UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Faculty of Humanities

English

Tracing the Ethical Dimension of Postwar British Experimental Fiction

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2015

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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TRACING THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF POSTWAR BRITISH EXPERIMENTAL FICTION

Chris Fraiser Clarke

This thesis examines the treatment of failure in the experimental fiction of Alan Burns, Eva Figes, B. S. Johnson and Ann Quin in order to reconsider their work's faltering relationship to postwar British culture. The thesis reassesses the significance of failure in these authors's experimental fiction by drawing on Ewa Ziarek's analysis of the affiliation between modernism's aesthetics of failure and the deconstruction of scepticism. Following Ziarek, it reads failure in the experimental texts of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin through the lenses of the philosophical revision of scepticism and of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other to argue that we can rethink these novelists's haunting relationship to postwar British culture by tracing their works's ethical dimension. This methodology allows for a critical reinterpretation of the relationship between these experimental fiction writers and the postwar British public as it was imagined by a key supporter and funder of their work – the Arts Council of Great Britain. Though the Arts Council's subsidization of postwar culture enabled the production of these experimental fictions, this thesis suggests that it also inhibited their modes of articulation through its subtle marshalling of the norms and conventions of the public, and thereby contributed to a tendency to misrecognize the significance of failure in these authors's works. The first chapter introduces Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin by sketching their fleeting formation as a group in the late nineteen-sixties, and their relationship to the Arts Council. The chapter then elaborates on the thesis's methodology by exploring how a sense of failure also haunted Raymond Williams and Doris Lessing's attempts to rethink the relationship between culture and community in postwar Britain. The chapters that follow focus in turn on texts by Figes, Johnson, Burns, and Quin in order to outline the relationship of their work to different discursive communities and to devise new ways to read the ethical significance of failure in their experimental fictions. As a whole, the thesis argues that a rereading of failure in the texts of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin can shed light on the lasting legacy of experimental writing in postwar British culture.

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I, Chris Clarke

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Tracing the Ethical Dimension of Postwar British Experimental Fiction

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This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;

Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;

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Acknowledgements

This thesis was funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Block Grant Partnership award. I would like to thank the AHRC for their financial support.

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In addition, I would like to thank Elaine Andrews at Morley College Library for providing me with the copies of *More*.

This work has been made possible by the teaching in the English Department at the University of Southampton. I would like to thank the following people for their teaching and encouragement: David Glover, Marianne O'Doherty, Stephen Morton, Stephanie Jones, and the late Julie Campbell. I am particularly grateful to Will May for introducing me to postwar British experimental fiction, and for his enthusiasm and interest in my work.

I am indebted to my supervisors Nicky Marsh and Peter Middleton, who have been an unfailing source of support and inspiration. Their questions and suggestions have been critical to this work, and their energy, focus, and sense of humour have propelled it. I would like to thank Peter for his innumerable insights, and for digging out some golden letters in distant archives. And I would like to thank Nicky for exploding the scope of this work, and for all the critical theory.

I would like to say a special thank you to Sue, Richard, Joe and Ella Clarke for their patience and love.

Introduction: Failure and Postwar British Experimental Fiction

This thesis examines failure in the experimental fiction of Alan Burns, Eva Figes, B. S. Johnson, and Ann Quin. It reads failure in their work through the philosophical revision of scepticism and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other, and argues that we can rethink these experimental novelists's haunting relationship to postwar British culture by tracing the ethical dimensions of their work.

On 27 November 1969, a group of experimental writers gave their first public reading at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. 'Writers Reading' included Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin.[1] Recalling the reading in 2010, Figes notes that the group, which 'was [supposed] to start us off on a reading career', 'completely failed in that regard'.[2] Figes makes a similar comment in the *New Review* in 1978, summing up how she, Burns, Johnson and Quin had tried to 'change the face of fiction' with the following statement: '[w]e have failed to change the English literary scene, or it has failed us'.[3]

An examination of failure in these experimental writers's works may be critical for understanding their haunting relationship to postwar British culture. John Calder, who published Burns and Quin's texts, claimed that 'Alan's problem was too much literary ambition: he needed that sense of failure that [Samuel] Beckett described in his Duthuit Dialogues and the trilogy'.[4] Strangely, the view that Burns lacked the sense of failure associated with Beckett's late modernism may affirm how he, like Figes, Johnson and Quin, followed it in his work. During his famous discussions of modern art with Georges Duthuit, Beckett outlines the paradox that the critique of representation insinuated by modern art's sense of failure is liable to be mistaken for a theme of representation. If modern art's 'sense of failure' impresses that 'relations between representer and representee' are 'shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes', Beckett acknowledges that the significance of 'this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure' is eclipsed when it is misrecognized as 'a new term of relation': a negative concept of art based on

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[1] London, British Library, B. S. Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39. The minutes of 'Writers Reading's' meetings note that, along with Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin, the following people participated in the group: Paul Ableman, Sarah Broadhurst, Carol Burns, Barry Cole, Rayner Heppenstall, and Stefan Themerson. At their first meeting the group 'resolved to invite: Jim Ballard, Williams Burroughs, Maureen Duffy, Michael Frayn, Alan Sillitoe'.

[2] Eva Figes, 'Authors' Lives', interviewed by Sarah O'Reilly, The British Library, 2010.

[3] Eva Figes, 'The State of Fiction: A Symposium', *New Review*, 5:1 (1978), 38-39, p. 38.

[4] John Calder, 'Through That Tunnel', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 17:2 (Summer 1997), 179-180, p. 180.

the failure of representation.[5] I want to suggest that we can reconsider Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's haunting relationship to postwar British culture by examining a similar misrecognition of failure in their work. These experimental writers haunt postwar British culture because the significance of failure in their texts is misrecognized as a theme by the public.

We can shed light on why failure in these experimental writers's texts was misrecognized by the postwar British public by turning to another modernist legacy, namely the Arts Council of Great Britain. The Arts Council's patronage of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's experimental texts stemmed from the work of the body's founder, the modernist and economist, John Maynard Keynes. In *A Shrinking Island* (2003), Jed Esty suggests that the eclipse of modernist aesthetics was a result of how certain modernists, including Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot and Keynes, responded to British imperial contraction by participating in the rise of an Anglocentric culture. The Arts Council reflects how Keynes attempted, in Esty's words, to 'metaphorical[ly] repair […] the social divides that had conditioned modernism's aesthetics of failure and fragmentation' by creating a 'knowable and bounded, social field', corresponding to the 'idea of a national culture'.[6] The Arts Council's subsidization of British culture implicitly promoted a notion of a complete and knowable community, which subtly framed what was possible and permissible in the postwar literary scene. Paradoxically, the body at once enabled the production of experimental works and inhibited their modes of articulation by aligning them with a notion of a knowable public.

Failure in the work of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin accentuates a tension between two legacies of modernism: Beckett's literary and elusive sense of failure as a mode of critique, and the need felt by the Arts Council in the 1960s to instantiate an imagined community. The formal and linguistic experimentation of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's texts impresses that these authors, like Beckett, refused to take their representation of others and the world for granted. When failure in these experimental texts is understood, following Beckett, as a critique of representation, it offers to amplify a discontinuity in, to recall Esty's words, the 'knowable and bounded' cultural community presupposed and represented by the Arts Council. We may be able to recover the critical significance of failure in these experimental writers's texts by acknowledging how failure in their work was misrecognized as a theme of the imaginary cultural community sponsored by the Arts Council, and other discursive publics of postwar

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[5] Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1965), pp. 124-125. Beckett points out that reducing this 'fidelity to failure' to a negative conception of art inverts the 'estheticized automatism' it sought to critique; it displaces the search for 'more authentic' representations.

