invent diversions from etymology as the installation of historical fact, the character of Franchesco figures the possibility that history—as fact or narrative—might always be otherwise than we think.

Indeed, in the twenty-first-century part of the book, Carol remarks of the fresco: 'The way [Franchesco] used that figure of the effeminate boy, the boyish girl, to balance the powerful masculine effect of the worker, and how this figure holds both an arrow and a hoop, male and female symbols one in each hand. On this alone I could make a reasonably witty argument for its originator being female, if I had to.'[134] In fact, there is a suggestion in the novel that the del Cossa section is the product of George's imagination—that she has invented it—because she takes her mother's 'witty argument' and uses it for a school project, reasoning that she and her friend H 'can make a great deal of it up and not be marked wrong because nobody will know either way'.[135] This is not to say that the del Cossa section is "merely" George's invention; on the contrary, the point is that there is always a possibility that the past (and, for that matter, the present or future) could always be otherwise than we think. Elsewhere in the novel, Franchesco is addressed as '[y]ou who exceed expectations', and although this seems to primarily refer to their gender identity, it could equally suggest that del Cossa embodies a wider openness to the possibility for things to be otherwise.[136]

Indeed, the novel seems to espouse a general ethics of surprise and invention. One epigraph, for example, is from Eugenio Montale's poem 'The Eel', and reads: 'green spirit seeking life | where only drought and desolation sting; | spark that says

---

[133] Ibid., p. 113.

[134] Ibid., p. 297.

[135] Ibid., p. 323.

[136] Ibid., p. 98.

that everything begins | when everything seems charcoal'.[137] The epigraph emphasises the liveliness which can emerge apparently from nothing, from 'charcoal' — which is both the residue of life and a source of energy. The 'spark that says that everything begins' gestures towards what Derrida identifies as the 'inaugural' or 'instituting' nature of invention: an invention is a first instance of something.[138] This emphasis on the inaugural is also particularly strong in the way Franchesco's section of the novel begins. The first word of Franchesco's narration is '[h]o', which, as George discovers when she looks it up in the dictionary, 'meant an exclamation of surprise'.[139] Jerked out of del Cossa by the shock of being brought back to life, the word 'ho' marks the inauguration of their narrative, staging the opening of the text as a moment of invention which breaks with the past in order to institute itself *as* a beginning. *How to Be Both* therefore stages an openness to surprise and the unexpected which is necessary to keep open a space for invention.

Accordingly, Smith's novel seeks out moments of chance or surprise in convention and history. As Franchesco remarks, 'nothing is finished or unchangeable except death and even death will bend a little if what you tell of it is told right'.[140] In place of the rigidity of convention, del Cossa seeks out the contingency of invention, making their story a kind of allegory of the question facing both Smith as a contemporary experimentalist and the Goldsmiths Prize as an award for innovation. As well as figuring experimentation and invention, the frescoes also come to represent the logic of '[b]oth' promised in the novel's title. By portraying an artwork that is also an expression of ideology and political power, Smith suggests that the culture industry does not succeed in collapsing the categories of artwork and commodity such that objects' aesthetic and ideological functions are indistinguishable, but that our experiences and interpretations of such objects are heterogeneous and variegated. The logic of 'both' suggested by the title comes to denote the play of convention and invention, sameness and difference, program and surprise, art and market, in everything from frescoes to adverts.

---

[137] Ibid, np.

[138] Derrida, 'Psyche', pp. 5, 12.

[139] Smith, pp. 3, 324.

[140] Ibid, p. 95.

The novel's dual narrative structure, with one foot in Renaissance religious art and one in the contemporary culture industry, suggests that each part allegorises the other to a certain extent, which is the basis of my argument that Smith is here reflecting on the possibilities open to her for invention in a culture subject to its own conventions and limitations. Indeed, Derrida remarks on the possible reading of 'invention as allegory': 'invention of the other' as 'myth or fable'.[141] Allegory's etymological root in 'allo', meaning other or different, suggests to Derrida his theme of the invention of the completely unprecedented or other—which also seems to resonate with the reversible allegorical structure of *How to Be Both*. Each part of the novel imagines how things could have been otherwise: George's part could be read as strange haunting of the past by the future, while Franchesco's narrative is a secret alternate history underlying George's. This reversibility in the relationship between the two halves of the novel is also a *disjuncture* (Jan Dalley calls it a 'broken-backed' text) wherein only one relationship of dependency can logically be entertained at a time.[142] If George has imagined Franchesco's narrative, then the latter part of the novel is logically subordinate to the former. On the other hand, parts of George's story are told from Franchesco's point of view, as if it is Franchesco who is making up George. As signalled by the reversibility of the two parts of the novel in the print run, the exact nature of the relationship between the two halves is finally undecidable, leaving each free from overdetermination by the other.

The recurrent logic of 'both' in Smith's novel is mirrored in the Goldsmiths Prize's equivocal nature as an institution sanctioning what is supposed to break with convention—what might, in Derrida's terms, be deemed a 'counter-institutional' force.[143] The counter-institutional, as Simon Morgan-Wortham writes, is a '"with-against" movement, a turning toward and away from, a measure of both distance and proximity'.[144] Despite the 'against' in 'with-against', the counter-institution does not

---

[141] Derrida, 'Psyche', p. 3.

[142] Jan Dalley, '"How to Be Both", by Ali Smith', *Financial Times*, 5 September 2014

<https://www.ft.com/content/aaa87344-3386-11e4-85f1-00144feabdc0> [accessed 24 January 2020].

[143] Simon Morgan Wortham, *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 8.

[144] Ibid., p. 1.

denote a definitive, different, better institution, but 'may come to "replace" or, indeed, rethink existing institutions only according to an "interminable process" that […] hardly promotes closure, balance, resolution'.[145] The ambivalent gesture of the Goldsmiths, which incorporates novels into a canon and institutional framework while simultaneously querying the logic of canonicity, is distinctive in the prize landscape for the way it registers and enacts this tension.

Conclusion

How to Be Both and *The Line of Beauty* reflect on the key enabling fiction underpinning prize culture, thematising the processes through which literary value is instituted and naturalised. They show that the concepts of aesthetic value and aesthetic autonomy are fictions; that the institution of the literary prize is grounded in a set of ideas which only continue to function through a common belief in their truth. My readings of these novels have traced the ways in which they construct literary value as a kind of secrecy or fabulous (yet meaningful) attribute. Conversely, they also locate a certain power in the literary as an institutive force: it can bring things into being. In their thinking of the inventive powers of fiction—as against the apparently rigorously determining power of institutions such as prizes—these texts are implicitly defences of the novel, emphasising the genre's capacity to reframe the discourses of value that are brought to bear on it.

While this thesis places each of the novels it examines within a set of wider contexts—including that of an emergent canon called "contemporary fiction", as well as the institutional discourses that frame the reception of literary works—it also stages the capacity of these texts to perturb or displace these generalising frameworks. As I proposed in the introduction to this thesis, this displacement can be understood in terms of the logic of the signature or singularity of a work. Literary prizes have a particularly strange relationship with the notion of a signature. They single out particular novels as original and inventive—but, as Morrison acknowledges, all novels are singular in that they are experiments. The logic of the prize is therefore a peculiar way to treat the question of singularity or generality. As such, the book award

---

[145] Ibid, p. 18.

exemplifies the tension outlined in this thesis between institution and signature. Hollinghurst's figure of the line and Smith's thinking of invention show how authors continually address the question of singularity or the signature while still caught up in a field of generality such as the market or canon.

While prizes assign literary value, they do so according to a particularly narrow—often implicitly economic—definition of the concept. In refusing and rethinking this discourse of value in various ways, Smith and Hollinghurst's texts demonstrate the force of the literary, which is a power to put the values and truth claims of institutional discourses 'onstage', as Derrida says. Chapter four also takes up this central question of value, examining how the now decades-old discourse of "the death of the novel" has found renewed currency as the internet threatens traditional publishing. This chapter has argued that Smith and Hollinghurst's novels overwrite the narrow conception of literary value represented by prizes with a broader defence of the instituting power of fiction. Similarly, the following chapter will assess how Smith's novel *Autumn*, as well as texts by Olivia Laing and Gordon Burn, contest the apparent cultural and economic devaluation of the novel—a problem which is felt particularly keenly in the institution of publishing.

CHAPTER FOUR: PUBLISHING

The previous chapter examined how book prizes produce and circulate cultural capital. The current chapter extends this analysis of literary value by attending to the apparently waning fortunes of the novel and traditional publishing in the internet age. Over the last few decades the publishing industry has seen widespread consolidation, with most of the major houses becoming part of massive media conglomerates that prioritise shareholder value—often, it is suspected, at the expense of literary value. At the same time, technological changes have made it possible to do everything from editing and typesetting to marketing and distribution on tighter timelines and budgets. These technological developments facilitate the fulfilment of commercial imperatives to speed up production and trim the fat at a time when the profit motive is often thought to outweigh considerations about literary merit. These changes have created a sense that, in the new media environment, publishing's traditional

institutional characteristics—particularly its long lead times—are increasingly outdated.

My analysis of the publishing industry considers these technologically-driven changes in the material production of books alongside an analogous cultural conversation about the novel's apparent outdatedness in a media landscape dominated by instantaneous modes of communication and ephemeral cultural forms. Like publishing, the novel is increasingly seen as slow and archaic in the context of the new media environment, in which faster communications foster an aesthetics of speed, immediacy and informational transparency to which the novel is often imagined to be ill-suited. While the previous chapter described cultural anxieties about potentially fabulous or overinflated literary value, my analysis here is directed towards a sense that—as Pieter Vermeulen argues—the novel is losing its historical function and value.[1] This chapter traces the ways in which this erosion has been inextricably linked in the public imagination with recent developments in publishing, arguing that contemporary authors such as Ali Smith, Olivia Laing and Gordon Burn are increasingly producing fictions which contest the narrative of the novel's obsolescence.

Smith's *Autumn*, Laing's *Crudo: A Novel* and Burn's *Born Yesterday: The News as a Novel* were all written at speed and published as soon as possible on completion. The goal in all three cases was to make the novels feel up-to-date. Smith wrote her book over the course of a few months in 2016 and her publisher agreed to bring it out almost as soon as she delivered her manuscript, with the publication date falling in October of that year. Smith's aim was to capture something ephemeral about the mood of the nation in the wake of the EU referendum, and she wanted to ensure that the book came out while the atmosphere it portrayed was still current. The fabric of Laing's novel is woven from Kathy Acker citations, Tweets, current affairs, and autobiographical material—hence the title, which refers to a style of raw cuisine: these are found materials, put together quickly and without editing. Anticipating Smith and Laing's experiments by almost a decade, *Born Yesterday* was written over a short space

---

[1] Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), p. 3.

of time, the summer of 2007, and published in April 2008. Like the other two novels, it focusses largely on real news stories from the period during which it was written. In common with *Crudo*, the protagonist (also called Burn) shares many autobiographical details with the author.

All three texts mimic the modern experience of consuming rolling news coverage, constantly checking Twitter, and communicating instantly with people all over the world. The authors' comments in various interviews all suggest that they wrote these texts in order to investigate how the novel might be capable of representing the speed and disorder of twenty-first-century life through an aesthetics of immediacy. This is, I think, why both Laing and Burn express their commitment to the genre by including the word 'novel' in their subtitles. This gesture emphasises the form's inherent concern with the new and innovative, and therefore its suitability for addressing the very contemporary developments that are considered to be the its greatest existential threats. *Autumn*, *Crudo* and *Born Yesterday* engage with these questions at a formal level, particularly in their handling of narrative time, but they also achieve this by intervening in the material processes of publishing. All three novelists asked for the normal timelines and procedures of traditional publishing to be compressed in order to mimic the internet's more immediate forms of communication and publication.

Smith, Laing and Burn's novels therefore exemplify what Daniel N. Sinykin has described as contemporary fiction's propensity to reflect on its own production in and through the complicated networks of the publishing industry. Sinykin argues that this tendency owes to growing concerns about the marketisation of fiction in the 'conglomerate era' of publishing:

> Publishing houses expanded and, beginning in the 1960s, were purchased by one media conglomerate after another. Conglomerates pressured publishers to increase their profits. But the rationalization of publishing, its submission to the logic of the market, took time and remains incomplete. Against this rationalization, what comes after postmodernism (all the names for which are bad, so I will call it contemporary),

tends neither to embrace nor struggle against the market but […] attempts to negotiate its complicity.[2]

Publishing's 'rationalization' or 'submission to the logic of the market' crucially takes shape as the demand to speed up or streamline the publishing process, ensuring that businesses and workers only expend the amounts of time and labour that are absolutely required for the extraction of value. Formally mimicking the experience of immediacy fostered by the internet, and intervening to speed up the publishing process, Smith, Laing and Burn's novels yoke together urgent questions about the contemporary role of publishing and the cultural relevance of the novel. As such, they exemplify what Margaret Anne Hutton has described as twenty-first-century fiction's preoccupation with 'the role and status of the novel in the contemporary media ecology'.[3]

My analysis in this chapter moves from an account of material changes in the modern publishing process to a consideration of the conceptual pressures these developments put on definitions of publishing and communication. My point of entry into these debate is a tension between immediacy and mediation: publishing is often thought of as a form of economic, cultural and temporal mediation, while technology and market dictates seem to be driving us towards more apparently immediate or transparent transactions and communications. As such, publishing is under economic and cultural pressure to reduce its mediating role in the dissemination of texts in a contemporary market that privileges immediacy and transparency. These qualities are habitually thought of as belonging to new and social media, but constitutionally opposed to the novel. The demands of the market are therefore experienced as an existential threat to the novel as well as publishing.

However, my readings of Smith, Laing and Burn's texts show how they register the impossibility of immediate communication. Working from Derrida's model of signification, I show how the novels' attempts to render immediacy only highlight the

---

[2] Dan N. Sinykin, 'The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007', *Contemporary Literature*, 58 (2017), 462–91 (pp. 470, 465).

[3] Margaret Anne Hutton, 'Plato, New Media Technologies, and the Contemporary Novel', *Mosaic*, 51 (2018), 179–95 (p. 181).

fact that all communication—and, indeed, all experience—is structured by a certain spacing or mediation. Returning to the Derridean account of fiction mobilised in my previous chapters, my readings show how the novels use their fictionality to render the structure of mediation; fiction emerges as a way of thinking the impossibility of immediacy. In other words, these fictions of immediacy show that immediacy is a fiction. This strategy, I argue, arises in response to current debates about the threat that the internet and its cultural forms might pose to traditional publishing and the novel. As a result, what the novels have to say about fiction and immediacy redounds on contemporary discourses about the internet and publishing. In short, the novels resist cultural narratives about the seamless, speeded-up nature of contemporary experience and reassert the role of publishing and the novel in twenty-first century literary culture.

Publishing

According to many commentators, the recent technological changes I alluded to in my introduction pose not only an economic but an existential threat to traditional publishing. Michael Bhaskar argues that 'in every understanding [of publishing] regarding content, mediation is key', raising the question of what happens to publishing if its mediating role is no longer required.[4] My review of the recent literature on publishing outlines a basic tension between its role as a cultural or economic mediator and a twenty-first-century acceleration in the drive towards immediate communication. Concomitantly, I will also examine the ways in which the novel is imagined as a slow or opaque cultural form in contrast with the apparent transparency and immediacy of internet-based genres such as the tweet. As such, my analysis draws a link between the materiality of publishing—its physical and economic features—and a set of metaphysical concepts, such as immediacy and mediation, which underpin commonplace understandings of its nature and function.