[6] Joshua Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 5-6, p. 10.

Britain. I want to suggest that the Arts Council inhibited these experimental texts's modes of articulation through its subtle marshalling of the norms and conventions of the public, and thereby contributed to a tendency to misrecognize the significance of failure in these authors's works. Considering this misrecognition of failure as a particularly English phenomenon suggests one way to explain why these experimental writers were overlooked by the postwar literary scene, while Beckett's work gathered an audience in France. Equally, it offers to elucidate Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer's observation that even more measured experimental texts that explored the limits of representation, such as those produced by Doris Lessing and John Fowles, 'made their audiences outside Britain', and 'found […] their critical understanding emerging, better abroad than at home'.[7]

In order to reconsider failure in these writers's works I turn to Ewa Ziarek's *The Rhetoric of Failure* (1996). Ziarek's study provides a way to reassess how modernism's aesthetics of failure has been considered to affirm its dissociation from social concerns.[8] It does this by drawing attention to how deconstruction has also been misread as a continuation of modern aestheticism through the invocation of a 'rhetoric of exhaustion, atrophy, or paralysis'.[9] Ziarek counters aesthetic critiques of deconstruction by showing how a similar rhetoric of failure recurs in the dismissal of deconstruction as a form of scepticism, and how it obscures the significance of the revisions of scepticism put forward by Stanley Cavell, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Ziarek argues that these critiques of deconstruction overlook the way 'failure functions not only as a theme but also as a rhetoric' in poststructuralist rereadings of scepticism, 'implying a model of language transgressing the bounds of the philosophy of the subject'.[10] '[E]ven when it deploys the rhetoric of failure' poststructuralism 'does not share the sceptical mood of disaster, loss, or catastrophe' as its rhetorical turn 'shifts the entire paradigm of language: from the one based on the centrality of the speaking subject to the one based on the "the search for the other and the other of language"'.[11]

In Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy the otherness disclosed by his revision of scepticism is figured as the alterity of the ethical relationship to another person. Ziarek points out that

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[7] Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer, 'Preface', *The Contemporary English Novel: Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies*, 18 (1979), 7-16, p. 14.

[8] Ewa Ziarek, *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Scepticism Reinvention of Modernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). Ziarek elucidates that modernism's aesthetics of failure has been interpreted as '[e]ither failing to convey the real (scepticism) or purposively negating the real in order to disclose new possibilities of signification, which, nonetheless, remain confined to the realm of art (aestheticism)' (p. 16). Both interpretations affirm modern art's autonomy from social concerns.

[9] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 6.

[10] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 82.

[11] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 80.

Levinas's philosophy enables us to reassess the claim that the rhetoric of failure employed by modernist texts confirms their separation from the ethical. If theories of ethics have traditionally derived their notions of the good from the true, Levinas presents an ethical relation to the other person as the unfounded foundation of such theories. In contrast to how modern Western philosophy has represented the other to itself, and thereby dissolved their alterity, Levinas suggests that the otherness of the other person always already withdraws from attempts to think or appropriate it. Levinas supports his claim for the absolute exteriority of the Other by aligning it with 'Plato's idea of the "Good existing beyond Being"' and René Descartes's 'discovery of the "Idea of the Infinite"'.[12] Though Levinas's philosophy, which is rooted in the phenomenological tradition, is generally recognized to have introduced the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger to France, its reception in the immediate postwar years was confined to a collection of philosophers, including Maurice Blanchot, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. The 'ethical turn' of poststructuralist theory and Derrida's work has prompted a surge of interest in Levinas's thought, and it has subsequently been invoked in a range of different contexts.

Levinas conceives the ethical as a relation to what he calls the 'face' of the other, which rests on no prior ground:

> the person with whom one is in a relationship through the face […] does not appear as belonging to an order which can be "embraced", or "grasped". The other, in this relationship of responsibility, is, as it were, unique: "unique" meaning without genre. In this sense he is absolutely other […].[13]

Levinas argues that an unconditional and infinite responsibility to respond to and for the other person institutes subjectivity and language: '[i]t is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual "I"'.[14] The subject finds themselves in language as having always already responded to the address of other. Their response affirms language as it withdraws from it; Levinas describes the ethical address of the other as 'a saying prior to language, but without which no language, as a transmission of messages, would be

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[12] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', interviewed by Richard Kearney, in *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 177-199, p. 190, p. 191.
[13] Emmanuel Levinas, interviewed by Raoul Mortley, in *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 10-23, p. 16.
[14] Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', p. 192.

possible'.[15] Consequently, Levinas proposes that the face of the other signifies as a 'trace' that leaves its equivocal imprint on language by always already withdrawing from it; the disturbance of the trace 'is a movement that already carries away the signification it brought'.[16] The ethical proximity of one human being to another is an obligation 'prior to any commitment', which 'expresses a way of being affected […] without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation'.[17]

In a reading of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), Levinas intimates that a reinterpretation of failure is one way of remarking the exposure to the other: '[t]he failure of communication is the failure of knowledge. One does not see that the success of knowledge would in fact destroy the nearness, the proximity, of the other'.[18] Levinas makes a similar point when he observes that '[t]he fact that philosophy cannot totalise the alterity of meaning in some final presence or simultaneity is not for me a deficiency or fault. Or to put it another way, the best thing about philosophy is that it fails'.[19] Levinas's reappraisal of failure mirrors his double reading of scepticism, in which, as Ziarek puts it, 'the failure or impossibility of knowledge is intertwined, though not simultaneous, with the ethical affirmation of otherness'.[20] Levinas's rereading of failure is at the heart of Ziarek's claim that an acknowledgement of failure as a rhetoric enables 'a different articulation of modern aesthetics'; Ziarek contends that the focus on failure as a rhetoric can be read as affirming 'a disjunction between the epistemological and the ethical'.[21] I will argue that the rhetoric of failure in the experimental texts of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin affirms how their address to a knowable public or community stutters and goes astray because of their sensitivity to being addressed by the Other. Consequently, if the public misrecognizes failure in these experimental writers's works as a failure to harmonize with a knowable community, this misrecognition may also implicitly affirm the response to the alterity of the other person articulated by these texts.

The final piece of this thesis's methodology is a theory of the public sphere which gives us a way to contextualize failure in these experimental fictions. Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002) is helpful here as it suggests a way to understand the processes by which

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[15] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), p. 16.
[16] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 61-73, p. 66.
[17] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 101.
[18] Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Other in Proust', in *Proper Names*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 99-105, p. 104.
[19] Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', p. 188.
[20] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 89.
[21] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 87.

'the perception of public discourse' as 'dialogue or discussion among already co-present interlocutors' 'obscures the importance of the poetic function of both language and corporeal expressivity in giving a particular shape to publics'.[22] It thus provides a framework through which to consider how the rhetoric of failure in these experimental writers's texts, and the alterity to which it refers us, was misrecognized by publics of postwar British culture. The chapters on Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin will recover how their work appeared to fail to address different discursive communities, and offer readings of their experimental text's rhetoric of failure which suggest their work's sensitivity to the alterity of the other.