---

[4] Michael Bhaskar, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), p. 38.

Mediation, for Bhaskar, refers to the ways in which publishing does not simply translate or communicate content, but actively shapes it.[5] He describes publishing as 'a mediating actor-network' in which elements such as 'paper, presses, capital' should be seen as actors capable of producing effects.[6] He argues that, rather than simply making texts public, publishers 'transform relationships in unpredictable ways': '[m]ediators don't just pass things on; they change them'.[7] It is this fundamental mediating role which is now coming under pressure as a result of new technologies:

> While apparently important subjects like ebook formats and digital marketing tactics are certainly of interest, they miss the wider and more fundamental questions arising from the Internet's structure. The foundations of scarcity and intellectual property, the role as a gatekeeper, connector and mediator, are all under assault from forces often misunderstood by contemporary publishers.[8]

For Bhaskar it is not simply that technological developments are rearranging the processes that make up publishing; rather, the fact that the internet is fundamentally changing what it means to publish or disseminate texts raises existential questions for traditional publishing.

Bhaskar argues that while digital publishing appears to elide the publisher's role, and therefore the fact that publication is always mediation, this only exacerbates a common misapprehension about publishing: the belief that it is a transparent act of communication. While the etymology of publishing suggests it simply means 'to make public or known', this definition has always raised more questions than it answered, even before the invention of the internet:

> Publishing was never simple. […] What, exactly, is the difference between a published and an unpublished work? If I leave manuscripts lying around in public, does that in some way constitute publishing? There have long been separations between printing and publishing, and indeed, separations between the many acts now considered core to publishing. Publishing floats somewhere above the production and dissemination

---

[5] Ibid., p. 212.

[6] Ibid., pp. 211-12.

[7] Ibid., pp. 38, 212.

[8] Ibid., p. 21.

of books, neither printing nor distribution, sales, art, copyediting or copyright owning exactly, but a strange conceptual amalgam of all or none of them. The closer one looks the more publishing dissipates into a non-activity with blurred limits. While the Internet poses an existential challenge to publishing, even prior to the web publishing was existentially challenged.[9]

Bhaskar's description emphasises publishing's mediating role by highlighting the various stages a text goes through before it reaches its public. It is therefore easy to see how a text which goes through fewer steps before being made public—such as a blog post or tweet—could be understood to be less mediated, with fewer potentially distorting processes interposed between the text's originator and its readers. If this becomes the new paradigm, then conventional publishing will look hopelessly slow, unwieldy and outdated. However, as signalled by Bhaskar's insistence on the conceptual disarticulation of the various processes which make up publishing, 'making public' is never a straightforward act. Bhaskar's analysis suggests that whatever is true of traditional publishing could also be true of more "immediate" forms of publication: there is no simple, unmediated or transparent act of making public.

John B. Thompson's *Merchants of Culture* has also addressed the threat that new publishing technologies apparently pose to the industry's traditional role and purpose. Thompson outlines the various ways in which technology allows stages in the publishing process to be skipped, condensed, or performed cheaply and without the aid of massive infrastructure and expenditure. As Thompson observes, this raises the question of the essential purpose of publishers:

Given that the publishing chain is not rigid and that particular tasks or functions can be eclipsed by economic and technological change, what reason is there to believe that the role of the publisher itself might not be rendered redundant? What are the core activities or functions of the publisher? Are these activities that could be phased out by new technologies, or that could be done by others? Could publishers themselves be disintermediated from the publishing chain? These questions have been raised often

---

[9] Ibid., pp. 36, 34.

enough in recent years: in an age when anyone can post a text on the internet, who needs a publisher anymore?[10]

Thompson describes a shift towards quicker and more streamlined publishing, but this is clearly a double-edged sword. Publishers are starting to seem economically and technologically 'redundant', but—as Bhaskar suggests—it is widely thought that they fulfil important cultural functions, and that these will be lost if traditional publishing house ceases to exist.

Concerns about these changes in the industry powerfully inform Smith's experiment with her novels' publishing timeframes. Her account of how she conceived of her project *Seasonal*, the quartet of novels of which *Autumn* is the first instalment, both refers to the pressure for literature to be completely up-to-the-moment and gestures towards the challenges that the process of conventional publishing poses for this contemporaneity. Speaking of her realisation that it was time to start writing the quartet, she told interviewer Eric Karl Anderson:

> This might simply be because I knew now it was possible, after Hamish Hamilton made such a beautiful finished book-form for *How to Be Both* in a matter of weeks (!), to turn a book around quite speedily compared to the usual time it takes, and this excited me about how closely to contemporaneousness a finished book might be able to be in the world, and yet how it could also be, all through, very much about stratified, cyclic time.[11]

These remarks register the present currency of 'contemporaneousness' in fiction (which later sections of this chapter will place in a critical context) and raise the issue that the 'usual time it takes' to publish a book would tend to stand in the way of a novel's timeliness. Indeed, as literary journalist Archie Bland observes, '[p]ublishing

---

[10] John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 18-19.

[11] Eric Karl Anderson, 'Ali Smith on Autumn, Brexit, and the Shortness of Life', *Penguin*, 12 October 2016 <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2016/ali-smith-on-autumn/> [accessed 11 February 2020].

lead-times do make it difficult for a book to feel bang up-to-date'.[12] As such, Smith's publishing project speaks to a sense that conventional publishing is out of step with the temporality of the present.

Accordingly, the sped-up production timeline that *Seasonal* demands pressurises one of publishing's key mechanisms for managing its activities, the lead time. Long lead times, measured in years rather than months, are an entrenched institutional feature of trade publishing, and have historically been seen as necessary for several reasons. Firstly, as the Jonathan Cape publisher Dan Franklin has observed, ensuring quality takes time. Editing, for example, is 'exhausting, a long, slow slog through every line of the manuscript'.[13] Ideally, this time-consuming process improves the quality of the text, and is therefore seen as a key tool that publishers use to produce and safeguard literary value, and, in turn, their own prestige. However, in recent years, editing has often been cited as one of the elements of publishing most under threat as technological change and commercial imperatives pressurise lead times. As Alex Clark observes, '[f]or some years now—almost as long as people have been predicting the death of the book—there have been murmurs throughout publishing that books are simply not edited in the way they once were'.[14] The reason for this, she believes, lies in the acceleration and commercialisation of the publishing process:

> The time and effort afforded to books, it is suggested, has been squeezed by budgetary and staffing constraints, by the shift in contemporary publishing towards the large conglomerates, and by a greater emphasis on sales and marketing campaigns and on

---

[12] Archie Bland, '*They Is Us*, by Tama Janowitz', *Independent*, 20 March 2009

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/they-is-us-by-tama-janowitz-5451439.html> [accessed 12 March 2020].

[13] Dan Franklin, 'Commissioning and Editing Modern Fiction', in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. by Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 281.

[14] Alex Clark, 'The Lost Art of Editing', *Guardian*, 11 February 2011

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/11/lost-art-editing-books-publishing> [accessed 12 March 2020].

the efficient supply of products to a retail environment geared towards selling fewer books in larger quantities.[15]

The fate of editing is therefore emblematic of the contemporary 'rationalization' of publishing that Sinykin describes. The example of editing, which is supposed to improve the quality of the work, also shows how the long lead time has historically played a role in reproducing the ideology of literary value.

The long lead time also used to be crucial for producing another kind of value: revenue. As Mike Shatzkin described in 1999, as the internet and other forms of technology were already beginning to accelerate publishing timeframes, there was a time when books simply couldn't be brought to market too quickly, because there was a set schedule for pre-publication sales and marketing activities:

> Since reps required elaborate sales materials to present new titles to accounts, this mandated a defined cycle for new title introductions, giving the house enough time to make the catalog and other sales materials and to organize sales conferences to give the reps, two or three times each year, the information and materials they needed to sell. These conferences became the organizing force behind book marketing.
>
> Working backwards from the sales conference date, deadlines are created for when copy and information of various kinds are needed and, indeed, when a list needs to be 'closed,' when it is time to stop adding more titles.[16]

While Shatzkin argued two decades ago that '[t]his entire system is now an anachronism', publishers will always need *some* time to generate a buzz before publication day—for example, by circulating proof copies to reviewers.[17] This sales and marketing lead time is indispensable and, perhaps more importantly for our purposes, is part of what makes the difference between conventional publishing and new internet-enabled forms of dissemination such as online self-publishing. As Thompson observes, marketing is one of the areas where conventional publishers remain comparatively powerful:

---

[15] Ibid.

[16] Mike Shatzkin, 'Reinventing the Marketing Machine', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 15 (1999), 95-99 (p. 96).

[17] Ibid., p. 7.

To publish in the sense of making a book *available to the public* is easy—and never easier than it is today, when texts posted online could be said to be 'published' in some sense. But to publish in the sense of making a book *known to the public*, visible to them and attracting a sufficient quantum of their attention to encourage them to buy the book and perhaps even to read it, is extremely difficult—and never more difficult than it is today, when the sheer volume of content available to consumers and readers is enough to drown out even the most determined and well-resourced marketing effort. Good publishers—as one former publisher aptly put it—are market-makers in a world where it is attention, not content, that is scarce.[18]

Marketing, then, is a prime example of a function of conventional publishing which remains integral to the industry and cannot have its timeline completely collapsed.

Editing and marketing are just two aspects of the publishing process which have historically made the industry's long lead times necessary. These examples suggest that time is a key mechanism or category in publishing's institutional control over the production of novels. As a result, I argue, traditional publishing can be thought of as having its own particular temporality. Especially compared to instantaneous communication and publication on the internet, traditional publishing's temporality is increasingly thought of as slow. The process of editing, Franklin argues, takes as long as it takes, and cannot be brought to a premature conclusion: 'At the end of the process the book is better, sometimes much better. Both the editor and the author genuinely believe this. If one or the other doesn't, then the process is not over and they must try again.'[19] It is this slow, laborious temporality of the publishing industry which Smith sees as an obstacle to contemporary fiction cultivating a sense of being up-to-the-minute.

Smith's intervention required her publisher, Penguin's hardback imprint Hamish Hamilton, to abbreviate the usual lead time. The aim was to publish *Autumn* very quickly after Smith delivered the manuscript, thus reducing the amount of time available for the publisher's activities, such as editing, typesetting and marketing. As an interviewer for Foyles bookshop remarked to Smith, this entailed a certain amount

---

[18] Thompson, p. 21.

[19] Franklin, p. 281.

of risk on both sides: 'In order to be absolutely topical, you write and deliver your books almost impossibly close to their publication date, implying a huge amount of trust on all sides, the publisher of the quality of your work and you of theirs.'[20] In pursuing the publication of *Autumn* through the traditional publishing channels (rather than conducting her experiment on the internet, for example), but asking Hamish Hamilton to adapt or set aside one of its key mechanisms for managing the production of literature and literary value, the long lead time, Smith exerted a 'counter-institutional' force on her publisher: she worked both with and against its normal institutional frameworks.[21]

Smith's publishing experiment expresses a certain ambivalence about recent technologically-driven changes to the industry. *Autumn* and the other novels in the quartet evoke the fat-trimming logic of the market in certain ways; for example, by asking that various processes be sped up and streamlined, eliminating any potential dead or unprofitable time. On the other hand, they introduce an element of unpredictability which cuts across the demand for a rationalised workflow that measures and controls every aspect of the publishing process. As a result, *Autumn* is not exactly complicit with the demands of rationalisation; rather, it seems that Smith's aim is to push publishing and the novel to their limits, in order to understand what they might be capable of in the twenty-first-century.

The internet and the novel

It is also interesting in light of Clark's comments on the fate of editing to note that the Foyles interviewer alights on the question of 'quality' or literary value. Raising the issue of a work's intangible, noneconomic value, the interviewer's remark points to the ways in which material and economic changes in publishing also have an aesthetic or cultural concomitant. As Smith's remarks to Anderson show, it was her interest in the essentially aesthetic question of novelistic immediacy which led her to the recognition that the pace of traditional publishing feels out of step with the speed of

---

[20] Foyles, 'About the Author: Ali Smith' <https://www.foyles.co.uk/ali-smith> [accessed 12 March 2020].

[21] Simon Morgan Wortham, *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 8.

modernity. It is at this juncture that the essentially economic and technological issue of how texts are produced as commodities and disseminated meets with a set of cultural and aesthetic questions about the genres and forms best suited to or most reflective of twenty-first-century life. As the speed of news and information transfer accelerates, British literary culture increasingly seems to be asking whether the long, slowly-written and unhurriedly published novel can remain the privileged form for representing a contemporary experience increasingly saturated by short, immediate communications.

These anxieties have been voiced, for example, by the authors Will Self and Tim Parks, who have both argued that the internet poses a threat to the novel. It would be remiss not to mention that Self and Parks' articles belong, of course, to an august genre of "death of the novel" polemics, but they exemplify a sense that the threats facing the novel in the late twentieth century (exhaustion, obsolescence) have become particularly exacerbated in the twenty-first.[22] Self uses Marshall McLuhan's concept of a 'Gutenberg mind'—a mind organised by, or orientated towards, information presented in a 'codex'—to argue that, as we shift from mostly presenting information in books to mostly presenting it online, we will lose the desire or ability to read novels.[23] As a consequence, Self argues, 'if you accept that [in 20 years' time] the vast majority of text will be read in digital form on devices linked to the web', then 'the death of the novel is sealed out of your own mouth'.[24] Self believes that once the book becomes technologically obsolete, so will the novel.

Parks similarly works from the proposition that '[n]o art form exists independently of the conditions in which it is enjoyed'.[25] For Parks, 'the state of constant distraction we live in' due to the internet will inevitably deplete 'the very

---

[22] Vermeulen gives a concise history of this genre in *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel*, p. 1.

[23] Will Self, 'The Novel is Dead (and this Time it's for Real), *Guardian*, 2 May 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[24] Ibid.

[25] Tim Parks, 'Reading: The Struggle', *New York Review of Books*, 10 June 2014 <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/10/reading-struggle/> [accessed 11 February 2020].

special energies required for tackling a substantial work of fiction'.[26] The forms of cultural production suited to the internet will train us poorly for the novel, and as a result Parks feels called to pronounce:

> I will go out on a limb with a prediction: the novel of elegant, highly distinct prose, of conceptual delicacy and syntactical complexity, will tend to divide itself up into shorter and shorter sections, offering more frequent pauses where we can take time out. The larger popular novel, or the novel of extensive narrative architecture, will be ever more laden with repetitive formulas, and coercive, declamatory rhetoric to make it easier and easier, after breaks, to pick up, not a thread, but a sturdy cable.[27]

Like Self's forecast, this prediction is permeated by a suspicion that the novel is not the cultural form for our era: it has been superseded by other kinds of writing which are more suited to the dominant technologies and structures of feeling. Interestingly, given that *Autumn*'s opening line evokes *A Tale of Two Cities* (of which more shortly), Park's description could almost as easily apply to Dickens' serialised novels as to the literature of Parks' imagined technological dystopia, with the consequence that Parks accidentally suggests that the changes he foresees are not necessarily unprecedented or inherently pernicious for the novel.

However, Self and Parks' columns largely attest to a widespread fear that material and economic changes to the modern publishing landscape pose a threat to the novel form. As Alice Bennett observes, '[r]eading and attention have, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, become part of a fraught collection of concerns about subjectivity and self-management manifested as a discourse of crisis surrounding readers' capacity for attention'.[28] In other words, these anxieties are not necessarily reflective of a new, genuine problem with attention and reading, but are symptomatic of wider maladies. The way Bennett links these concerns to discourses of 'self-management' already begins to suggest that they perhaps have more to do with ideologies of productivity and efficiency than they do with literature.

---

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Alice Bennett, *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 1.

Joe Moran has also criticised polemics such as Self and Parks', arguing that fears that new technologies will eliminate certain cultural forms are premised on 'an "innovation-centric" understanding of historical progress':

> This fallacy assumes that technological change happens inexorably and in one direction, so older forms like dead-tree literature are seen as lagging behind newer, more virtual media—when in fact these older technologies tend to be fairly resilient and can co-exist creatively with new ones. John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid have given the name 'endism' to this flawed logic that new technologies like the Internet will simply do away with older ones, like real-time television or printed books.[29]

While Smith, Laing and Burn's publishing experiments betray a certain cultural anxiety about 'dead-tree literature […] lagging behind', they also seek to reframe this narrative.

The three novels testify to a keen awareness of cultural debates about the supposed decline of the novel. In *Autumn*, when Elisabeth visits the elderly Daniel at his care home, she imagines his response to her reading material: 'What you reading? he'd say. | Elisabeth would hold it up. | Brave New World, she'd say. | Oh, that old thing, he'd say. | It's new to me, she'd say.'[30] When Daniel calls the book 'that old thing', he registers a sense that Huxley's dystopia might be a premonition of the future that has gone out of date. Any such projection of the future is always susceptible to failure: while the novel was supposed to warn us where we were headed, we may have gone there already, or somewhere else entirely. Either way, the warning becomes redundant. A dystopia is also a satire or commentary on its contemporary moment, but Daniel's remark reminds us that it can go out of date by no longer being contemporary with the things it was satirising. In this way, *Autumn* raises the question of the continued relevance of novels beyond their contemporary moment. The novel, as a cultural form that is supposed to remain relevant and stay in circulation long after publication—unlike newspaper reports or tweets—is particularly susceptible to this kind of questioning.

---

[29] Joe Moran, 'Walking with a Purpose: The Essay in Contemporary Nonfiction', *Textual Practice*, 32 (2018), 1277–99 (p. 1285).

[30] Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), p. 31.

Elisabeth's riposte, on the other hand, echoes the kind of pronouncement often made about *Brave New World*: that it is as relevant today as it was in its own time. The notion that a novel can be ahead of its time—and therefore exactly the right thing for its time, or not appreciated until much later, when it finally becomes contemporary— recalls Giorgio Agamben's insight that being contemporary always involves a certain anachrony. Agamben argues:

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.[31]

The very idea of contemporaneity, Agamben suggests, involves a paradox. Staging this paradox in her own fiction of immediacy, Smith responds to fears about the novel becoming outdated by marking the general and unavoidable anachrony which inheres in the idea of immediacy itself. If the novel is susceptible to becoming outdated, then this is only because of a general truth about the contemporary and not a particular fault of the novel form.

Regardless of its subtitle '*A Novel*', *Crudo* seems dubious about the capacities of the novel to represent reality, particularly the speeded-up experience of the contemporary. At times, reflecting on its own structure as a patchwork of found texts, *Crudo* voices the sense that fiction is superfluous for representing the real:

> It was uncomputable, it was the province of the novel, that hopeless apparatus of guesswork and supposition, with which Kathy liked to have as little traffic as possible. She wrote fiction, sure, but she populated it with the already extant, the pre-packaged and ready-made. She was in many ways Warhol's daughter, niece at least, a grave-robber, a bandit, happy to snatch what she needed but also morally invested in the cause: that there was no need to invent, you could make anything from out of the

---

[31] Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?', in *What is an Apparatus?*, trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39-55 (p. 40).

overflowing midden of the already-done, the as Beckett put it nothing new, it was economic also stylish to help yourself to the grab-bag of the actual.[32]

While the novel and fiction are unwieldy and vague, the stuff of life is already available for appropriation. This helps one cut right to the chase: it is 'economic'. One of the key questions this chapter will try to answer is why *Crudo* should be billed as a novel, given its author-protagonist's scepticism about the form. At the very least, this decision suggests that the novel continues to be a useful form even as—or perhaps because—its cultural power continues to diminish.

As we have seen, Vermeulen argues that as the regimes of subjectivity, individualism, nationhood and empire associated with the novel lose traction, the genre itself has begun to pursue 'explorations of different forms of affect and life' and 'interrogations of the ethics and politics of form'.[33] These novels, he argues, 'exploit [their] formal licence by departing from a particular, and partly fictional, conception of the novel as a homogenous, clearly-codified genre in order to explore what forms of life and effect emerge after the dissolution of that genre'.[34] Retaining the marker 'novel' despite its reflections on the genre's cultural and descriptive powerlessness, *Crudo* exemplifies Vermeulen's description of texts which interest themselves in the formal decomposition of the contemporary novel.

As Self and Parks' columns show, anxieties about the contemporary death of the novel are most often framed in terms of changes to the dominant technological modes of communication and publication. *Autumn*, *Crudo* and *Born Yesterday* are publishing experiments in the sense that they engage with these anxieties by altering the normal production timelines of conventional publishing. The next section of this chapter examines how the novels also thematise prevalent cultural concerns about what the new technologies of dissemination are doing to our experience of space, time and causality, portraying the ways in which we are constantly overwhelmed by instantaneously-published material, from posts on social media to fake news. Parks and Self's articles exemplify how this experience is often thought to pose an existential

---

[32] Olivia Laing, *Crudo: A Novel* (London: Picador, 2018), p. 84.

[33] Vermeulen, p. 4.

[34] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

threat to the novel as a narrative, temporally-organised, sensemaking medium. However, I want to suggest that Smith, Laing and Burn's fictions of immediacy find that the novel is actually surprisingly well-placed to reflect on the questions raised by contemporary technology.

Contemporaneity and immediacy

My key argument ultimately concerns the ways in which Smith, Laing and Burn's texts critique the narrative of the novel's obsolescence amid the rise of instantaneous modes of publication and dissemination. However, since there is no question that these novels also mimic the sense of accelerated, disordered temporality arising from contemporary technology, I first want to establish what this putative *experience* of immediacy feels like, and how it has been conceptualised both in public discourse and in literary theory. Peter Boxall, for example, has described this experience and its potential consequences for fiction as follows:

> The increasingly frictionless synchronisation of global culture, rather than delivering an increasingly secure sense of location, of homeliness in our space and time, has delivered us to a condition in which time, as in Hamlet's Denmark, is out of joint, in which the narrative forms we have available seem no longer to be well adapted to articulating our experience of passing time.[35]

This is, Boxall notes, a particularly twenty-first-century habitus. However, while this sense of out-of-jointness is exacerbated by modern telecommunications, it can also be understood as a general truth about the experience of the contemporary, which—as we have seen Agamben argue—is always a disjointed relation with the present.

There is, then, a widespread belief that duration and distance have collapsed due to modern technology. Following David Harvey, Mark Currie calls this the narrative of 'time-space compression', which apparently 'extends the span of the present to encompass places once thought to be at a considerable spatial, and therefore

---

[35] Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 21.

temporal, distance'.[36] Another purported aspect of contemporary experience, Currie writes, is 'accelerated recontextualisation', wherein the gap between the first instance and the citation of a style 'becomes increasingly, if not infinitely, short, so that the temporal distance between an original and its recontextualisation is abolished altogether'.[37] He also groups what Derrida calls 'archive fever' with these phenomena; this is 'the frenzied archiving and recording of contemporary social life which transforms the present into the past by anticipating its memory'.[38] Currie is very clear that these are *narratives* about the contemporary, and that the basic assumptions about temporality on which these narratives are premised are in fact philosophically incoherent.[39] Specifically, referencing Derrida's critiques of phenomenology, he argues that they privilege the experience of the temporal present and the ontological framing of being as presence.[40] However, I am using his descriptions as he intended them: not to to reify, but merely to identify these narratives where they appear in the contemporary discourse of the death of the novel.

Smith, Laing and Burn have all addressed the sense Currie describes of a chaotic, speeded-up present in their accounts of writing their novels. We have already seen how Smith linked her wish to write and publish *Autumn* as quickly as possible to the desire that literature be absolutely contemporary. Similarly, in conversation with Smith, Laing said of writing *Crudo* that 'the now pours onto you day by day, and I just wanted to write down what it feels like to be wrenched under it'.[41] Her process was designed to reflect this feeling: 'I was writing down everything that came my way, everything that happened went in, so if Trump tweeted something about the troops or nuclear war it went in in his own words, nothing's in quote marks'.[42] Here,

---

[36] Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 9.

[37] Ibid., p. 10.

[38] Ibid., p. 11.

[39] Ibid., p. 12.

[40] Ibid.

[41] 'Crudo: Olivia Laing and Ali Smith', *London Review Bookshop Podcast*, 3 July 2018

<https://www.podbean.com/media/share/dir-5ax4t-43c0cca> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[42] Ibid.

Laing intimates a permeability verging on total transparency between the contemporary moment and her writing: 'everything that happened went in', without the mediation of paraphrase or 'quote marks'.

Burn characterises *Born Yesterday* in similar terms:

> Blogging, rolling news, online interactivity—so ingrained have these things become that it is hard to remember that they are all recent developments and all contribute to our sense of being inundated by information, much of which calls itself "news", when it is in fact—and increasingly—no more than rumour, gossip, spin, speculation.'[43]

In response to this now familiar characterisation of contemporary life, Burn adopted a specific writing process:

> The idea behind *Born Yesterday*, Burn told an interviewer, was to take the non-fiction novel 'to its ultimate': to find a big story 'and the moment the news explosion happened to go there and write about it, turn it into a novel in the way that happens all the time through rolling news, newspapers, blogging. And to turn it around fast, so that the novel came out while the news coverage was still fresh in people's minds.'[44]

These remarks all testify to the authors' determination to reduce the mediating work of fiction, writing, time or labour. Particularly in Laing and Burn's comments, there is a sense that the stuff of the real, the now, is supposed to be taken up into their novels as unfiltered and unchanged as possible.

Autumn announces its own quickness and ephemerality from the very start, bearing a dedication '[f]or Gilli Bush-Bailey | see you next week'.[45] The dedication playfully marks the exact timing of the book's publication, and therefore goes almost immediately out of date, as soon as 'next week' has passed. The novel proper begins: 'It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature.'[46] Rewriting the

---

[43] Simon Willis and Gordon Burn, 'Gordon Burn | Interview', *Granta*, 18th April 2008 <https://granta.com/interview-gordon-burn/> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[44] Ibid.

[45] Smith, np.

[46] Ibid., p. 3.

first passage of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Smith makes a broad-brush characterisation of her historical moment—but, like Dickens, she ironises the tendency to make this type of statement. The object of Dickens' facetiousness is the kind of pat epochal thinking which results in generalisations like 'it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair'.[47] Smith's version overbalances the cadence of Dickens' oppositions by forcing the repetition of 'worst' and substituting meaningless tautology in place of his rhetorical paradoxes, before puncturing any notion of historical exception or specificity with that eye-rolling '[a]gain'. Emerging from a climate of political commentary in which a paradigmatic figure of discourse is the underthought and overshared 'hot take', the novel sounds thoroughly fed up with attempts to describe the historical moment.[48] The tone of these opening lines evokes an affect of jaded political disengagement in the face of various contemporary crises, from global warming to Brexit, that are frequently imagined as bewildering and unprecedented.

Autumn, then, is not a novel which seeks to make sense of its historical moment. Rather, Smith's concern is with the *experience* of the contemporary: ephemeral, immediate, un-theorised. As Smith told Matthew Sweet in an episode of Radio 3's *Free Thinking* program, '[i]t isn't really about explaining, it's about responding to what language is doing in the moment or in the time in which you're working, that's what the novel is'.[49] The novel's publication history, the speed of writing and production, reflects this. In this respect, we might liken Smith's process to Samuel Richardson's 'writing to the moment', which he describes in his preface to *Clarissa*: 'Letters... written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects... abound not only with critical situations, but with what may be called *instantaneous* Descriptions and Reflections... Much more lively and affecting.'[50] Like

---

[47] Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 1.

[48] Elspeth Reeve, 'A History of the Hot Take', *New Republic*, 12 April 2015

<https://newrepublic.com/article/121501/history-hot-take> [accessed 11 February 2020].

[49] 'Writing Real Life from Brexit to Grenfell', *Free Thinking*, BBC Radio 3, 30 October 2019.

[50] Scott Dale, 'The Power of the Quill: Epistolary Technique in Richardson's *Pamela*', *Revista Letras*, 53 (2000), 53-64 (p. 57); Richardson, qtd. in ibid.

the letters in *Clarissa*—and like the originally serialised chapters of *A Tale of Two Cities*—*Autumn* has the feeling of an instalment, a dispatch: we are waiting to see what happens next, both in life and in *Seasonal*.

Another of *Autumn*'s major preoccupations is the speed with which time seems to pass because of the apparently accelerated events of 2016. Elisabeth reflects: 'Someone killed an MP […] But it's old news now. Once it would have been a year's worth of news. But news right now is like a flock of speeded-up sheep running off the side of a cliff.'[51] By referencing the murder of Jo Cox, the novel places itself in a very particular time, the real historical moment of its publication. Elisabeth's sense of an uncontrollable and sped-up sequence of events echoes what is now a commonplace about contemporary politics (particularly since the EU referendum and 2016 US presidential election), but also keys into a broader cultural preoccupation with the accelerating speed of life, which is understood to be a feature of twenty-first-century modernity.

At another point in the novel, Elisabeth 'skims the day's paper on her phone to catch up on the usual huge changes there've been in the last half hour', tapping 'on an article headed Look Into My Eyes: Leave. EU Campaign Consulted TV Hypnotist'.[52] Here, Smith represents an unnaturally and worryingly accelerated temporality and includes references to real current events underway at the time of writing and publication. As the novel's opening implies, one of the most commonly-expressed fears about the pace of current events and life in general is that it exhausts people, making them politically disengaged: 'It is yet another day, weather, time, news, stuff happening all across the country/countries, etc.'[53] The list has the effect of substituting 'weather, news, time' for 'day', conflating spatial and temporal categories—as well as elliptically producing the awkward construction 'another weather'. In addition to the forward slash and the et cetera, this ungainly phrasing communicates the boredom, frustration and carelessness engendered by the sense that events are moving too

[51] Smith, p. 38.

[52] Ibid., p. 137.

[53] Ibid., p. 253.

quickly to engage with. In this way, Smith's novel seems to accept the narrative of time-space compression as an unfortunate truth of contemporary life.

As Burn's description of the new media environment suggests, his novel is equally concerned with the pace of life, current events and communications in the new millennium. *Born Yesterday*'s protagonist, for example, reflects on the dematerialising effects of global finance: 'Under the influence of globalisation, the nature of financial markets had changed.'[54] As a result, '[i]t was a changed, and still vertiginously changing, world'.[55] The accelerating speed of contemporary capital, it seems, has outstripped the novel's capacity to register it, and the novel often touches on the narratives of temporal disorder that Currie describes. For example, a television actor tells the protagonist: 'It used to be that, even as a performer, your image receded as you grew older. But now the uniquely twenty-first-century experience is that it just replicates and multiplies in accordance with that law of the digital realm that states that anything digital will be copied, and anything copied once will fill the universe.'[56] Something about modern technology, the actor thinks, has made the culture's archival tendencies spin out of control. Indeed, Derrida's term archive fever describes a possibility or tendency that has always been part of the structure of temporality; the contemporary only accelerates it. Derrida himself remarked on this 'different experience of speed', which he suggested was 'the brutal acceleration of a movement that has always already been at work'.[57] Similarly, *Born Yesterday* describes the sense that a general truth about temporality has become exacerbated and dysfunctional in the contemporary moment.