The introductory chapter that follows elaborates on my methodology. Firstly it introduces authors of 'Writers Reading' by considering the group's relationship to the Arts Council. I outline Burns, Johnson, Figes and Quin's tense relationships to the Arts Council's cultural community by drawing on Warner's theory, and I point towards different publics that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. I go on to consider how we might draw out the ethical significance of these writers's failure to harmonize with postwar publics by rereading the preoccupation with failure in Raymond Williams's analysis of realism in the modern novel and Doris Lessing's experimental novel, *The Golden Notebook* (1962). In contrast to these experimental novelists's misrecognition by the public, the turn to Williams and Lessing's work allows us to register how postwar writers more overtly committed to the idea of community were also haunted by a sense of failure. In my reading of Williams and Lessing's texts I draw upon Ziarek's work to foreground how a knowable community constitutes its identity by misrecognizing the insinuation of alterity for a failure of representation. The subsequent analysis considers how Lessing's experimental text employs failure as a rhetoric attentive to the claims of the other, and thereby prepares the way for reading the ethical dimension of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's work.

[22] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2002), p. 115.

1. Experimental Fiction and the Postwar Public Sphere

'Writers Reading' and the Arts Council's Cultural Community

The correspondence sections of the B. S. Johnson Archive, which the British Library recently opened to researchers, include miscellaneous documents, such as event programmes, pamphlets, invitation cards, and drafts of reports, essays and letters. The documents relating to the group 'Writers Reading' consists of their promotion booklet (which profiles each of its members and features a broken typewriter on its cover), copies and drafts of adverts, and the typed minutes of their first two meetings. At the inaugural gathering of 'Writers Reading' in July 1969 the group's agenda included topics such as 'Chairman', 'Launch Meeting', 'Finance', 'Publicity', 'Arts Council', and 'Foreign Writers'.[1] Under 'Decision Making' the minutes note 'that no one member should be in executive position'.[2] Though the writers's promotion programme would also describe 'Writers Reading' as 'the first co-operative group', this impression of a cohesive collective conceals the dissidence that characterized their discussions and aims. The minutes of the group's second meeting in September reports that the points discussed 'took some length of time in very rowdy conditions without any basic decisions arising. All are pending further debate', and their A5 advert announced their ambition 'to start a dialogue through audience participation and/or protest'.[3] If 'Writers Reading' sought, in their words, 'to create a new audience' for 'prose writers concerned with new forms, styles, and language', it expected dissent to be a constitutive part of its public: '[w]e are prepared to be writers facing a barrage of questions, friendly, interested or downright hostile'.[4] The group's struggle to realize an open and contestable public for their work is reflected by their own 'heated debates' about the 'type of person' they might invite to introduce their first reading, as the tone of their discussion seems to have fallen into derision: 'The following names were put forward for Chairman (tongue in cheek or otherwise): Prince Philip; Jenny Lee; William Golding; Prof. Tolkien; Laurence Olivier; a member'.[5] Figes's response to the question of who she was closest to in the group emphasizes the disorder and differences that characterized 'Writers Reading': 'I don't think there was anyone. Possibly Ann, I'm not sure. But then we were all huggermugger, you know, really'.[6]

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[1] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39.
[2] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39.
[3] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39.
[4] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39.
[5] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39.
[6] Figes, 'Authors' Lives'.

'Writers Reading's' references to the Arts Council, to whom the group applied 'for subsidy & any other assistance', and the first Minister for the Arts, Jennie Lee, suggests a way to explore the tensions of these writers's relationship to an audience in the postwar era.[7] In *A Shrinking Island*, Esty aligns Keynes's work with a selection of English modernists who 'translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture – one whose insular integrity seemed to mitigate some of modernism's characteristic social agonies while rendering obsolete some of modernism's defining techniques'.[8] In regard to Keynes's work, Esty detects the eclipse of modernism by the notion of a national culture in his *General Theory* (1936); in the 1930s Keynes 'traded the pleasures of form for the consolation of reform' through the 'invention of a systemic, holistic British macroeconomics', which 'pursu[ed] a middle way between raw capitalist individualism and the new authoritarian collectivism'.[9] For Esty, the 'unexplored irony of Keynes's project is that this new version of capitalism became less complex and delightful as an object of representation': '[h]is own stylistic inventiveness, like the literary pyrotechnics of the high modernists, was outmoded in part because he began to reconceive his work in relation to a more complete and knowable social totality'.[10] The Arts Council could be considered to reflect how Keynes's later work imagined a culture that would, in Esty's words, 'deliver the alienated modernist subject into a more public, communal arrangement for the production and consumption of art'.[11] 'Writers Reading's' failure to address a public suggests that their revival of modernist aesthetics marks a rift in the cultural community promoted by the Art Council in the 1960s, which, as we shall see, subtly marshalled the ways in which texts could articulate themselves in the postwar literary scene.

We can draw upon Warner's theory of the public sphere to explore how 'Writers Reading's' failure to address a public points towards a discontinuity in the knowable cultural community projected by the Arts Council. This branch of Warner's work brings together queer theory and public-sphere theory to explore how social forms are constructed through the circulation of texts and modes of reading, and examines their significance for modern culture and contemporary politics. Warner argues that the way '*the* public' functions as a 'kind of social totality' is 'only possible because it is really *a* public of discourse', whose existence depends on its vacillation between a 'real context of reception' and a 'rhetorical address' to indefinite others.[12] If '*the* public' appears as 'groups that […] saturate identity' and upholds that 'strangers

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[7] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39.
[8] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 2.
[9] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 181, p. 7, p. 171.
[10] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 181.
[11] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 182.
[12] Warner, *Publics*, p. 68, p. 67.

need to be on a path of commonality', Warner proposes that '*a* public' 'organizes itself independently of state institutions, laws, [and] formal frameworks of citizenship' by making 'strangerhood […] the necessary medium of commonality'.[13]

Warner contends that the 'double movement' of 'indefinite address and self-organized discourse' at work in a public presents us with a 'kind of chicken-and-egg circulatory'.[14] One part of public speech's 'double movement' consists in the way it 'address[es] indefinite strangers' and 'puts a premium on accessibility'.[15] The other side of its 'double movement' entails that public speech's indefinite address rejoins the cultural context of its reception, as the attempt to articulate an 'infinitely accessible language' would risk 'miss[ing] other equally important needs of publics':

> to concretize the world in which discourse circulates, to offer its members direct and active membership through language, to place strangers on a shared footing. For these purposes, language must be concrete, making use of the vernaculars of its circulatory space.[16]

Warner suggests that the 'critical discourse of *the* public corresponds as sovereign to the superintending power of the state'; the 'unity of the public' depends on, amongst other things, 'an arbitrary social closure (through language, idiolect, genre, medium and address) to contain its infinite extension', and 'institutionalized forms of power to realize agency attributed to the public'.[17] In contrast, '[p]ublics more overtly orientated in their self-understandings to the poetic-expressive dimensions of language, including artistic and many counterpublics, lack the power to transpose themselves to the generality of the state'.[18] A sketch of the relationships between the authors of 'Writers Reading' and the Arts Council's cultural community will illuminate different contexts in which these experimental writers's works jar with the construction of a public. It may be helpful to think of these novelists's relationship to the public as a series of separate 'counterpublics', whose tenuous cohesion was continuously pulled awry by their work's concern for other persons. As we shall see, the rhetoric of failure in these experimental texts reflects how these writers refused to reduce their text's mode of address to a knowable public because of their sensitivity to the alterity of others. Consequently, failure in

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[13] Warner, *Publics*, p. 71, p. 75.
[14] Warner, *Publics*, p. 108, p. 113, p. 67.
[15] Warner, *Publics*, p. 108.
[16] Warner, *Publics*, p. 108.
[17] Warner, *Publics*, p. 116, p. 117.
[18] Warner, *Publics*, p. 116.

their works impresses an alterity more radical than the 'strangerhood' Warner envisages as constitutive of a public or counterpublic.

Though the cultural community projected by the Arts Council sought, in Esty's words, to 'supersede both the philistinism of the Victorian bourgeoisie and the rarefied institutions of modernist elites', it seems to have accentuated the tensions between a revival of modernism and the mainstream in the immediate postwar years.[19] In July 1945, a year before he died, Keynes set out the aims of the Arts Council in a radio broadcast. The Arts Council had developed out of the 'Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts', which, during the Second World War, had tried 'to replace what war had taken away' by 'carr[ying] music, drama and pictures to […] air-raid shelters, to war-time hostels, to factories, to mining villages'.[20] For Keynes, the efforts of the CEMA had revealed 'that we were providing what had never existed in peace time', and resulted in a '[s]trange patronage of the arts'.[21] The Art Council's subsidisation of the arts aimed, in Keynes words, 'to feed […] newly aroused and widely-diffused desires' by supporting 'the work of the artist' as 'individual and free, undisciplined, unregimented, uncontrolled'.[22] At the same time it concentrated on the 're-building of the community and of our common life', characterizing the public's norms and conventions while denying its mediating role; in 1945 Keynes advised listeners that they should 'not think of the Arts Council as a schoolmaster. Your enjoyment will be our first aim. […] In so far as we instruct, it is a new game we are teaching you to play – and to watch'.[23] The elitist tone of Keynes's address to the nation reflects how, as Raymond Williams points out, in 'its first formulation, under the 1946 charter', the Arts Council 'was concerned with "the fine arts exclusively"'; '[s]ocially, the original arts were the cultural interests of an older upper-middle and middle class', which meant subsidy was limited to 'theatre, opera, ballet, concert music, painting and sculpture'.[24]

It was not until the 1960s that the Arts Council adopted, in Williams's words 'a cultural and educational'[25] policy, and appeared, as Robert Hewison puts it, 'to democratize its procedures and become less of a metropolitan oligarchy'.[26] Calder recalls the moment in 1964

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[19] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 177.
[20] John Maynard Keynes, 'The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes', in *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes: Volume 28, Social, Political and Literary Writings* (London: Macmillan for the Royal Economic Society, 1982), pp. 367-372, p. 367.
[21] Keynes, 'The Arts Council', p. 367, p. 367 p. 368.
[22] Keynes, 'The Arts Council', p. 369, p. 368.
[23] Keynes, 'The Arts Council', p. 370, p. 369.
[24] Raymond Williams, 'The Arts Council', *Political Quarterly*, 50 (1979), 157-171, p. 162, p. 163, p. 162.
[25] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 163.
[26] Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960-75* (London: Methuen Paperback, 1986), p. 228.

when the Arts Council's charter was reshaped in hope of 'increas[ing] the accessibility and […] improv[ing] the standard of the arts':

> [t]his was the period when Labour having returned to power with Harold Wilson as Premier, Jennie Lee became Arts Minister, and suddenly there was money for the arts in greater abundance than ever before, and this included literature. [...] Money was made available to help writers trying to get known who had sufficient talent, providing someone knowledgeable and considered responsible would vouch for them.[27]

In addition to subsidizing literature at 'the point at which it's being written', Charles Osborne, the deputy head of the literature department, points out that the Arts Council's revised charter also supported fiction at 'the point it's being published'.[28] This enabled publishers such as, in Calder's words, 'Jonathan Cape, Secker and Warburg, Faber, and even Collins' to take on new and experimental writers 'provided that the Arts Council reduced their risk'.[29] The Arts Council's outward promotion of a more democratic and culturally diverse public was epitomised by Jennie Lee's assertion that 'there must be freedom to experiment, to make mistakes, to fail, to shock – or there can be no new beginnings'.[30] The grants Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin were awarded in the late 1960s and early 1970s enabled them, as the Arts Council had hoped, to 'buy time' for their experimental fictions[31]; in 1975 Figes claimed, '"I couldn't go on writing novels and bring up a family without an Arts Council subsidy"'.[32]

Yet, Calder's allusion to the conditions informing the body's subsidisation of literature – 'sufficient talent' and a 'responsible' sponsor – hints at the devices through which the Arts Council fell short of realizing Lee's characterization of an open and contestable cultural community. In a study commissioned by the Arts Council on its grants to writers, 'which might not have seen the light of day without the intervention of Eva Figes, Robert Hewison, [and]

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[27] John Calder, *Pursuit: The Uncensored Memoirs of John Calder* (London: Calder, 2001), p. 275.
[28] Charles Osborne, interviewed by Peter Firchow, in *The Writer's Place: Interviews on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain*, ed. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), pp. 258-275, p. 262.
[29] Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 275.
[30] Jennie Lee, 'Theatre and the State', *Hutchinson's Theatre Annual*, 1970-1.
[31] Advertisement on the back page of *New Review*, 5:1 (1978).
[32] Quoted in Nicholas de Jongh, 'Writers in protest over PLR', *Guardian*, 24 April 1975, p. 5.

Richard Hoggart'[33], Jim McGuigan suggests that 'sponsorship and the concept of "serious writing"' were 'exclusion mechanisms' that contributed to 'social closure'.[34] McGuigan highlights that for 'an application to stand a reasonable chance of success the sponsor must be regarded by the Finance Committee as a legitimate witness of the writer's seriousness and need'.[35] 'Sponsorship' operates as a 'pre-selection or gate-keeping mechanism' as 'writers who do not have access to members of the Arts Council-literary world network' and rely on 'sponsors outside the commercial literary networks are rarely successful'.[36] Similarly, in spite of its claims to diversify its subsidisation of culture, the Arts Council was 'not concerned with assisting all writing, […] but only writing denoted by words such as "merit", "quality" and "seriousness"'.[37] The 'taken-for-granted assumptions about literary evaluation underpinning the [panel's] decision-making process' helped the Arts Council reproduce the cultural elitism implicit in Keynes's radio broadcast.[38]

McGuigan's illumination of the social closure enforced through the 'intimate connections' between 'Panel membership and sponsorship', and the concept of 'serious' literature, concurs with Williams's critique of how the Arts Council operated and appeared to the public: 'the principle of an intermediate body, sometimes described as if it were a British democratic innovation, is administered by this essentially different principle of a relatively informal but reliable and consensual ruling class'.[39] Drawing on his own experience as a member of the Arts Council, Williams claims that '[w]hat begins, from the Department of State, as a process of selective and administered consensus, cannot become at any of its lower levels an open and democratic public body'.[40] Instead the Art Council's consensual politics forced it to 'work in ways which confer the impression of independent public responsibility but which prevent or limit any clear and coherent exercise of it'.[41] Williams underlines the limitations imposed by the 'consensus procedures' of the Arts Council by reporting how 'astonished' the 'Vice-Chairman' of the literary panel had been when, on 'one particularly controversial decision, [Williams] asked to have [his] dissent recorded'.[42] Johnson, who had served as a member of the literature panel for the Greater London Arts Association in the early 1970s, seems to hint at a similar frustration in a letter to Beckett from 1972. Having thanked Beckett

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[33] Jim McGuigan, *Culture and the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. ix.
[34] Jim McGuigan, *Writers and the Arts Council* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1981), p. 64.
[35] McGuigan, *Arts Council*, p. 64.
[36] McGuigan, *Arts Council*, p. 92, p. 86, p. 85.
[37] McGuigan, *Arts Council*, p. 93.
[38] McGuigan, *Arts Council*, p. 94.
[39] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 166.
[40] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 162.
[41] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 164.
[42] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 161, p. 159, p. 161.