Like *Autumn* and *Born Yesterday*, *Crudo* seems first and foremost concerned with the chaotic, speeded-up immediacy of everyday experience. Kathy is anxiously aware of this phenomenon and its foreclosure of political engagement: 'She missed the sense of time as something serious and diminishing, she didn't like living in the

---

[54] Gordon Burn, *Born Yesterday: The News as a Novel* (London: Faber, 2008), p. 73.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., pp. 174-5.

[57] Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', trans. by by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, 14 (1984), 20–31 (pp. 20, 21).

permanent present of the id.'[58] Broadly speaking, the id can be associated with a 'permanent present' because it is the part of the psyche which demands the instant fulfilment of desires; Freud similarly argued that '[t]he processes of the [unconscious] are *timeless*; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all'.[59] It is the ego which manages the necessities of waiting for fulfilment and tolerating disappointment. As a result, it seems that Kathy sees duration as 'serious' because it involves causality and consequences—which the id has no regard for—while the 'permanent present' is associated with the infantile demand for immediacy, the closing of the gap between desire and gratification. Living in the twenty-first-century temporality of the id, Kathy thinks, disrupts our understanding of causality: 'People weren't sane anymore, which didn't mean they were wrong. Some sort of cord between action and consequence had been severed.'[60] This is, once again, a function of a disordered temporality in which '[t]hings still happened, but not in any sensible order'.[61] Kathy believes that this contemporary experience of speed and disrupted teleology carries ethical implications, hampering people's ability to register the potential outcomes of their decisions.

In other words, '[t]here was currently […] a problem with putting things together'.[62] One reason for this, Kathy believes, is that capital's vast networks of interdependency and exploitation alienate people from the material effects of their decisions:

> On the plane she [another writer] complained about the air pollution of jet fuel and perfume, how it gave her allergies, but she didn't connect the casual habit of flying thousands of miles with the collapse of the butterflies. Kathy didn't blame her. The equations were too difficult, you knew intellectually, but you never really saw the

---

[58] Laing, p. 43.

[59] Sigmund Freud, 'The Unconscious' in *The Sigmund Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), pp. 572-84 (p. 582).

[60] Laing, p. 62.

[61] Ibid., p. 62.

[62] Ibid., p. 36.

consequences, since they tended to impact other poorer people in other poorer places.[63]

If this is true of contemporary experience, then it also has consequences for the novel. Narrative fiction is structured by a certain ordering, a teleology, or what Frank Kermode called the sense of an ending, but—as Kathy remarks—this seems to have come under particular pressure because of the speed and chaos of events in our particular historical moment.[64]

Similarly, there is a suggestion in *Autumn* that, in order to be properly contemporary—to resist the retroactive narrativisation of the raw stuff of real experience—the contemporary novel has to eschew the meaning-making process of fiction. Alex Preston, writing in the *Financial Times*, found that the novel is light on what is traditionally thought of as plot: 'Not a great deal happens, but then, as George says in Smith's 2014 Man Booker-shortlisted novel *How to Be Both*, plot is "the place where a dead person's buried". Or, as one character puts it in *Autumn*, "This isn't fiction . . . This is the Post Office." *Autumn* is a novel of ideas, and plot isn't the reason we keep turning the pages.'[65] If the difference between instantaneous modern communications and the novel is that the former are imagined to transparently transfer raw information, while the latter constructs meaning, then perhaps the implication here is that real life is more like the Post Office, a place of communication. In another example of twenty-first-century modernity exacerbating a general temporal paradox, Smith's novel suggests that the disordered present of Brexit Britain is marked by an inability to conceive of or represent causal relations between events in a coherent plot.

While—as Kathy suggests—this is not a neutral development but an ethically worrying one, it is also extremely difficult to resist. At the same time as remarking

---

[63] Ibid., p. 91.

[64] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[65] Alex Preston, 'Autumn by Ali Smith—"The First Serious Brexit Novel"', *Financial Times*, 4 October 2016 <https://www.ft.com/content/0e227666-8ef4-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78> [accessed 12 February 2020].

that 'it was what the Nazis did, made people feel like things were moving too fast to stop and though unpleasant and eventually terrifying and appalling, were probably impossible to do anything about', Kathy also hints at the difficulty of distancing oneself from this experience of immediacy when it manifests as debased cultural consumption: 'The speed of the news cycle, the hyper-acceleration of the story, she was hip to those pleasures, queasy as they were.'[66] This ambivalence as regards 'hyper-acceleration' raises a quandary for Laing's novel itself: *Crudo* tries to get purchase on a contemporary experience of immediacy, which is construed as politically and ethically disempowering, by mimetically replicating the experience of that immediacy.

Matthias Nilges' 'Neoliberalism and the Time of the Novel' argues that this strategy is bound to fail. He contends that the contemporary sense of immediacy is a structural component of neoliberalism, and novels which simply reproduce this experience are constitutionally unable to render a critique of neoliberalism. According to Nilges, '[n]eoliberalism requires […] a structural literalisation of temporal immediacy, that is, for instance, connected to the speed of trade and communication in the context of which we witness the contraction of time into instantaneity'.[67] The time of the novel, Nilges argues, is not, or should not be, this temporality of immediacy. This is because 'neoliberalism's structural commitment to immediacy stands in opposition to the ontology and function of literature as an artistic medium'.[68] This argument rests on a conception of literature as autonomous: 'literature throughout the twentieth century crucially defines itself in opposition to the rise of other cultural media designed to capture modern life in its immediacy (such as photography or cinema) as the medium of mediation'.[69] Novels which 'simply replicate the logic of neoliberalism' are 'not only bad at dealing with neoliberalism', but 'bad at being novels'.[70]

---

[66] Laing, p. 87.

[67] Mathias Nilges, 'Neoliberalism and the Time of the Novel', *Textual Practice*, 29 (2015), 357–77 (p. 368).

[68] Ibid., p. 367.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., p. 361.

On a surface level, Nilges' criticism seems to be borne out in *Crudo*, which formally replicates the sense of acceleration and disorder that impedes Kathy's ability to make ethical and political discriminations. The novel opens on '2 August 2017' with Kathy scrolling through Twitter: 'The internet was excited because the President had just sacked someone. Got hired, divorced, had a baby, and fired in ten days. Like a fruit fly, some joker wrote. 56,152 likes.'[71] The 'someone' in question is White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci, and there is indeed a real tweet describing him as '[l]ike a fruit fly'.[72] This news story exemplifies the sense that the speed of current affairs has accelerated in the late 2010s. However, by replicating this feeling of acceleration and disorder, *Crudo* also seems to lose ethical purchase on events.

Laing's novel mimetically reproduces the speed and chaos of twenty-first-century life through formal techniques which recall David Shields' description of contemporary writing in his manifesto *Reality Hunger*:

> An artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet-unstated one, is forming. What are its key components? A deliberate unartiness: 'raw' material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, unprofessional. […] Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; an overly literal tone, as if a reporter were viewing a strange culture; plasticity of form, pointillism; criticism as autobiography; self-reflexivity, self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography; a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real.[73]

The rawness Shields refers to is also evoked in Laing' title, and her conceit of incorporating whatever comes to hand in a particular moment evinces the 'openness to accident' he describes. *Crudo* is avowedly autobiographical, mirroring closely the

---

71 Laing, p. 3.

72 Sophia Tesfaye, '"Things That Have Lasted Longer than Mooch": Twitter Laughs at Firing of Anthony Scaramucci', *Salon*, 31 July 2017 <https://www.salon.com/2017/07/31/things-that-have-lasted-longer-than-mooch-twitter-laughs-at-firing-of-anthony-scaramucci/> [accessed 11 February 2020].

73 David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 5.

events of Laing's personal life in the summer of 2017. The 'overly literal tone' Shields identifies also perfectly describes the narrator's response to the Scaramucci scandal: 'None of it was funny, or maybe it all was.'[74] This verbal shrug communicates the impossibility of making a judgement on events which happen so quickly and chaotically. While *Crudo*'s formal techniques of appropriation and collage allow it to render a sense of contemporary acceleration, what is lost is the ability to interpret and order the various fragments.

Laing's novel mimetically reproduces an experience of speed and disorder which forecloses ethical judgement and critique. However—and this is the key point I wish to make—*Crudo* also registers the impossibility of immediacy. It marks the fact that all experience and communication is structured by a kind of gap or spacing. This is legible, for example, in how the word 'just' functions in Kathy's remark that 'the President had just sacked someone'. As a modifier to temporal phrases, 'just' means '[o]nly a very short time ago' or '[e]xactly at this point of time; at this moment; right now'.[75] But this is precisely the problem: Kathy says this on August 2nd, but Scaramucci was sacked on July 31st. Whether two days counts as '[o]nly a very short time ago' is an impossible discrimination to make when the now is so vanishingly quick, and can be subdivided into ever-smaller units. The news is already going out of date, even as it has 'just' happened.

In a way, this bears out Laing's point about the pace of contemporary experience. But it also brings our attention to a problem with her attempt to mimic the immediacy of this experience: whatever Laing writes down passes from present to past faster than she can write it.[76] It is precisely by staging itself as immediate that

---

[74] Laing, p. 3.

[75] 'Just, adv.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019,

<www.oed.com/view/Entry/102192> [accessed 28 February 2020].

[76] Henry Fielding parodied this difficulty with Richardson's conceit of 'writing to the moment' in *Shamela*. The eponymous heroine is pictured writing to her mother even as Squire Booby approaches her bed: 'I hear him just coming in at the door. You see I write in the present tense, as Parson Williams says.' In the next sentence, Shamela remarks, '[w]ell, he is in bed between us', suggesting that the assault is underway as she is writing. See: Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, ed. by A.R. Humphreys (London: J.M. Dent, 1973), p. 12.

Crudo marks the impossibility of perfect contemporaneity. The novel shows that all writing and communication—all experience—is structured by a certain spacing. Everything—tweets, the news, writing of any kind—goes out of date faster than it can be produced and consumed. As a result, I want to argue that *Crudo* and the other novels considered here are more complex in their representations of immediacy than Nilges' critique allows.

Smith similarly marks an awareness that the now is always fleeting, that there will always be anachrony. For example, we might recall her remark, cited earlier, that she wanted to know 'how closely to contemporaneousness a finished book might be able to be': the question is to what *extent* her book might coincide with a particular moment, not whether it could be perfectly contemporary. The impossibility of perfect contemporaneousness is also foregrounded by Smith's claim that she paradoxically needed *more* time in order to ensure that *Autumn* was as current as possible: as Brexit unfolded, Smith says, 'I was right up against my promised deadline for Hamish Hamilton, so I asked my publisher, Simon, if I could have an extra month, because I knew the book had to (and I had to, too) square up to what was happening if the notions of contemporaneousness in it were to mean anything at all'.[77] Had the novel come out just after the referendum with no mention of the vote, it would have already been out of date; conversely, in purposefully delaying in order to address a new development, Smith compromises the immediacy of her project.

In Derridean terms, it is the novels' attempts at immediacy which most obviously *date* them in the sense of marking them as being of a particular moment, and therefore susceptible to becoming dated, something of the past. The novel's signifiers of immediacy—such as dates and times—become signifiers of the impossibility of pure contemporaneity. In 'Signature Event Context', Derrida identifies writing as the concept which calls our attention to the impossibility of immediate communication. Indeed, the issue of writing's particularly obvious structure of non-immediacy is already adduced in Smith, Laing and Burn's accounts of their writing processes—Smith's remarks on *Autumn*, for example, show that

---

[77] Anderson.

writing can never be perfectly up to the minute. Derrida's intervention demonstrates why this might be, and why no communication or experience is ever immediate.

Writing is a particularly clear example of this, Derrida observes, because it is generally thought to extend the field of communication beyond the presence of the originator. Writing 'must […] remain legible despite the absolute disappearance of every determined addressee' and in the absence of 'the sender or producer'.[78] Because it must be able in principle to signify to any given person regardless of circumstance, 'a written sign carries with it force of breaking with its context'.[79] A sign is therefore part of a 'contextual chain' mediated by a 'spacing' which allows for 'its extraction and grafting', its quotation or use in another context.[80] Importantly, this ability of the sign to signify outside of its original context—so obvious in the case of writing—is also a feature of all communication. Regardless of the mode of delivery, a sign works 'because [the] unity of the signifying form is constituted only by its iterability': the mark must be recognisable across different modulations or contexts in order to function as a mark.[81] The iterability which so obviously allows the written mark to extend the field of communication turns out to be the structuring feature of all signification (as I will come onto shortly, for Derrida this also includes the category of experience in general).

In Derrida's model of communication, there is always a possibility that a given utterance will fail. Since iterability structures the mark, a 'risk' of failure is the mark's 'internal and positive condition of possibility'.[82] Communication is structured by the possibility of failing to signify; it is neither transparent nor immediate, but constituted by a mediating gap or spacing which allows for citation. The consequences of Derrida's argument are fundamental and general: no writing, no matter how speedily produced and disseminated, conveys its meaning or content transparently and immediately. Derrida says that these characteristics of language are also to be 'found

---

[78] Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf), pp. 307-330 (pp. 315, 316).

[79] Ibid., p. 317.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., p. 325.

[…] ultimately in the totality of experience', because the 'field of the mark' is not isolated, but general.[83] As such, Derrida writes, we can 'extend this law even to all "experience" in general, if it is granted that there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differentiated marks'.[84] The structure of the mark therefore entails that no experience is immediate.

One implication of this argument for Smith, Laing and Burn's projects of writing to the moment is that the assumption of a shared context can no longer hold. This is particularly clear in the case of the novels' reliance on ephemeral references to current affairs. The reader's recognition of the precise significance of these references relies on a shared historical context. For example, the opening pages of *Autumn* feature Daniel Gluck washing ashore in his dreams, recalling the drownings of refugees in the Mediterranean which so dominated British headlines around the time of the novel's publication. Exploring the beach further, Daniel finds: 'Just along from this dead person, there is another dead person. Beyond it, another, and another. […] Some of the bodies are of very small children.'[85] The passage particularly evokes the highly-publicised photograph of the body of three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, which sparked an international outcry over Europe's approach to the refugee crisis. The evocation of the photograph relies on the reader sharing the novel's frame of reference—but, as Derrida's critique of communication shows, this shared context can never be completely reliable.

This is particularly clear in the case of the Alan Kurdi photograph, because the international outcry it precipitated was notoriously driven by ephemeral emotion. As has been widely remarked, public sympathy for Kurdi and indignation over the treatment of refugees quickly waned, with journalist Patrick Kingsley titling one of his articles on the subject 'One Year on, Compassion towards Refugees Fades'.[86] This example makes it particularly clear why Smith's reliance on a shared context of

---

[83] Ibid., p. 318.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Smith, p. 12.