'for the very generous remarks you were so kind to make on my Arts Council form', Johnson's pessimistic comments on the organisation suggest his criticisms of its structure may have been muted by the façade of democracy and responsibility projected by the organization: '[n]ow it's up to the Arts Council, in whom I have no faith whatsoever – it's all chaos, who has what'.[43] Eric Mottram, a radical at the heart of a circle of poets who 'fell foul of Charles Osborne' when they took over The Poetry Society in the seventies, reiterates the censuring effects of the body: '[m]any writers, publishers, administrators, and literary figures are hesitant to come forward with criticisms. They know that their livelihood, or an important part of it, depends on not being on bad terms with the man who holds power'.[44]

Even if the Arts Council provided financial support to publishers and writers producing experimental work, its organization through, in Raymond Williams's words, a 'process of selective and administered consensus' secured the body's autonomy and its projection of a democratic image of postwar culture as it deflected criticisms of its failure to deliver this public onto the work it subsidized.[45] Johnson's disillusionment may have been intensified by the fact that the press had targeted his work because of its affiliation with the body. Jonathan Coe's biography draws attention to how, in 1970, Johnson along with Alexander Trocchi was made the target of the *Daily Mail*'s 'paranoid loathing' of the Arts Council; Johnson and Trocchi's pictures appeared beneath the headline, '"They're giving away YOUR money to spoonfeed hippy art"'.[46] The episode suggests the ease with which attacks from the right could misrepresent Johnson's work, and its 'powerful attachment' to, in Coe's words, 'a disappearing ideal of a working-class community'.[47] Richard Hoggart had anticipated the attack on Johnson and Trocchi with his description in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) of popular journalist's 'glorification of "the common man"' in its 'highbrow-hunting'; these articles presented the 'Arts Council [as] a "fiddle" by a lot of "cissies" who despise the amusements of the plain Englishman'.[48] Hoggart indicates how the Arts Council could be targeted by the media to bolster its claim to reflect the interests of the 'common man', and, as a result, feed the illusion that the work the body subsidized was detached from the public. The apparent divergence between the public fostered by the press and subsidized works made the creation of a public an

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[43] Quoted in Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 329.
[44] Eric Mottram, 'Poets and the Arts Council of Great Britain', in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 47, p. 46.
[45] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 162.
[46] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 290.
[47] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 259.
[48] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 149.

even more daunting prospect for sponsored authors, and seems to have helped intensify anxieties about, in Hoggart's words, the 'creation of a mass culture'[49], or, as Johnson furiously put it, 'the din of the marketplace vendors in pap and propaganda'.[50] Equally, Hoggart and Johnson's denunciations of a mass culture could be said to have compromised their allegiances to working-class communities, as their work emulated an elitist position that eulogized and ossified working-classes ways of life. What the press's 'highbrow hunting' and the elevation of working-class culture over 'massification' obscures is how class anxieties cut across cultural forms, as is evident in 'Writers Reading' inviting Alan Sillitoe to read at their inaugural event.

In contrast to the hostility directed at the Arts Council by the parochial press, 'the radical Press', in Williams's words, 'continu[ed] to insist' that the Arts Council was 'the citadel of bureaucratic establishment art'.[51] In an interview from 1969 Burns articulated his sympathy with this criticism of the body, claiming that 'the ruling literary clique' is 'the so-called literary panel of the Arts Council'.[52] While admitting his 'immense gratitude' for having been 'bought for two thousand quid by the Arts Council', Burns suggests that his attempt to be an 'uncompromising radical' had been compromised by a 'very awkward characteristic of the British social-political scene: that our bourgeoisie, our tyrants, are such nice folks'.[53] Williams highlights how the body's friendliness was one component of its consensus politics; for Williams, the Arts Council's power relied on it being a 'pleasant' body that treated its members with 'a very general courtesy and helpfulness'.[54] The Art Council's withdrawal of its funding from *Ambit* magazine offers one illustration of how the literature panel's consensus politics threatened to neutralise experimental works. When the magazine offered twenty five pounds for the 'best poem written under the influence of drugs', the chairman of the Arts Council, Lord Goodman, vetoed the prize.[55] Quin won the competition with her entry 'Triptics', which was, in her words, 'written under my usual combination of nicotine, caffeine and of course, the birth pill I take – Orthonovin'.[56] The formation of 'Writers Reading', and its rowdy debates, reflects how the cultural community postulated by the Arts Council failed post-war experimental fiction insofar its 'consensual' model eclipsed the 'disputative', and subtly nullified these works.

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[49] Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 12.
[50] B. S. Johnson, 'Introduction', in *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), pp. 11-31, pp. 15-16.
[51] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 157.
[52] Alan Burns, interviewed by Peter Firchow, in *The Writer's Place: Interviews on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain*, ed. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), pp. 50-62, p. 58.
[53] Burns, interviewed by Firchow, p. 58.
[54] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 158.
[55] See Patricia Hollis, *Jennie Lee: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 277.
[56] Quoted in *Ambit*, 35 (1968), p. 42.

The tensions between the public projected by Arts Council and the experimental fictions it subsidised came to the fore in, as Robert Sutherland puts it, one of 'the most expensive of the literary ventures' of the Arts Council – the *New Review*'.[57] Sutherland highlights how the *New Review* was considered by those inside and outside of the capital as a 'diabolical compound of a London-based, elitist, expensively subsidized magazine'[58]; Mottram saw it as 'the archetypal establishment magazine' since it 'consistently received grants of up to £35,200 annually'.[59] The magazine's symposium on 'The State of Fiction' from 1978 reflects how the body had hindered the construction of a public for diverse literary forms. In response to being asked for their thoughts on the recent development of the novel and its future, Figes critiqued the literary scene's rejection of innovative fiction even as David Lodge bemoaned the lack of original prose writers:

> the English literary scene resembles the state of affairs that precedes the formation of a star – lots of dust and nebulous clouds of gas that have yet to condense into a critical mass. It is hard to think of any really original writer of prose fiction except Ian McEwan and perhaps Martin Amis; but it may be that they exist, and criticism has simply failed to make them visible.[60]

Lodge's focus on a 'star' intimates at how, in response to 'a literary market-place that [was] in every sense of the word dangerously inflationary', the postwar literary public had come to subordinate critical discussion to acclamation.[61] In his 1978 survey of the fiction industry, Sutherland elucidates how English publishing, having enjoyed an '"everlasting boom"' 'since the war', was 'put at risk' in 1973.[62] Sutherland claims that the 1973 'crisis' 'took the form of general instability, largely brought about by uncontrolled price increases, together with a suddenly unpredictable market for books'.[63] The effect of this crisis had been 'to harmonise disruptive factors, cumulative changes in the reading public, author unrest, commodity price

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[57] John Sutherland, *Fiction and the Fiction Industry* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), p.138.
[58] Sutherland, *Fiction*, p. 138.
[59] Mottram, 'Poets', p. 47.
[60] David Lodge, 'The State of Fiction: A Symposium', *New Review*, 5:1 (1978), 49-50, p. 49.
[61] Lodge, 'State of Fiction', p. 50.
[62] Sutherland, *Fiction*, p. xv.
[63] Sutherland, *Fiction*, p. xxv.

changes or the invasion by foreign competitors with more efficient techniques': 'the assimilation of the book industry to rational styles of production and marketing'.[64]

Lodge's attempt to sketch a development in the novel suggests how the rhetorical devices of postwar experimental fiction came to be subsumed under a more efficient publishing industry, which had contributed to the lack of a 'lively and theoretical debate' about the novel in England:

> if there has been a discernible trend in English fiction over the past decade, it has been precisely in the direction of formal experiment and formal self-consciousness – not in the high modernist mode, but more in the tradition of Sterne, building into the structure of the novel itself an awareness of the problematics of fictional discourse. Realism is not rejected, but it is not employed naively.[65]

Lodge's evocation of what we might call 'metafiction' seems to indicate the moment in which the public constructed by the Arts Council gave way to a culture based on a work's commercial success and critical reception. The danger of distorting postwar experimental fiction through the consumer culture that secured its eclipse could be reflected in Coe's justification of his biography of Johnson:

> B. S. Johnson was, if you like, Britain's one-man literary avant-garde of the 1960s. Yes, of course there were other avant-garde writers around at the time (Alan Burns, Eva Figes, Ann Quin, Christine Brooke-Rose spring immediately to mind). But they were not as famous as he was, they were not as good at putting their names about, they did not appear on television as often as he did.[66]

Coe's introduction risks misrepresenting the commercial pressures that contributed to Johnson's failure as grounds upon which to argue for his success, and seems to reflect how, in Bart Moore-

[64] Sutherland, *Fiction*, p. xxiii, pp. xxv-xxvi.
[65] Lodge, 'State of Fiction', p. 49, p. 50.
[66] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 3.

Gilbert's words, a 'consumer society mediated by an advertising industry' has come to make the 'formal techniques of the avant-garde' 'commonplace'.[67]

Moreover, Coe evokes another public that helped eclipse postwar experimental fiction by putting Figes, Quin and Brooke-Rose in brackets. If Coe's framing of Johnson reiterates how, in Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs words, the 'neglect of women innovators is partially a legacy of modernism as interpreted through its male critics', it implicitly reflects how it 'is also partially a legacy of the last decades of feminist criticism'.[68] The formation of a second wave of feminism through texts such as Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) helped inaugurate a field of 'Women's literature' in mainstream culture and literary studies that overlooked experimental women's writing. Christine Brooke-Rose, whose translation of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le Labyrinthe* for Calder and Boyars won her an Arts Council Translation Prize, outlines the gendering at work in the emergence of trends in the fiction market and literary studies: 'It does seem […] not only more difficult for a woman *experimental* writer to be accepted than for a woman writer […], but also peculiarly more difficult for a *woman* experimental writer to be accepted than for a *male* experimental writer'.[69] Experimental women writers need, according to Brooke-Rose, 'to withdraw from the man she is with who may be consciously or unconsciously punishing her for, or otherwise stifling her creativity, or from society (ditto)', and thus 'slip through all labels, including that of "woman writer." The price, however, is to belong nowhere'.[70] Doris Lessing might be said to recap the difficulties Brooke-Rose describes in the preface she added to *The Golden Notebook*. The novel 'was instantly belittled […] as being about the sex war, or claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war', when its 'main aim' – 'to shape a book that would make its own comment, a wordless statement' – escapes and challenges articulation.[71]

This analysis of 'Writers Reading's' relationship to the Arts Council's shaping of the public sphere has introduced some of the imaginary communities through which these texts's rhetoric of failure may have been misrecognized in the postwar years. The section that follows examines how failure in postwar experimental texts is misrecognized as a theme of a discursive

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[67] Bart Moore-Gilbert, 'Introduction: Cultural Closure or Post-Avant-Gardism?', in *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?*, ed. by Bart Moore-Gilbert (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1-28, p. 21.
[68] Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English', in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 3-51, p. 6.
[69] Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Illiterations', in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 55-71, p. 65.
[70] Brooke-Rose, 'Illiterations', p. 66, p. 67.
[71] Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 8, p. 13.

community, and how it might be reread in such a way as to call attention to exclusions through which social formations are constructed.

Failure and Community in Postwar Experimental Fiction

If the previous section sketched different ways in which authors of 'Writers Reading' participated in the postwar public sphere, then this section elaborates on how we can rethink these writers's failure to concur with the contexts of their reception. 'Writers Readings's' discord with the public invites a reconsideration of Esty's contention that the cultural community of the Keynesian state 'rendered obsolete certain aspects of modernist literary practice'.[72] I want to reassess Esty's argument by suggesting that the ethical significance of a rhetoric of failure in these novelists's works is misrecognized when it is measured against an ideal completion of community.[73] Esty may overemphasize the influence of 'the discursive process by which English intellectuals translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture' and simplified 'modernism's defining techniques' and 'characteristic social agonies'.[74] Esty's claim that postwar modernists presided over 'a self-obsolescing aesthetic'[75] is mirrored by Andrzej Gąsiorek's view that Burns and Johnson's works 'offer increasingly rarefied versions of earlier shock tactics'; for Gąsiorek, they represent 'the fag-end of a decaying tradition'.[76] We can reconsider the rhetoric of burnout in these dismissals of a postwar revival of modernism by drawing on Ziarek's reappraisal of how aesthetic and sceptical refutations of deconstruction supplant poststructural critiques of representation with notions of communal unity. Ziarek's analysis highlights that the notion of a community misrecognizes a rhetoric of failure as a failure of communication, and thereby implicitly affirms how texts that fail to harmonize with its terms are sensitized to the alterity of others even as it seems to dismiss them as 'self-obsolescing' or 'fag-ends'.

This section suggests that we can reconsider failure in the postwar experimental novel as a rhetoric which calls attention to how the alterity of the other person is misrecognized as a theme by a discursive community. I do this by examining how failure haunted Raymond Williams and Doris Lessing's work. It seems appropriate to develop this discussion of failure, the experimental novel and the postwar public sphere through Williams and Lessing's work as both sought to reconceive the relationship between culture and community in the 1960s. In Williams and Lessing's texts failure highlights how their acute social concerns were at odds

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[72] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 12.
[73] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 12.
[74] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 181, p. 2.
[75] Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 12.
[76] Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-war British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 19.

with their notions of community. Williams and Lessing's work thus parallels the contradictory relationship between postwar experimental writing and the public, albeit from the perspective of community rather than textual experimentation. Firstly I sketch how in *The Long Revolution* (1961) Williams formulates a relationship between realism in the modern novel and a notion of community through a seeming exclusion of failure. In order to explore the tension between failure and community in Williams's examination of realism, I draw on Ziarek's work to suggest that Williams's analysis is symptomatic of the tendency to 'subordinate alterity to a vision of communal unity'.[77] When Williams's appeal to a community for the realist novel is considered through the philosophical revision of scepticism, we can see how his construction of a communal unity relies upon a refusal to admit the alterity insinuated by texts that fail to adhere to its terms. Consequently, I propose that Williams's apparent relegation of failure in his projection of a community for the realist novel can be reread as paradoxically admitting and relinquishing an acknowledgment of having been called to respond to the ethical address of the other.

I build on this rereading of failure in Williams's thoughts on community and the postwar novel by examining how failure has also come to characterize Lessing's experimental novel, *The Golden Notebook*. Ziarek's outline of how the poststructuralist revision of scepticism invites a renewed interest in literary form and figurative language enables us to reassess the view that failure is, in Tracy Hargreaves words, the 'ironic subject' of the *The Golden Notebook*.[78] I examine how *The Golden Notebook* articulates a discord between the claims of the other person and their misrecognition by a discursive community by suggesting that failure functions not only as theme but as a rhetoric in the text, emphasizing a tension between Lessing's responsibility for others and her notion of community. Reading Williams's notion of realism through Ziarek's work foregrounds how a rhetoric of failure is misrecognized as theme when it is considered in relation to a knowable community. In contrast, Lessing's use of a rhetoric of failure in *The Golden Notebook* highlights the tension between a response to the other person and its misrecognition within the framework of a discursive community.