[86] Patrick Kingsley, 'Alan Kurdi: One Year on, Compassion towards Refugees Fades', *Guardian*, 2 September 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/01/alan-kurdi-death-one-year-on-compassion-towards-refugees-fades> [accessed 12 February 2020].

writing and reception is so susceptible to failure, exacerbating or radicalising the potential Derrida identifies for writing to signify (or fail to) beyond its context. As Stephanie Merritt has observed of *Autumn* and *Winter*, '[t]hese novels are a deliberate publishing experiment, to see how close to publication the author can capture current events; inevitably, even at a distance of months, 11th-hour references to the Grenfell fire and Trump's reclaiming of "Merry Christmas" already seem like snapshots of the past'.[87] Similarly, in *Born Yesterday*, the protagonist senses the Madeleine McCann news story going out of date as the ephemeral feelings of shock and sadness fade. As people at a bus station wait impatiently for images of the missing child displayed on the electronic departure board to be replaced by bus times, the protagonist reflects: 'They were witness to the more general shift from initial shock and intensity of feeling, to an alienated separatedness that was becoming apparent, a distancing.'[88] The immediacy of 'shock' has passed by before it can even be properly experienced as present, showing that there is always a gap or spacing in our experience of immediacy.

Crudo similarly signals a preoccupation with context, feeling and ephemerality. Reflecting on the tonal nuances of a particular historical moment, 1987, Kathy asks: 'What did people know, what were they ignorant of? This was the problem with history, it was too easy to provide the furnishings but forget the attitudes, the way you became a different person according to what knowledge was available, what experiences were fresh and what had not yet arisen in a global frame.'[89] In this passage, it sounds as if Kathy is trying to evoke something like a structure of feeling, something not easily recoverable or reproducible across historical periods—except, the novel suggests, through a practice of citation. Kathy's desire to 'reconstruct attitudes, to understand ambient levels of prejudice and fear' is a matter of what Derrida might call citation, a question of what can be taken out of its context and cited, translated, or understood in another.[90] The novel's own aesthetics imply that such a

---

[87] Stephanie Merritt, 'Winter by Ali Smith Review—Luminously Beautiful', *Guardian*, 5 November 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/05/winter-ali-smith-review> [accessed 12 February 2020].

[88] Burn, p. 187.

[89] Laing, p. 83.

[90] Ibid.

practice is necessary for the kind of historical understanding Kathy seeks, quoting the real Kathy Acker's writings and citing Donald Trump's tweets. As such, *Crudo* relies on the possibility of severing the mark from its referent, which in turn depends on a mediating gap or spacing in the structure of the sign. The novel's aesthetic, in other words, depends on the non-immediacy of communication and experience.

Derrida's thinking of the mark also implies that the high degree of chronological specificity which the novels try to maintain is susceptible to failure. *Autumn* dates its narration with frequent references to particular events; for example, one section begins, '[i]t is just over a week since the vote'.[91] *Crudo* similarly keeps time with the contemporary through markers such as '[i]t was the week Obamacare was rolled back'.[92] There are similar examples in *Born Yesterday*, in which the narrator remarks: 'Today—3 July 2007—Blair has been out of office for just six days.'[93] *Crudo*, in particular, aspires to a high degree of chronological specificity—telling us, for example, that '[i]t was 19:45 on 13 May 2017'.[94] This suggests a desire to narrow down the present to smaller and smaller fragments of time. The fixing of these ephemeral moments through the convention of the date, however, produces exactly that: a fixity in time which is precisely *not* contemporary. In dating themselves, the novels mark their own temporal distance both from the moment described and from the moment in which the reader is reading (distances that can only grow). As such, it is through their use of dates that the novels become more *dated*.

Crudo's narrative discourse is, in fact, organised around this paradox. The novel is written in the past tense—seemingly an odd decision if the intent is to render immediacy. The present tense, which produces the effect of being present with or in the moment described, would be the more obvious choice. Similarly, given Laing's stated aim to render the immediacy of contemporary experience, it is again slightly strange that the narrative mode tends more towards diegesis than mimesis, preferring the more distant mode of telling or reporting to the immediacy of showing. However,

---

[91] Smith, p. 53.

[92] Laing, p. 27.

[93] Burn, pp. 9-10.

[94] Laing, p. 1.

we can see these two narratological features—the past tense and the diegetic mode—working to produce a sense of speed in the following passage:

> She was walking down 1ˢᵗ Avenue when the Comey news broke. 9 May 2017, early evening. Carl texted, Twitter's ABLAZE gurl. Everyone was saying it was a banana republic, at dinner Jim said what blows my mind is that we'll be talking about this in years to come, what we were doing, but we'll know how it panned out. They ate Chicken Zsa Zsa and salad, they ate foie gras, they drank beer and Reisling, they laughed all night, that was the night the President fired the Director of the FBI, they were scared and sick, Jim said he's taking a giant shit on our nation.[95]

Laing's style of reporting rather than staging events frequently involves these kinds of paratactic lists. Recalling Shields' description of works that incorporate 'chunks of reality', these lists embody the logic of collage as a form of cutting, citation and juxtaposition. Deploying cuts and jumps between topics, scenes and speech, Laing also mobilises the ellipsis of collage, leaving the relationships between these disparate terms unarticulated. Parataxis creates a sense of accumulation as events pile on top of each other and the underlying causal or conceptual relationships between them remain unavailable to immediate apprehension. In this way, Laing recreates the breathless, disorientating, one-thing-after-the-other experience of the present.

However, despite the specificity of the temporal markers, names, and places mentioned in this passage, the mode of narration is actually quite distanced. The speech and action are reported rather than dramatised, such as when 'Jim said he's taking a giant shit on our nation'. Instead of rendering experiential immediacy through detailed description, Laing chooses to stage the speed of the contemporary at the level of narration, *telling* the story quickly with her breathless sentences. The time of the telling is, in fact, the narratological level at which pace is most at issue, because narrative discourse is (among other things) a matter of the temporal relation of the time of the telling to the time of the told. The *récit* is the *récit*; the *discours* is what can be sped up or slowed down. This also offers an explanation of Laing's choice to write in the past tense, which gives the impression of events slipping past, *becoming* past, as soon as or before they can be written down. The past tense, then, offers its own ways

---

[95] Ibid., p. 28.

of rendering speed and immediacy. Laing's particular mode of narration, this sped-up past tense, registers the susceptibility of a mark to go out of date as soon as it is made.

Born Yesterday similarly uses tense to create a feeling of temporal dislocation. For example, one chronological marker I have already cited, '[t]oday—3 July 2007—Blair has been out of office for just six days', inscribes its relation to the moment it dramatises by using the present tense, suggesting that the narration is contemporary with the events it describes. However, the subsequent passage introduces a more complex temporal relation by slipping into the tense of the future-in-the-past. Burn tells the true story of a new car which 'was currently on order' for Blair: '[t]o ensure that its security remained uncompromised, in late September it would be delivered by transporter straight from the docks to a police garage in Vauxhall in south London, where, when the locks were thrown, it would be found to contain four illegal migrants'.[96] Just as Burn's prior use of the present tense maintained his conceit that the future had not happened yet at the time of the telling, this switch to the future-in-the-past maintains a kind of uncertainty vis-à-vis the future. This choice of tense implies that the future is not yet known, even as the narration reports something that has already happened. Burn achieves a sense of temporal confusion by telling past events which have already happened at the time of writing in a future mode, as if the events in question had not yet happened. The tense of the passage therefore mimics a contemporary feeling that the present becomes past before it can be properly experienced or registered *as present*, creating a sense of chronological disorder.

In this way, the three novels highlight a set of temporal paradoxes which have been the subject of philosophical debate since the Ancient Greeks. Currie argues that 'an exploration of the philosophical analysis of presence raises some difficulties which challenge the basic vocabulary of the sociological accounts [of space-time compression, accelerated recontextualisation and archive fever]: difficulties which relate to issues such as the *concept* and the *experience* of the present'.[97] These accounts of an eternal, oversaturating and over-available present are gainsaid by various

---

[96] Burn, p. 10.

[97] Currie, p. 12.

critiques of the very idea of the present. As Currie describes, while from one point of view it seems that the present is the only temporality which actually exists, from another perspective the reverse is true: 'For Augustine, the present lacks extension: in its undivided form, the present is infinitely small, or without duration, and if it is given extension, in the form of some block of time to be designated as presence, that presence will be necessarily divided between elements which have been and those which are still to come.'[98] In this view, the present is the vanishing point at the intersection of past and future: as soon as we try to mark off the boundaries of the present, we realise we are only talking about either the very recent past or the very near future.

Daniel is perhaps thinking of something like this temporal paradox when he tells Elisabeth, '[t]ime travel *is* real': 'We do it all the time. Moment to moment, minute to minute.'[99] *Autumn* engages with the problem of contemporaneity by staging the present as an impossible subdivision of (in Currie's words) 'a crossed structure of retentions and protentions'.[100] For example, introducing a new section, Smith writes: 'Here's an old story so new that it's still in the middle of happening, writing itself now with no knowledge of where or how it'll end.'[101] Here, the present is the mode of *in medias res*: the future is open and nonexistent, and the present is the cutting edge of temporal progress. The problem with this view is that the present is here imagined as the final moment before the future happens, but this moment can be infinitely divided and subdivided into past or future, and as such does not exist. There is no now with which to be contemporaneous.

It is perhaps for this reason that Smith employs a fairy tale rhetoric here which marks the present as strangely untimely. The phrasing '[h]ere's an old story' sounds like the fairy tale framing device 'once upon a time'. It frames her fiction of immediacy *as* a story, a fiction, while also evoking the timelessness of folk tales, which are not contemporary, but always about other times and places. Stephen Benson has argued that this 'ostensible otherworldliness of "Once upon a time"' is particularly suited to

---

[98] Ibid., p. 13.

[99] Smith, p. 175.

[100] Currie, p. 12.

[101] Smith, p. 181.

novels which address themselves to the complex temporality of the contemporary.[102] After all, he argues, '[t]he time of the contemporary is elusive, a shifting mix of presents and pasts as well as of imagined futures'.[103] This may be why '[t]he fiction of the past forty years has sought repeatedly the company of the fairy tale, a mutually transformative relationship of backward glances, revisionary up-datings, wild anachronisms, and imaginary futures'.[104] Smith's fairy-tale marking of time in *Autumn* shows how the present always has to be staged as a kind of logically incoherent fiction, a time called forth or constituted by an act of telling.

Crudo's narrative handling of time similarly foregrounds the structure of the present as a crossing of retrospect and anticipation—and, in the process, remarks on its own status as a narrative, fictional construction of the present. As we saw earlier, the novel begins by establishing a particular time and place, '19:45 on 13 May 2017', and proceeds for a few sentences in this temporal setting. At first, then, the text adheres to the narrative convention of the fictive present unfolding in past tense. Currie describes this convention as follows:

> The present for a reader in a fictional narrative is not really the present at all but the past. It is somebody else's present related to us in the past tense. Though it seems like the present, because it is new to us, it is tensed as the past, in what the French call the preterite, a tense otherwise known as the past perfect or the past historic. We are narrated to in the preterite, but we experience the past tense in the present. But because it is the past tense we know that there is a future present, in relation to which the present of the narrative is past.[105]

Despite the use of past tense, Currie explains, readers are accustomed to thinking of the narrative as being the characters' present even though we know that their future is already determined, already laid out for them.

---

[102] Stephen Benson, 'Introduction: Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale', in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, ed. by Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), p. 3.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid., p. 4.

[105] Currie, p. 5.

Laing is very deliberate in the first few paragraphs of *Crudo* about performing and unveiling this conceit. Temporally, these passages move from Kathy's May to August and then back to around mid-July, employing temporal markers which foreground the structure of fiction as a kind of present-in-the-past. In one sentence, the narration moves from 13th May to the August wedding: 'Kathy was angry. I mean I. I was angry. And then I got married.'[106] In the next sentence, the narrative action moves back to an intermediate time between Kathy getting angry and getting married, again marking this temporal shift very explicitly: 'Two and a half months later, pre-wedding, post-decision to wed, Kathy found herself in Italy.'[107] Shifting between several different times and tenses, the novel disorders the fictive present, highlighting the way it is constituted as a crossed structure of retrospection and anticipation.

While all three authors emphasise speed and immediacy in their accounts of writing their novels, the texts themselves repeatedly stage the failure of writing to be structurally or temporally immediate. As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, these novels have all been positioned by their authors as publishing experiments: attempts to adapt the form of the novel and the speed of publishing to better respond to a contemporary experience of acceleration. Bhaskar and Thompson both remark that publishing is often thought of in terms of mediation; since immediacy would be the elimination of mediation, the novels' reflections on the contemporary appearance of technological, experiential and epistemological immediacy have consequences for the debate outlined above about the conceptual foundations of conventional publishing.

In other words, what the novels have to show us about immediacy also redounds on the material, economic and cultural questions facing the institution of publishing in the twenty-first-century. In particular, the novels offer ways of rethinking a prevalent discourse about the outdatedness of publishing as a communicative medium. In their representations of the news and social media, all three novels highlight the fact that the tendency to go out of date is not confined to traditional print media, but is unavoidable for—and even exacerbated by—

---

106 Laing, p. 2.

107 Ibid.

instantaneous digital dissemination. As such, they implicitly reject the grounds on which publishing and the novel are increasingly characterised as irrelevant or archaic.

Fictions of immediacy

Smith, Laing and Burn's novels all stage the fact that it is precisely the attempt at being up-to-the-minute, precisely the inscription of immediacy, which exposes the propensity of the mark to go out of date. Recalling Currie's observation that space-time compression and accelerated recontextualisation are *narratives* about twenty-first-century culture, the three novels examined here show that the contemporary immediacy of experience is only an experience of immediacy. It is, in other words, a fiction. As such, rather than becoming irrelevant in the face of technology, the novel as a fictional form has a peculiar power to rethink the narratives about the immediacy of contemporary experience that so often frame debates over the apparent slowness or outdatedness of traditional publishing.

The final movement of this chapter frames this strategy as a defence of fiction and the novel, placing Smith, Laing and Burn's treatments of immediacy within the context of two apparently opposing tendencies in contemporary fiction. Robert Eaglestone describes contemporary literature's 'strong interest in telling a story' instead of foregrounding—as postmodernism did—the illusoriness of narrative.[108] Strangely, at the same time, there has been 'a turn away from fiction as it has been understood altogether', exemplified by *Reality Hunger*.[109] As attempts to deliver unmediated representations of the contemporary, the novels examined in this chapter might seem to exemplify the 'turn away from fiction', but I have argued that they deploy their fictionality to foreground the impossibility of such representations.

It may seem paradoxical that there has been a resurgence of storytelling at the same time as there has been a turn away from fiction. However, I argue that these tendencies are part of the same move: a turn away from a particular late-twentieth-century conception of fiction and a renewed interest in its other capacities. In the

---

[108] Robert Eaglestone *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 14.

[109] Shields, p. 17.

postmodernist vocabulary, the term "fiction" refers to the inevitable shaping power of narrative and the unavailability of raw experience. According to Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, postmodernism amounted to a '"doctrine of panfictionality"—a "crisis" in the dichotomy between fact and fiction that ultimately leads to "the expansion of fiction at the expense of nonfiction"'.[110] By contrast, the contemporary interest in 'telling a story' shows a renewed interest in fiction's *institutive* powers: its ability to call up a fabulous world. Gibbons et al similarly contend that contemporary aesthetics exhibit 'a renewed need or wish to experience the world as possessing depth, as real, even amidst a lingering postmodernist scepticism of such an attempt'.[111] While this new engagement with a sense of the real 'does not entirely rebuild the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction after postmodernism, it does create a "reality effect" which renews the ontological category of the real'.[112] As Barthes argued, the reality effect only ever treated the real 'as a signified of connotation', since 'just when [insignificant] details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do—without saying so—is to *signify it*'.[113] Fiction, here, is the capacity to invent something and make it seem real. This is also the power which my thesis has shown literary institutions relying on to install their discourses and values.

Autumn, *Crudo* and *Born Yesterday* use their fictionality to foreground the fabulous nature of ideas about immediate representation and communication circulating in the discourse around publishing. The novels mime immediacy, but explicitly betray the fictionality of their reference. For example, *Crudo* is preoccupied with the ways in which a sense of reality is often rendered through the structure of fiction. Kathy asks of the contemporary political situation: 'How had this all happened? Some sort of gross appetite for action, like the Red Wedding episode only actual and huge. It didn't feel actual, that was the problem. It felt like it happened

---

[110] Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, 'Reality Beckons: Metamodernist Depthiness Beyond Panfictionality', *European Journal of English Studies*, 23 (2019), 172–89 (p. 174).

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid., pp. 174-5.

[113] Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141–48 (p. 148).

inside her computer.'[114] Here, *Crudo* sets out to represent a creeping feeling in the culture not only that we fail to understand and experience reality *as* reality, but that we have an appetite for fiction that we are exhibiting in our 'actual' political behaviour. Laing's protagonist finds that reality is only appropriable through the structure of fiction.

We might compare this to Derrida's reading of mimetics in 'The Double Session'. In this text Derrida writes about Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Mimique', which describes a show in which Pierrot recounts through mime how he murdered his wife. The mime supposedly acts out something which has already happened. However, the purported crime has not "really" happened, so it occurs for the first time in the mime—and yet, over the objection that the mime is therefore not an imitation, Mallarmé and Derrida insist that '[*t*]*here is* mimicry'.[115] Similarly, Kathy can only grasp the horror of post-2016 politics by thinking of it as being 'like' *Game of Thrones*, meaning that her experience of the 'actual' depends not on reality, but on a fiction. As with 'Mimique', there is no original, actual referent, but the fold of fictionality makes it as if there were. This, Derrida argues, is why fiction can put the truth onstage: 'this imitator having in the last instance no imitated, this signifier having in the last instance no signified, this sign having in the last instance no referent, their operation is no longer comprehended within the process of truth but on the contrary comprehends *it*'.[116] Rather than simply rendering a contemporary sense of immediacy or transparency, *Crudo* therefore shows itself to be highly concerned with the structure of fiction and of mediation.

The novel also addresses a concomitant anxiety that '[i]n this atmosphere it was becoming increasingly hard to feel real'; that the social, political and cultural power of reality as an enabling fiction is weakening.[117] Rather than the contemporary being marked by an increased immediacy, a lack of mediation, *Crudo* obliquely offers the possibility that it is actually characterised by an inability to experience ourselves as

---

[114] Laing, p. 48.

[115] Jacques Derrida, 'The Double Session', in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 187–316 (p. 217).

[116] Ibid., p. 218.

[117] Laing, p. 118.

real. This is not the same as the banality often attributed to postmodernism that there is no such thing as truth—again, there is an extra complication to Kathy's observation, in that her concern is not with truth claims as such, but with the *feeling* of reality. The reality she gestures towards is therefore already subject to the structure of fiction or mediation. The implication is that the apparent immediacy of *Crudo*'s own narrative discourse is a similar effect: an appearance of reality effected by a fiction of immediacy.

Burn also represents his protagonist as keenly aware of the haunting of reality and fiction by one another. When one of the protagonist's acquaintances appears on the reality TV show *How Clean is Your House* (a real programme which aired in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s), his evaluation of the presenters' behaviour is telling: '[b]oth of them went into what appeared to be an unfeigned overdrive of shock and revulsion at he start of the show'.[118] The protagonist is aware that, even in the case of something which *seems* real, he can only say for sure that it 'appeared' to be so. In one way, it is the format of reality TV which has done this: as we try to make forms that are more and more "real", we only end up with more of an *appearance* of reality. As Burn shows, viewers are not stupid: they know that this appearance of an immediate or transparent representation is itself a fiction.

As with *Crudo*, *Born Yesterday*'s reflection on reality TV can be extrapolated to a metafictional comment on the text's own narrative discourse. The novel knows that it produces the appearance of reality through a fiction of immediacy. Indeed, in his review of the novel, Mark Lawson wrote:

> On recent [April Fools' Days], it has been increasingly difficult to spot the deliberate spoofs amid the many no less obviously ridiculous events and claims. And Burn, who has divided his career between journalism and books of fiction and non-fiction (subjects including Fred West and George Best), seems to have concluded that the

[118] Burn, p. 3.

worrying sense of not being sure if a news item is truth or fiction has spread from one spring morning to become a general problem.[119]

Lawson's assessment shows that *Born Yesterday*, like reality TV, exposes how it is precisely the attempt to render more reality which in fact produces more fiction, and more equivocation over the distinction between the two categories. Rather than giving an unmediated experience of contemporary reality, Burn's novel shows up the fictional structure of such claims to representational immediacy.

Crudo and *Born Yesterday*, then, mobilise their fictiveness to highlight a similar structure of fictionality in claims to representational immediacy. Smith's novel also suggests a further critique of the aesthetics of immediacy, advocating for something very much like a Derridean secrecy, which resists the exhaustive and exhausting registering or recording of experience. Elisabeth and Daniel's conversations intimate that it is sometimes best if a possibility is left open for some knowledge, information, or aspect of the real to go unregistered. For example, surveying a field where there is now no longer any trace of the summer fair in the grass, Elisabeth is pleased that 'now you couldn't tell that any of these summer things had ever happened', a kind of erasure or forgetting which appeals to her: 'Somehow this wasn't the same as melancholy. It was something else, about how melancholy and nostalgia weren't relevant in the slightest. Things just happened. Then they were over. Time just passed. Partly it felt unpleasant, to think like that, rude even. Partly it felt good. It was kind of a relief.'[120] While the aesthetics of immediacy demand an exhaustive, literal appropriation of the real by fiction, here *Autumn* seems to encourage letting some things go unrecorded and uncaptured.

Daniel similarly argues that not everything needs to be retained: 'It's all right to forget, you know, he said. It's good to. In fact, we have to forget things sometimes. Forgetting is important. We do it on purpose. It means we get a bit of rest.'[121] For

---

[119] Mark Lawson, 'I Heard the News Today, Oh Boy', *Guardian*, 5 April 2008 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview21> [accessed 12 February 2020].

[120] Smith, p. 116.

[121] Ibid., p. 210.

Daniel, it is necessary or perhaps even ethical to forget. The Derridean secret is similarly a principle of allowing things (though not any one thing in particular) *not* to come to light. Derrida writes: 'Heterogeneous to the hidden, to the obscure, to the nocturnal, to the invisible, to what can be dissimulated and indeed to what is nonmanifest in general, [the secret] cannot be unveiled. It remains inviolable even when one thinks one has revealed it.'[122] While Smith describes *Seasonal* as an attempt to capture something of the contemporary, Elisabeth and Daniel's remarks register an awareness that some things are ephemeral and cannot be caught or recorded in memory or writing. As discussed in earlier chapters, the structure of secrecy is also the structure of fiction, and these passages in *Autumn* remind us that the abolition of secrecy is also the destruction of the space of the literary or fictional as such.

Jonathan Culler writes that '[Derrida] warns us to mistrust an insistence on transparency: to be compelled to reveal secrets is a feature of totalitarianism'.[123] Totalitarianism here means 'total information awareness', which could also easily describe Laing's aesthetic principle for *Crudo*, for example.[124] Read alongside Derrida's account of the secret, *Autumn* implies that there is a politics to the precise and comprehensive capture of the moment to which Laing aspires when she describes the process of writing *Crudo* as one in which 'everything that happened went in': it is a form of totalitarianism, a refusal of the secret and of fiction or the literary. *Autumn*'s thinking of memory can therefore be understood as a critique of contemporary fetishisations of immediate and transparent representation, suggesting that it constitutes an evacuation of the secret and the abolition of fiction.

Autumn, *Born Yesterday* and *Crudo* are therefore powerful reassertions of the novel and fiction at a time when, as Shields describes, we seem to be enduring the 'marginalization of literature by more technologically sophisticated and more visceral narrative forms'.[125] The novel, Shields argues, is incapable of 'convey[ing] what it feels

---

[122] Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering"', trans. by David Wood, in *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 3-31 (p. 26).

[123] Jonathan Culler, '"The Most Interesting Thing in the World"', *Diacritics*, 38 (2008), 7-16 (p. 15).

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

like to be alive right now'.[126] As we saw earlier, Shields describes artists responding by 'breaking larger and larger chunks of reality into their work'. This formal technique renders an immediacy which is not available to fiction, a category often maligned in *Reality Hunger*: fiction 'has never seemed less central to the culture's sense of itself' because '[t]here is more to be pondered in the grain and texture of life than traditional fiction allows'.[127] The novel, in this view, is outdated and unfit for representing contemporary experience.

That having been said, Shields shows an awareness that the reality and immediacy of these works is in fact illusory, remarking: 'I'm hopelessly, futilely drawn toward representations of the real, knowing full well how invented such representations are.'[128] Just as Kathy finds that she can only grasp reality through the effect of fiction, Shields' manifesto ends up showing that reality hunger is actually the desire for a reality which can only be rendered fictionally. Shields also quotes an article by Janet Malcolm in which fiction is described as *less* mediated than reality:

> The ideal of unmediated reporting is regularly achieved only in fiction, where the writer faithfully reports on what's going on in his imagination. When James reports in *The Golden Bowl* that the Prince and Charlotte are sleeping together, we have no reason to doubt him or to wonder whether Maggie is "overreacting" to what she's seeing.[129]

There is, in other words, nothing below or behind fiction's 'unmediated reporting', no truth against which the fiction can be checked.

Timothy Clark has explained the effect Malcom/Shields is describing here as one in which 'the literary […] actually conjures up what it seems merely to re-present as already there'.[130] This is because in fiction, the narrator's 'observations are necessarily true'; they 'become true simply by virtue of being made'.[131] As I described

---

[126] Ibid., p. 71.

[127] Ibid, pp. 177, 202.

[128] Ibid., p. 175.

[129] Ibid., p. 132.

[130] Timothy Clark, 'Not Seeing the Short Story: A Blind Phenomenology of Reading', *Oxford Literary Review*, 26 (2004), 5–30 (p. 8).

[131] Ibid.

in earlier discussions of the secret, there is no actual referent or false bottom to a fictional text; '[t]he language', as Clark says, 'can only describe what it has itself posited and in the terms in which it posits it'.[132] It is only through a 'trompe-l'oeil' effect (like Franchesco's image of a hand or foot coming out of the frame in *How to Be Both*) that we can forget that the apparent "truth" of a narrative is only produced at the level of the fictional language.[133] Similarly, in 'The Double Session', Derrida describes the 'operation' of a mimetics that copies or re-presents something that did not pre-exist it as throwing light on an empty stage: 'This "materialism of the idea" is nothing other than the staging, the theatre, the visibility of nothing or of the self. It is a dramatization which *illustrates nothing*, which illustrates *the nothing*, lights up a space, re-marks a spacing as a nothing, a blank: white as a yet unwritten page, blank as a difference between two lines.'[134] In this sense, fiction has a way of *showing up* the structure of mediation.

My readings of *Autumn*, *Crudo* and *Born Yesterday* demonstrate how these novels identify the structure of fiction as a resource for rethinking the present currency of communicative and experiential immediacy in contemporary literary culture. As the internet increasingly seems to enable the transparent circulation of information, the novel as a fictional form becomes a peculiarly privileged medium for reframing claims to unmediated, transparent or exhaustive representation. As Derrida argues, literature has the capacity to re-present and therefore query veridical discourse: 'A "literature" […] can produce, can place onstage, and put forth something like the truth. Therefore it is more powerful than the truth of which it is capable.'[135] Citing the example of 'The Emperor's New Clothes', Derrida argues that the discourses of truth, reality or analysis 'will have been exhibited/dissimulated in advance by the tale, which therefore no longer belongs to the space of decidable truth'.[136] My analyses of

---

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Derrida, 'The Double Session', pp. 218-9.

[135] Jacques Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', in *The Post Card*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 413–19 (p. 419).

[136] Ibid.

Autumn, *Born Yesterday* and *Crudo* identify just such an effect in their representations of immediacy.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that *Autumn*, *Crudo* and *Born Yesterday* thematise the impact of the internet on the publishing industry and the novel as a literary form. Their aesthetics of immediacy evoke the ephemerality of the new media environment, in which narratives disintegrate in the rapid flow of information, and mimic digital forms such as the tweet. Here, Smith, Laing and Burn can be seen flirting with fears that the internet, with its many channels of instant publication and dissemination, is having a pernicious effect on novelistic form. However, my readings of the novels show that they mark the necessary failure of attempts at communicative or representational immediacy. By staging this failure, the novels contest the idea that digital publishing and the cultural forms propagated by the internet have privileged access to the immediacy of contemporary experience. Immediacy emerges as an impossible fiction: there can be a feeling or a literary effect of immediacy, but experience itself is always mediated.

Mobilising their own fictionality to highlight the impossibility of immediacy, these texts show how the novel as a fictional form is a highly appropriate medium for reflecting on the questions of mediation and immediacy which are central to the contemporary perception of an accelerated temporality. Parks and Self think that the novel is at risk of going out date because it demands sustained attention and a certain kind of slowness; however, based on my readings of tense and narrative discourse, one could say that it is precisely because the novel has its own distinctive ways of handling time that it remains a useful genre for addressing questions of temporality and mediation. Indeed, this is the crux of Nilges' argument about neoliberalism and contemporary fiction.

These questions surrounding the novel's fitness for representing contemporary experiences of immediacy have arisen with the arrival of technologies for instantaneously publishing and disseminating information. Bhaskar and Thompson both raise the possibility that traditional publishing is faced with an existential threat in the form of a widespread reorganisation of the material production and

dissemination of texts. Bhaskar, in particular, highlights the fact that conventional publishing has always been conceptualised as a mediating institution taking part in cultural gatekeeping, complex negotiations of value between various agents, and the control of certain channels of communication. The contemporary possibility of—and drive towards—the instantaneous publication and dissemination of texts therefore threatens to render obsolete the very concept of a publisher.

This threat has not yet been realised, and—as Thompson observes—there are many functions which traditional publishers fulfil that other agents in the field cannot. With the recent resurgence of print books and the dying-down of fears about ebooks cannibalising print sales, it is now beginning to seem as though what appeared to be a conceptual or existential threat posed by technological change to the very fundamentals of publishing is instead a severe economic one posed by the need for publishers, now largely subsumed by massive media conglomerates, to produce shareholder value.[137] Sinykin and Clark's analyses of the conglomerate era of publishing, for example, certainly point in this direction. However, my readings of *Autumn*, *Born Yesterday* and *Crudo* argue that recent developments in how texts, whether they are novels, news articles or tweets, are communicated to the public (i.e., how they are *published*) form a crucial and unavoidable context for critical analysis of the contemporary literary aesthetics of immediacy.