Williams's discussion of the harmony between 'ordinary language' and an 'equal-standing community' in a lecture he gave in memory of Lucien Goldmann helps to elucidate the limitations of his analysis of realism in *The Long Revolution*. Williams claims that the 'cultural distance' between England and Europe may be due to way 'British thinkers and writers are

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[77] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 14

[78] Tracy Hargreaves, '"…to find a form that accommodates the mess": Truth Telling from Doris Lessing to B. S. Johnson', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 42 (2012), 204-222, p. 214.

continually pulled back towards ordinary language'.[79] The pull towards 'ordinary language' is evident, according to Williams, not only in 'certain rhythms and choices of words' but also insofar as it 'represents an unusual consciousness of immediate audience: a sharing and equal-standing community, to which it is equally possible to defer or to reach out'.[80] Williams's comments on the pull towards ordinary language provides a way to reassess his attempt to repair a 'gap' in the modern novel in *The Long Revolution*. Williams identifies 'a formal gap in modern fiction, which makes it incapable of expressing one kind of experience […] for which, in my mind, the word "realism" keeps suggesting itself'.[81] For Williams, this 'formal gap' in the novel's projection of reality, or how it 'creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons', is evident in the 'polarization' of the realist novel; it has divided into the '"social novel"', which presents characters as 'aspects of society', and the '"personal novel"', which appears to uphold that 'society is an aspect of the characters'.[82] Williams contends that this polarization is a result of how 'the characteristic experience of our century is that of asserting and preserving individuality' when the realist novel 'needs […] a genuine community': 'each lacks a dimension, for the way of life is neither aggregation nor unit, but a whole indivisible process'.[83]

The oscillation between what Williams calls a 'formal gap' in the modern novel and his characterization of realism as 'that which human beings make common, by work or language'[84] could be considered symptomatic of, in Warner's terms, the 'double movement' of 'indefinite address and self-organized discourse' constitutive of a public.[85] Williams's focus on a formal gap' in the novel's modes of expression could be compared to how public discourse, in Warner's words, 'promises to address anybody. It commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger'.[86] Similarly, Williams's rendering of realism as 'the individual's effort to communicate what he has learned, to match it with known reality'[87] approximates the other side of Warner's notion of public discourse; it 'must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate'.[88] At an earlier point in *The Long Revolution*, Williams elucidates that the individual's need to communicate is 'the process of making unique experience into common

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[79] Raymond Williams, 'Literature and Sociology: In Memory of Lucien Goldmann', *New Left Review*, 67 (May-June 1971), 3-18, p. 3.
[80] Williams, 'Literature and Sociology', p. 4.
[81] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), pp. 277-78.
[82] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 278, p. 282.
[83] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 286, p. 282.
[84] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 288.
[85] Warner, *Publics*, p. 108, p. 113.
[86] Warner, *Publics*, p. 113.
[87] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 288.
[88] Warner, *Publics*, p. 114.

experience, and it is, above all, the claim to live […]. The ability to live in a particular way depends, ultimately, on acceptance of this experience by others, in successful communication'.[89] The notion of art that accompanies this discussion of communication and community parallels Williams's outline of the relationship between the realist novel and a public:

> [t]o succeed in art is to convey an experience to others in such a form that the experience is actively re-created – not "contemplated", not "examined", not passively received, but by response to the means, actually lived through, by those to whom it is offered. At this stage, a number of art-works already fail, fundamentally because the artist's experience is insufficiently organized and he cannot discover the means by which the experience could be shared.[90]

The coherence of the public Williams projects for art relies upon its apparent exclusion of artworks that fail to communicate with others. This move is repeated in Williams's outline of a community for the realist novel; Williams notes in passing that, 'in the necessarily difficult struggle to establish reality, [...] many kinds of failure and breakdown are possible'.[91] Williams's notion of community could be said to realize Beckett's fear that modern art's 'fidelity to failure' would be misrecognized as 'a new term of relation'[92] as he goes on to propose that 'failure and breakdown may become characteristic' of the postwar novel.[93]

In order to recuperate the significance of failure in Williams's delimitation of a public for the realist novel, we can turn to Ziarek's analysis of how the invocation of a community as a response to the threat of scepticism entails an exclusion of otherness. Ziarek's work draws upon a diverse range of literary, theoretical and philosophical texts in order to open dialogues between feminism, modernism, ethics, and critical and political theories. In her first book, *The Rhetoric of Failure*, Ziarek intervenes in the tendency to misread deconstruction's relationship to postmodernism and its affiliation with modernist aesthetics as forms of scepticism and aestheticism. She does this by pointing out that sceptical and aesthetic repudiations of

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[89] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 38.
[90] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 34.
[91] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 288. Similarly, in Warner's theory, while the 'nonidentity' between public speech's address to indefinite others and its characterization of their world 'allows people to shape the public by addressing it in a certain way', '[i]t also allows people to fail if a rhetorical addressee is not picked up as the reflection of a public' (p. 108, p. 72).
[92] Beckett and Duthuit, *Dialogues*, p. 125.
[93] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 288, p. 289.

poststructuralist theory have obscured the significance of the deconstruction of scepticism for philosophical and modernist discourses. Where scepticism has been dismissed as reiterating the impasse of the failure of knowledge, Ziarek highlights that Cavell, Derrida and Levinas reconsider the sceptical argument as a moment in which its rhetoric offers to disclose an alterity overlooked by, and incommensurate with, its self-understanding and philosophical refutation. Ziarek utilizes the reinterpretation of rhetoric proposed by these rereadings of the apparent failure of sceptical argument to reconsider the ethical significance of failure in modernist aesthetics. More recently, Ziarek's work has explored the relationships between feminism, modernism and politics. In *An Ethics of Dissensus* (2001), Ziarek presents the first part of a three-book project dedicated to the idea of a 'feminist ethics'. Once again she draws on Levinas's work and many other cultural and critical theorists to rethink the relation between freedom and responsibility in the contexts of postmodernity, feminism, and theories of radical democracy.

Ziarek's outline of the revision of scepticism in the work of Cavell, Derrida and Levinas provides a way to suggest that the apparent exclusion of failure in Williams's outline of a community for the realist novel is indicative of 'a certain inability to link the philosophical or aesthetic critique of representation with the signification of otherness'.[94] Ziarek elucidates that scepticism, 'usually understood as a negative or critical attitude questioning the possibility of knowledge and truth', operates 'within the field of subjective reason' and tends to focus on the 'relation between the subject and the object, on the correspondence between representation and represented, between words and things'.[95] In her reading of Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* (1979), Ziarek draws attention to how '[t]hinking about language in terms of the traditional picture of scepticism tends to misconstrue the discontinuities within linguistic practices and intersubjective relations as the lack of correspondence between language and the world, subject and object'.[96] Themes such as failure, scepticism, and uncertainty arise 'only if we assume that there is a radical difference between language and world', and 'misunderstand the role of language' by 'confus[ing] the intersubjective constitution of the framework of the world with the subjective representation of that world'.[97]

Williams's assertion that 'realism is not an object, to be identified, pinned down, and appropriated'[98] signals how his analysis of a gap in modern fiction departs from sceptical framework. Yet, the notion of community that replaces it is limited insofar as it retains, in

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[94] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 10.
[95] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 5, p. 76.
[96] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 33.
[97] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 32, p. 33.
[98] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 274.