Against the backdrop of a crisis of confidence in trade publishing and widespread fears about the fate of the novel, *Autumn*, *Crudo* and *Born Yesterday* reassert the genre's capacity to address the pressing cultural questions of our time. Like the contemporary writing examined in chapters one, two and three, these novels are implicitly defences of literature; they reinscribe the particular qualities or powers of fiction and the novel. The conclusion to this thesis situates this tendency in contemporary fiction in terms of a twenty-first-century shift away from postmodern gestures of negation and cancellation and towards the rearticulation of the aesthetic as a political and ethical resource. It also crystallises the role that a Derridean thinking

---

[137] Alex Preston, 'How Real Books Have Trumped Ebooks', *Guardian*, 14 May 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/14/how-real-books-trumped-ebooks-publishing-revival > [accessed 16 March 2020].

of institution, inauguration and iteration might have in such a project, pointing to the ways in which fiction as a form of invention is structured by the possibility of the new and unforeseeable.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has interrogated a particular awareness in contemporary British literature of the institutional frameworks which govern its production and reception. As literary prizes proliferate and authors increasingly earn their crust as creative writing lecturers, as public discourse fractures and the print press loses out to the internet, the contemporary literary landscape is increasingly characterised by the disintegration of some institutions and the overweening sway of others. Ali Smith's oeuvre shows a sustained thinking of the question of literature's relation to institutions, which feature in some of her works as organs vital to the maintenance of an educated body politic (as in *Public Library and Other Stories*), and in others as quasi-carceral apparatuses (as in *Hotel World*).

Smith's biography, career and author-function make her a paradigmatic example of the ambivalent relationship between authors and institutions such as prizes, publishing, universities, and the public. Her fictions mirror this complexity in

their 'counter-institutional', or 'with-against' thinking of the institution.[1] Gesturing towards the wider prevalence of this tendency, my readings of texts by Alan Hollingsworth, Olivia Laing, Gordon Burn, Claire-Louise Bennett and Rachel Cusk show how twenty-first-century British novels register the continuing power of literary institutions to assert ideologies such as value, aesthetic autonomy, professionalism, and populism—even as these texts also track a growing contemporary awareness of the essentially fictional nature of these concepts.

I have argued throughout this thesis that Jacques Derrida's term 'fictive institution' best captures the novels' double recognition of both the power and the contingency of institutions, suggesting how and why concepts still have force even though their ontological or metaphysical grounding is abyssal: once instituted as fictions, they command belief, they dissimulate, they present their origins as natural.[2] However, this contingency also suggests that things could have been, or could be, otherwise. This is, I think, the most important contact-point between Smith's ethics and Derrida's. As Sarah Wood points out, the Derridean logic of iterability allows for the possibility of a change in the order of things: '[*i*]*tara* is itself reborn to itself as the root of Latin *iterum*, "again" or "anew"'.[3] This is not to say that the structure of signification as Derrida describes it underwrites a particular emancipatory political agenda; only that it prevents meanings from becoming completely codified, continually allowing for the possibility of the new.

We might think here of the dead lecturer in *Artful*, someone who 'used to know all the words', 'more words than anyone', but now, instead of their old institutional authority over interpretations, represents a linguistic remainder: the leftover bits of language that cannot be assimilated into a conventional system of meanings.[4] The

---

[1] Simon Morgan Wortham, *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 8, 1.

[2] Jacques Derrida, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge, (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–75 (p. 36) [emphasis removed].

[3] Sarah Wood, 'Anew Again', in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 277-92 (p. 290).

[4] Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 42.

revenant's speech creates new, accidental and unforeseen encounters with meaning (or its absence). On hearing the word '[e]pomony', the narrator revels in this new experience of language: 'Oh, the imagination was fantastic: mine didn't just make up some place you'd been, it even made up words whose meanings I didn't know— which was exactly what it had been like to live with you.'[5] Critics tend to argue that Smith's writing gestures towards political and ethical possibilities for new experiences, knowledge, or orders to emerge; for example, Emily Horton argues that Smith 'recogniz[es] a potential for freedom and community within urban space, and also a new opportunity for personal and social affective engagement'.[6] My readings of Smith's work show that we can trace this possibility down to the level of signification, as a function of the literary which escapes codification.

Each chapter of this thesis has argued that contemporary fiction motivates this insight in order to try to recover something, whether it is the possibility for artistic invention, the immediacy of (aesthetic) experience, or the sense of a coherent public or community. However, while the novels, short stories and creative-critical works addressed here constitute various kinds of return, these returns are crossed by an awareness of the constructed nature of the original object. We could frame this as a Derridean cognisance that languages and concepts are all in some way instituted. When Derrida speaks of 'fictive institution', he evokes not only the literary's negative relationship to ontology, but a more general structure in which concepts like value, immediacy, discipline, professionalism, experience and the aesthetic are not simply given, but have to be originated. This founding moment, however, always involves the fictional installation of an origin. In their tacit awareness of this fact, the twenty-first-century texts studied in this thesis are broadly in line with the contemporary mood in the academy and in literary culture, an orientation towards a *qualified* recovery of what has been lost or cancelled by postmodernism or critique.

Pieter Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker describe this orientation, which they call 'metamodernism', as a set of widely distributed 'trends and tendencies [that]

---

[5] Ibid., p. 43.

[6] Emily Horton, 'Contemporary Space and Affective Ethics in Ali Smith's Short Stories', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 9-22 (p. 22).

can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern' which 'express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse'.[7] This discourse is nascently, and ambivalently, utopian:

> CEOs and politicians, architects, and artists alike are formulating anew a narrative of longing structured by and conditioned on a belief ('yes we can', 'change we can believe in') that was long repressed, for a possibility (a 'better' future) that was long forgotten. Indeed, if, simplistically put, the modern outlook vis-à-vis idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naive, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation's attitude—for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation—can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism.[8]

This formulation of 'informed naivety, pragmatic idealism', I think, could well describe contemporary literature's impulse towards the recovery of categories which postmodernism has given us cause to be sceptical of. What is distinctive about this tendency is that it is tempered by a postmodern awareness that these categories were always instituted fictions.

We could compare this disposition to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the reparative, a contemporary turn away from the exposure of structures of oppression, and towards the recovery of resources for nourishing and repairing both oneself and the social body. Like metamodernism, the reparative is also a commitment to a qualified recovery; it aims 'to assemble or ''repair'' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though, I would emphasize, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*'.[9] Like metamodernism, then, reparative reading is a move towards a recovery that is acknowledged to be partial. Against this backdrop, the aesthetic turn in literary

---

[7] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2 (2010) [n.p.].

[8] Ibid.

[9] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, ed. by Michèle Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 124-152 (p. 128).

criticism takes on a broader significance. John Joughin and Simon Malpas, Isobel Armstrong, Joseph North and Elizabeth Anker all press for a recuperation of the aesthetic as a desperately-required resource not only for literary studies, but for a wider political project of relating art and our understanding of it back to material conditions.[10] This materialist aesthetic stops short of reinstating the old, metaphysical/ideological aesthetic, again exhibiting a contemporary oscillation between cancellation and recovery.

As far as the examples of contemporary literature studied here partake of this project, they do so by recognising that the instituted nature of everything from the signifier-signified relationship all the way up to aesthetic discourse always offers the possibility of change and difference. This is where contemporary formations like metamodernism and the reparative make contact with the logic of iterability. As Sedgwick observes, 'to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*'; on the contrary, 'to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise'.[11] The reparative position does not simply recover wholesale the lost objects of the past, but allows the reader 'room to realize that the future may be different from the past'.[12] One could also be brought to a similar recognition by Smith's thinking of chance and contingency through the figure of the pun.

This allows us to make a distinction between two senses of the term "institution": the first, in the sense of "institutionalisation", refers to codified, conventional discourse, while the second, as the logic of fictive institution or the instituted trace, suggests a radical contingency which entails that things could always be otherwise. Mobilising what Derrida describes as the capacity of the literary to put

---

[10] John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas, 'The New Aestheticism: An Introduction', in *The New Aestheticism*, ed. by John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 1-19; Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Elizabeth S. Anker, 'Postcritical Reading, the Lyric, and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*', *Diacritics*, 45 (2017), 16–42.

[11] Sedgwick, p. 146.

[12] Ibid.

the truth onstage, the contemporary literature examined in this thesis turns the logic of institution back on the discourses and values promulgated by academic and public criticism, prizes and publishing. This capacity, Derrida suggests, is literature's peculiar power. In remarking their own status as inventions, the texts examined in this thesis stand as defences of fiction, literature and the novel, institutions structured by the very possibility of beginning differently or anew.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

'About', Gorse <http://gorse.ie/about/> [accessed 4 February 2020]

Aesthetics and Ideology, ed. by George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University
   Press, 1994)

Agamben, Giorgio, 'What is the Contemporary?', in *What is an Apparatus?*, trans. by
   David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009),
   pp. 39-55

Ahmed, Sara, 'Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character', *New*
   Literary History, 42 (2011), 231–53

Akbar, Arifa, 'Conversations with the Undead: Ali Smith Gives the Lecture a
   Haunting Twist', *Independent*, 27 October 2012
   <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-
   entertainment/books/features/conversations-with-the-undead-ali-smith-
   gives-the-lecture-a-haunting-twist-8226873.html> [accessed 4 February 2020]

'Ali Smith', *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4, 11 November 2016

'Ali Smith on Paul Cézanne: The Truth about Green', *Guardian*, 8 November 2010 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/interactive/2010/oct/31/ali-smith-cezanne-etang-soeurs> [accessed 4 February 2020]

Anderson, Eric Karl, 'Ali Smith on Autumn, Brexit, and the Shortness of Life', *Penguin*, 12 October 2016 <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2016/ali-smith-on-autumn/> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Anker, Elizabeth S., 'Postcritical Reading, the Lyric, and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*', *Diacritics*, 45 (2017), 16–42

Armstrong, Isobel, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

Art UK, *St Vincent Ferrer* <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/saint-vincent-ferrer-115248> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Bakhtin, Mikhail, 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 3-40

Barthes, Roland, 'The Reality Effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141–48

Belfield, Chris et al., 'The Impact of Undergraduate Degrees on Early-Career Earnings', Institute for Fiscal Studies, 27 November 2018 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/undergraduate-degrees-labour-market-returns> [accessed 27 March 2020]

Bennett, Alice, *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018)

Bennett, Claire-Louise, 'I Am Love', *Gorse*, 2 (2014), pp. 37-58

——, *Pond* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2015)

Bennington, Geoffrey, 'Demanding History', in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. by Derek Attridge, Geoffrey Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 15–29

Benson, Stephen and Clare Connors, 'Introduction', in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 1-47

Benson, Stephen, 'Introduction: Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale', in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, ed. by Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008)

Best, Stephen and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108 (2009), 1-21

Bhaskar, Michael, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network* (London: Anthem Press, 2013)

Blanchot, Maurice, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 379-87

Bland, Archie, '*They Is Us*, by Tama Janowitz', *Independent*, 20 March 2009 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/they-is-us-by-tama-janowitz-5451439.html> [accessed 12 March 2020]

Bone, Allison, 'Booker: Still Number One?', *Bookseller*, 15 September 2005 <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/booker-still-number-one> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010)

Boxall, Peter, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

——, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Brazil, Kevin, 'Form and Fiction, 1989-2018', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980-2018*, ed. by Peter Boxall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 89-104

British Fiction: The Novel at Mid-Century, ed. by Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Brown, Mark, 'Booker Prize 2011: Julian Barnes Triumphs at Last', *Guardian*, 19 October 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/18/booker-prize-julian-barnes-wins> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Burn, Gordon, *Born Yesterday: The News as a Novel* (London: Faber, 2008)

Carey, John, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992)

Cixous, Hélène, 'The Character of "Character"', *New Literary History*, 5 (1974), 383-402

Clark, Alex, 'Fair Play: Can Literary Festivals Pay their Way?', *Guardian*, 28 May 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/28/can-literary-festivals-pay-their-way> [accessed 20 February 2020]

——, 'The Lost Art of Editing', *Guardian*, 11 February 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/11/lost-art-editing-books-publishing> [accessed 12 March 2020]

——, 'Man Booker Prize: This Year's Judges Are Betraying Authors and Their Readers', *Guardian*, 16 October 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/16/booker-prize-judges-betray-readers> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Clark, Timothy, 'Literary Force: Institutional Values', *Culture Machine*, 1 (1999) [n.p.]

——, 'Not Seeing the Short Story: A Blind Phenomenology of Reading', *Oxford Literary Review*, 26 (2004), 5–30

——, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

Collini, Stefan, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012)

Cooke, Rachel, 'Has the Booker Prize Lost its Mojo?', *Guardian*, 7 October 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/07/has-the-booker-prize-lost-its-mojo> [accessed 11 February 2020].

Crosthwaite, Paul, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

'Crudo: Olivia Laing and Ali Smith', *London Review Bookshop Podcast*, 3 July 2018 <https://www.podbean.com/media/share/dir-5ax4t-43c0cca> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Culler, Jonathan, '"The Most Interesting Thing in the World"', *Diacritics*, 38 (2009), 7–16

——, 'The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction', in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. by Jonathan Culler (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 1-16

Currie, Mark, *About Time: Narrative Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006)

Cusk, Rachel, *Outline* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014)

Dale, Scott, 'The Power of the Quill: Epistolary Technique in Richardson's *Pamela*', *Revista Letras*, 53 (2000), 53-64

Dalley, Jan, '"How to Be Both", by Ali Smith', *Financial Times*, 5 September 2014 <https://www.ft.com/content/aaa87344-3386-11e4-85f1-00144feabdc0> [accessed 24 January 2020]

Daniel, Lucy, '*There but for the* by Ali Smith: Review', *Telegraph*, 24 May 2011 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8523762/There-But-For-The-by-Ali-Smith-review.html> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Darling, Rachel, 'A Double Win for Ali Smith Indicates There Are Too Many Book Prizes—But So What?', *The Conversation*, 13 November 2014 <https://theconversation.com/a-double-win-for-ali-smith-indicates-there-are-too-many-book-prizes-but-so-what-33422> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Davies, Ben, 'The Complexities of Dwelling in Ali Smith's *There but for the*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58 (2017), 509-520

'Democracy, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/49755> [accessed 10 February 2020]

'Demotic, n. and adj.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2020 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/49863> [accessed 31 March 2020]

Derrida, Jacques, '"Counterfeit Money" II: Gift and Countergift, Excuse and Forgiveness (Baudelaire and the Story of the Dedication)', in *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 108-72

——, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–75

——, 'Declarations of Independence', in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. by Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. by Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 46–54

——, 'Demeure', in Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death | Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 15-114

——, 'The Double Session', in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 187–316

——, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', in *The Post Card*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 413–19

——, 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 55-81

——, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', trans. by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, 14 (1984), 20–31

——, 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering"', trans. by David Wood, in *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 3-31

——, 'Positions: Interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta', in *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 37-96

——, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', trans. by Catherine Porter, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1–47

——, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf), pp. 309-330

——, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 351-70

——, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973)

Dickens, Charles, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

Eaglestone, Robert, *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, anniversary edn. (Malden: Blackwell, 2008)

Eastham, Andrew, 'Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian Aestheticism and Post-Modern Culture in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*', *Textual Practice*, 20 (2006), 509–27

'Enthusiasm, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2018 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/62879> [accessed 5 February 2020]

Eshelman, Raoul, 'Checking out of the Epoch: Performatism in Olga Tokarczuk's "The Hotel Capital" vs. Late Postmodernism in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (with Remarks on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Miloš Urban's *Sevenchurch*)', *Anthropoetics*, 10 (2004-5) [n.p.]

Esty, Jed, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Felski, Rita, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015)

'Fiction, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/69828> [accessed 14 February 2020]

'Fine, adj., adv., and n.2', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2016 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70361?> [accessed 2 April 2020]

'Fine, n.1', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2016 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70359> [accessed 5 February 2020]

Fielding, Henry, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, ed. by A.R. Humphreys (London: J.M. Dent, 1973)

Fletcher, John, 'Introduction: Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Other', trans. by Luke Thurston, in Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, ed. by John Fletcher, trans. by Luke Thurston, Leslie Hill, and Philip Slotkin (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1-85

Flood, Alison, 'Ali Smith Wins Goldsmiths Prize for Bifurcating Marvel How to Be Both', *Guardian*, 12 November 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/12/ali-smith-goldsmith-prize-how-to-be-both> [accessed 4 February 2020]

——, 'Hatchet Job of the Year Goes to Assault on Rachel Cusk', *Guardian*, 12 February 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/12/hatchet-job-of-the-year-rachel-cusk> [accessed 11 March 2020]

Foden, Giles, 'Check in, Drop out', *Guardian*, 14 April 2001 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/apr/14/fiction.alismith> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Foucault, Michel, 'What is an Author?', in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. by Josué V. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 141-60

Foyles, 'About the Author: Ali Smith' <https://www.foyles.co.uk/ali-smith> [accessed 12 March 2020]

François, Anne-Lise, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008)

Franklin, Dan, 'Commissioning and Editing Modern Fiction', in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. by Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Freud, Sigmund, 'The Unconscious' in Sigmund Freud, *The Sigmund Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), pp. 572-84

Garnham, Nicholas, 'The Media and the Public Sphere', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 359-76

Gąsiorek, Andrzej, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995)

Germanà, Monica and Emily Horton, 'Introduction', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 1-8

Gibbons, Alison, Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, 'Reality Beckons: Metamodernist Depthiness Beyond Panfictionality', *European Journal of English Studies*, 23 (2019), 172–89

Giddens, Anthony, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007)

Goldsmiths, University of London, *The Goldsmiths Prize 2019* <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Gordon, Edmund, 'The Dinner Guest', *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 August 2011, pp. 19-20

Habermas, Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003)

Hadfield, Andrew, 'Turning Point: Or, the Wheel Has Come Full Circle', *Textual Practice*, 28 (2014), 1-8

Hardyment, Christina, 'The Bookshop by Penelope Fitzgerald', *Times*, 21 July 2018 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/review-the-bookshop-by-penelope-fitzgerald-w5tvf5w22> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Harvey, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Head, Dominic, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency: Ali Smith and the Contemporary Canon', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 101-114

Henley, Jon, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard: "I Have Given away My Soul"', *Guardian*, 9 March 2012 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/mar/09/karl-ove-knausgaard-memoir-family> [accessed 11 March 2020]

Herrnstein Smith, Barbara, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988)

Hodgson, Jennifer, '"Such a Thing as the Avant-Garde has Ceased to Exist": The Hidden Legacies of the British Experimental Novel', in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2013)

Hogarth, William, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. by Ronald Paulson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997)

Hollinghurst, Alan, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004)

Hollingsworth, Mary, *Patronage in Renaissance Italy: From 1400s to the Early Sixteenth Century* (London: John Murray, 1994)

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002)

Horton, Emily, 'Contemporary Space and Affective Ethics in Ali Smith's Short Stories', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 9-22

'How to Fail: Olivia Laing', *How to Fail*, 8 August 2018 <https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-ti7mi-94772d> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Hutton, Margaret Anne, 'Plato, New Media Technologies, and the Contemporary Novel', *Mosaic*, 51 (2018), 179–95

'I Just Got a Permanent Academic Job—but I'm Not Celebrating', *Guardian*, 22 June 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-

network/2018/jun/22/permanent-academic-job-university-system-unfair-exploitative> [accessed 5 February 2020]

'Institution, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/97110> [accessed 31 January 2020]

Jaffe, Meredith, 'Middlebrow? What's So Shameful about Writing a Book and Hoping it Sells?', *Guardian*, 5 November 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/05/middlebrow-whats-so-shameful-about-writing-a-book-and-hoping-it-sells-well> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991)

——, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)

Jarvis, Simon, 'An Undeleter for Criticism', *Diacritics*, 32 (2003), 3-10+12-18

Johnson, Bret, 'How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Modernism (Again)', *New Statesman*, 14 November 2017 <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/11/how-we-learned-stop-worrying-and-love-modernism-again> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Jones, Philip, 'Bookers, Burns and Bounces', *Bookseller*, 19 October 2018 <https://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/bookers-burns-and-bounces-876241> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Joughin, John J. and Simon Malpas, 'The New Aestheticism: An Introduction', in *The New Aestheticism*, ed. by John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 1-19

Joyce, James, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)

Julavits, Heidi, 'Rachel Cusk's "Outline"', New York Times, 7 January 2015 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/books/review/rachel-cusks-outline.html> [accessed 27 January 2020]

'Just, adv.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019, <www.oed.com/view/Entry/102192> [accessed 28 February 2020]

Kamuf, Peggy, *Signature Pieces: On the Institution of Authorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988)

Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. by Nicholas Walker, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Keen, Tony, 'The Pros and Cons of Para-Academia', in *The Para-Academic Handbook: A Toolkit for Making-Learning-Creating-Acting*, ed. by Alex Wardrop and Deborah Withers (Bristol: Hammeron Press, 2014), pp. 243-9

Kellaway, Kate, 'Rachel Cusk: "Aftermath Was Creative Death. I Was Heading into Total Silence', *Guardian*, 24 August 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/rachel-cusk-interview-aftermath-outline> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Kermode, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Kim, Soo Yeon, 'Betrayed by Beauty: Ethics and Aesthetics in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 58 (2016), 165-88

Kingsley, Patrick, 'Alan Kurdi: One Year on, Compassion towards Refugees Fades', *Guardian*, 2 September 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/01/alan-kurdi-death-one-year-on-compassion-towards-refugees-fades> [accessed 12 February 2020]

Knights, Ben, 'Intelligence and Interrogation: The Identity of the English Student', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 4 (2005), 33–52

——, *Pedagogic Criticism: Reconfiguring University English Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, ed. by Michèle Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 124-152

Kristin Ross, 'Translator's Introduction', in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. vii-xxiii

Laing, Olivia, *Crudo: A Novel* (London: Picador, 2018)

Lawson, Mark, 'I Heard the News Today, Oh Boy', *Guardian*, 5 April 2008 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview21> [accessed 12 February 2020]

Levine, Caroline, *Forms: Whole, Rhythms, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015)

Levinson, Marjorie, 'What is New Formalism?', *PMLA*, 122 (2007), 558-569

Ley, James, *The Critic in the Modern World: Public Criticism from Samuel Johnson to James Wood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

Long, Camilla, 'Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation by Rachel Cusk', *Times*, 4 March 2012 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/aftermath-on-marriage-and-separation-by-rachel-cusk-xn0xgt0lsp9> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Maughan, Philip, 'The Mind in Solitude: An Interview with Claire-Louise Bennett', *The Paris Review*, 18 July 2016 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/07/18/the-mind-in-solitude-an-interview-with-claire-louise-bennett/> [accessed 5 February 2020]

McDonald, Rónán, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007)

McGill, Robert, *The Treacherous Imagination: Intimacy, Ethics, and Autobiographical Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013)

McGrath, Charles, 'After Hiding, He Becomes a Celebrity', *New York Times*, 18 October 2011 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/19/books/there-but-for-the-by-ali-smith-review.html> [accessed 4 February 2020]

McGrath, Melanie, '*There but for the* is a Lift for the Soul', *Evening Standard,* 2 June 2011 <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/books/there-but-for-the-is-a-lift-for-the-soul-6407647.html> [accessed 10 February 2020]

McGurl, Mark, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009)

McIlvanney, Liam and Ray Ryan, 'Introduction' in *The Good of the Novel*, ed. by Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), pp. vii-xiv

Merritt, Stephanie, review of *New Writing 13*, *Observer*, 17 April 2005, p. 19

——, 'Winter by Ali Smith Review—Luminously Beautiful', *Guardian*, 5 November 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/05/winter-ali-smith-review> [accessed 12 February 2020]

Michelene Wandor, *The Author is not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Miller, Seumas, 'Social Institutions', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 9 April 2019 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-institutions/> [accessed 14 February 2020]

Moran, Joe, 'Walking with a Purpose: The Essay in Contemporary Nonfiction', *Textual Practice*, 32 (2018), 1277–99 (p. 1285)

Morgan Wortham, Simon, *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006)

Morlock, Forbes, 'Graphic Ambivalent', *Oxford Literary Review*, 31 (2009), 49–63

Morrison, Blake, 'Blake Morrison on the Goldsmiths Prize for Fiction: "There Are Still Things to Say That Haven't Been Said Before"', *Guardian*, 11 November 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/11/goldsmiths-prize-mike-mccormack> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney, 'The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses', *Social Text*, 22 (2004), 101-15

Ngai, Sianne, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015)

——, 'Theory of the Gimmick', *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (2017), 466-505

——, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005)

Nilges, Mathias, 'Neoliberalism and the Time of the Novel', *Textual Practice*, 29 (2015), 357–77

North, Joseph, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017)

O'Connell, John, review of *New Writing 13*, *Time Out*, 27 April 2005, p. 65

O'Donnell, Patrick, '"The Space That Wrecks Out Abode": The Stranger in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and *The Accidental*' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 89-100

O'Grady, Megan, 'Claire-Louise Bennett Talks About Her Genre-Bending Debut, *Pond*, and the Magic of Solitude', *Vogue*, 6 July 2016 <https://www.vogue.com/article/pond-claire-louise-bennett-interview> [accessed 5 February 2020]

'Outline, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/133739> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Parks, Tim, 'Reading: The Struggle', *New York Review of Books*, 10 June 2014 <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/10/reading-struggle/> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Patterson, Christina, 'Ali Smith: The Power and the Story', *Independent*, 17 June 2005 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/ali-smith-the-power-and-the-story-226080.html> [accessed 4 February 2020]

Phelan, Laurence, review of *New Writing 13*, *Independent on Sunday*, 10 April 2005, p. 33

Pine, B. Joseph and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999)

Pohl, Rebecca, 'Ali Smith, Enthusiasm and Market', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 63 (2017), 694-713

Poovey, Mary, 'Creative Criticism: Adaptation, Performative Writing, and the Problem of Objectivity', *Narrative*, 8 (2000), 109-133

——, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

Preston, Alex, 'Autumn by Ali Smith—"The First Serious Brexit Novel"', *Financial Times*, 4 October 2016 <https://www.ft.com/content/0e227666-8ef4-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78> [accessed 12 February 2020]

——, 'How Real Books Have Trumped Ebooks', *Guardian*, 14 May 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/14/how-real-books-trumped-ebooks-publishing-revival > [accessed 16 March 2020]

'Prize Controversies', *Freedom, Books, Flowers and the Moon*, 17 October 2019 <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/freedom-books-flowers-moon-october-17/> [accessed 6 March 2020]

'Public, adj. and n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/154052> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010)

——, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991)

——, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004)

Readings, Bill, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

Rees, C.J. van, 'How Reviewers Reach Consensus on the Value of Literary Works', *Poetics*, 16 (1987), 275-94

Reeve, Elspeth, 'A History of the Hot Take', *New Republic*, 12 April 2015 <https://newrepublic.com/article/121501/history-hot-take> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Royle, Nicholas, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011)

——, *E.M. Forster* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999)

——, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003)

Ryan, Judith, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)

Schoene, Berthold, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009)

Schwartz, Alexandra, 'I Don't Think that Character Exists Anymore: A Conversation with Rachel Cusk', *New Yorker*, 18 November 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/i-dont-think-character-exists-anymore-a-conversation-with-rachel-cusk> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Scott, Catherine, 'Oscars 2013: Life of Pi—A Book in Numbers', 25 February 2013 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9892360/Oscars-2013-Life-of-Pi-a-book-in-numbers.html> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Self, John, 'Booker Prize Populism May Well Backfire', *Guardian*, 17 October 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/17/booker-prize-populism-backfire> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Self, Will, 'The Novel is Dead (and this Time it's for Real)', *Guardian*, 2 May 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Shields, David, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2010)

Shatzkin, Mike, 'Reinventing the Marketing Machine', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 15 (1999), 95-9

Shukla, Nikesh, 'The 2014 Goldsmiths Prize Shortlist: Why It's Neither "Creative" Nor "Daring"', *Guardian*, 2 October 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/oct/02/2014-goldsmiths-prize-not-creative-or-daring> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Sinykin, Dan N., 'The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007', *Contemporary Literature*, 58 (2017), 462–91

Small, Helen, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Smith, Ali, 'Green', in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 249-56

——, 'Last', in *Public Library* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. 5-17

——, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016)

——, graduation speech, University of East Anglia, 18 July 2016 <https://soundcloud.com/ueaevents/uea-honorary-graduate-ali-smith-speech> [accessed 4 February 2020]

——, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2002)

——, *How to Be Both* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014)

——, *The Accidental* (London: Penguin, 2006)

——, *There but for the* (London: Penguin, 2012)

——, *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017)

Smith, Emma E., '"A Democracy of Voice"? Narrating Community in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 4 (2010), 81-99

Squires, Claire, 'A Common Ground? Book Prize Culture in Europe', *Javnost*, 11 (2004), 37-47

Squires, Claire, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

St Anne's College, 'Weidenfeld Visiting Professorship in Comparative European Literature' <http://www.st-annes.ox.ac.uk/about/weidenfeld-visiting-professorship-in-comparative-european-literature> [accessed 4 February 2020]

Tait, Theo, 'The Absolute End', *London Review of Books*, 26 January 2012 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n02/theo-tait/the-absolute-end> [accessed 10 February 2020]

Tancke, Ulrike 'Narrating Intrusion: Storytelling and Frustrated Desires in *The Accidental* and *There but for the*', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 75-88

Tesfaye, Sophia, '"Things That Have Lasted Longer than Mooch": Twitter Laughs at Firing of Anthony Scaramucci', *Salon*, 31 July 2017 <https://www.salon.com/2017/07/31/things-that-have-lasted-longer-than-mooch-twitter-laughs-at-firing-of-anthony-scaramucci/> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Tew, Philip, *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2007)

Thompson, John B., *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013)

Todd, Richard, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996)

Vadde, Aarthi, 'Amateur Creativity: Contemporary Literature and the Digital Publishing Scene', *New Literary History*, 48 (2017), 27–51

Vermeulen, Pieter, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015)

Vermeulen, Timotheus and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2 (2010) [n.p.]

Warner, Michael, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005)

Williams, Raymond, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002)

Willis, Simon and Gordon Burn, 'Gordon Burn | Interview', *Granta*, 18th April 2008 <https://granta.com/interview-gordon-burn/> [accessed 11 February 2020]

Winnicott, D.W., *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Wintersgill, Caroline, 'Institutions of Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980-2018*, ed. by Peter Boxall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 105-133

Withers, Deborah and Alex Wardrop, 'Reclaiming What Has Been Devastated', in *The Para-Academic Handbook: A Toolkit for Making-Learning-Creating-Acting*, ed. by Alex Wardrop and Deborah Withers (Bristol: Hammeron Press, 2014), pp. 6-13

Wolfe, Peter, *Understanding Penelope Fitzgerald* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2004)

Wood, Sarah, 'Anew Again', in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 277-92

——, *Without Mastery: Reading and Other Forces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)

'Writing Real Life from Brexit to Grenfell', *Free Thinking*, BBC Radio 3, 30 October 2019

'You Can Write about a Kitchen Sink in a Way that Challenges…', *Guardian*, 23 March 2005 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/mar/23/alismith> [accessed 4 February 2020]

Young, Tory, '"Love and the Imagination Are Not Gendered Things": An Interview with Ali Smith', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9 (2015), 131–48