Ziarek's words, 'the premises of the philosophy of the subject'.[99] By philosophy of the subject Ziarek means 'post-Kantian language philosophy', which is '[b]ased on the claims of consciousness to the accurate representation of the external world'.[100] In his critique of 'ordinary language', Williams touches upon the limits of formulations of community that implicitly recapitulate a focus on the subject as the centre of meaning; ordinary language assumes a 'consciousness' of an 'immediate audience'.[101] In this notion of community, the sceptical argument's 'privileg[ing] of the subject and its concern with truth as the accuracy of representation' is carried over through, in Ziarek's words, 'the classical concept of communication': 'meaning has its origin, or source in the subject, and the successful transport of meaning is secured by the symmetrical relationship between speakers in a dialogue'.[102] Since Williams formulates a community for realism on the basis of the 'individual's effort to communicate what he has learned' and their ability 'to match it with known reality'[103], the notion of 'intersubjective communication' underlying his community is, as Ziarek puts it, 'merely an extension of the philosophy of the subject'; it requires the subject's communication to 'match' or agree with recognized ways of representing the world.[104] What Williams's postulation of a community for realism overlooks is how failure, in Ziarek's words, 'points to a breakdown of dialogue of, to lack of reciprocity between speakers, and […] to the lack of their common agreement'.[105]

Ziarek's critique of the tension between the notion of 'attunement' and 'acknowledgement' in Cavell's revision of scepticism helps to expand on the tension between Williams's notion of a community for the realist novel and the alterity insinuated by texts that fail to concur with it. In *The Claim of Reason* Cavell reassesses the significance of scepticism for Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language. Considering the implications of scepticism for the philosophy of language allows Cavell to pursue an alternative interpretation of scepticism, displacing its traditional line of argument, which Ziarek recaps as follows; 'a particular case of dissatisfaction with knowledge' leads to 'a general conclusion that we can never know anything with certainty'.[106] Cavell's rereading of scepticism argues that, as Ziarek puts it, 'particular cases of dissatisfaction with knowledge and language do not negate the totality of knowledge' but rather disclose 'a surplus of signification – a strange "truth" that our

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[99] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 98.
[100] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 76, p. 75.
[101] Williams, 'Literature and Sociology', p. 4.
[102] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 76, p. 100.
[103] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 288.
[104] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 100.
[105] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 100, p. 99.
[106] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 38.

basis in the world and in the human community is not (entirely) one of knowing'.[107] Levinas recaps the sceptical argument's performative contradiction, and the displacement of epistemology it implies, by highlighting the paradoxical way that it dares to ask, 'how can we know that we cannot know anything?'.[108] In Cavell's work this contradictory moment is reread as, in Ziarek's words, 'the "truth" of scepticism', which 'reveals not only the precedence of the being together of the speakers in a discursive community (what Cavell calls attunement) but also the alterity of the other person – or what Cavell terms acknowledgement'.[109] Ziarek's reading of 'attunement' as a 'tuning of ears' and 'the synchronization of voices, their harmonization in time'[110] could be paralleled to how Williams's notion of communication as 'the process of making unique experience into common experience'[111] is limited by its assumption of an 'immediate' or present 'audience'.[112] Ziarek argues that the repercussion of the way 'attunement' 'gathers all the dispersed voices into the fullness of the present' is that it 'subsumes the signification of the other into the mutual "attunement" of the speakers'.[113] Ziarek's reading of Cavell follows Gerald Bruns's work, which has argued that there is, in her words, 'a profound affinity between Cavell's idea of "acknowledgement" and Levinas's face-to-face encounter with the other'.[114] The comparison between Cavell and Levinas reveals how the former's notion of 'attunement', which 'stresses the continuity of between subject and the discursive community', conflicts with a 'non-reciprocal relation to the other', in which, as Ziarek puts it at a later point in her study, the subject is 'exposed to alterity prior to any intention to communicate'.[115] Ziarek contends that the conception of community as a harmonious and spontaneous agreement between speakers 'masters [the] temporal difference' of the 'asymmetry implied in the acknowledgement of the other'.[116] The emergence of failure in Williams's discussion of realism in the modern novel may register the discord between the otherness of the other and their subordination to, and misrecognition by, a present and harmonious community.

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[107] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 39.
[108] Levinas, 'Ethics of the Infinite', p. 187.
[109] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 13.
[110] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 48.
[111] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 38.
[112] Williams, 'Literature and Sociology', p. 4.
[113] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 48.
[114] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 43.
[115] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 44, p. 101.
[116] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 48.

Poststructuralism's renewed interest in the linguistic articulation of the sceptical argument's performative contradiction (rather than the negation of its thesis) offers a way to develop this rereading of failure in Williams's discussion of realism and community. If, as Ziarek suggests, 'the philosophical deconstruction of scepticism' is 'contingent on the change of emphasis from the logical (epistemological) to the rhetorical (literary) aspects of language', then Lessing's use of the 'theme of breakdown' to shape her experimental novel, *The Golden Notebook*, gives us a way to set out a fuller articulation of how the alterity of the other person haunts notions of community in postwar culture.[117] Lessing's text offers to shift the understanding of failure from an anomaly in communication, whose seeming exclusion ensures the coherence and self-identity of Williams's public for realism, to a rhetoric sensitive to the unrelenting claims of the alterity of the other. A reconsideration of how failure has been considered as a theme of *The Golden Notebook* through Lessing's deployment of failure as a rhetoric will help bring into relief the way the text insinuates a discord between its sensitivity to having been called to respond to the other person and its invocation of a public.

In an article that reads *The Golden Notebook* alongside 'an unlikely point of comparison', B. S. Johnson, Tracy Hargreaves explores Lessing's attempt to intervene in the 'so-called "crisis of writing"' associated with the 'cultural and political complacency' of postwar England.[118] Hargreaves contends that the 'embedded narratives of *The Golden Notebook*' counteract the insularity of postwar literature – represented for Lessing by the 'Angry Young Man' and his 'small, quite lively, intelligent novels'[119] – by 'reconnect[ing] the division between private angst and social accountability' in a way that 'the realist novel fails to do'.[120] If the 'connecting strands made across narratives' in *The Golden Notebook* impress 'the emotional, sexual, and unconscious dynamics of a subjectivity that is also inescapably historical', for Hargreaves it also entails the following idea:

> Failure becomes the ironic subject of *The Golden Notebook*: a book about a writer's inability to write takes 576 pages – a realist novel, a series of diaries, parodies of diaries, short stories, embedded fictions – in order to reveal that inability and failure.[121]

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[117] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 10.
[118] Hargreaves, '"…to find a form"', p. 205.
[119] Doris Lessing, 'The Small Personal Voice', in *A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews* (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 3-22, p. 18.
[120] Hargreaves, '"…to find a form"', p. 214.
[121] Hargreaves, '"…to find a form"', pp. 213-14.

Nevertheless, Hargreaves claims that Lessing 'recuperates "anger" from the stereotypes of the Angry Young Men towards a morally and intellectually righteous force' by having the novel's protagonist, Anna Wulf, reconfigure the 'limits of language and form' as a 'series of shifting performative truths'.[122] Where Hargreaves reads the text's rhetoric of failure as 'shifting performative truths', we can draw on the philosophical revision of scepticism to suggest that failure in Lessing's novel articulates a tension between an invocation of a community and a response to the other.[123]

In her 1957 essay 'The Small Personal Voice', Lessing attempted to transform symptoms of the seeming parochialism of postwar literary culture into an opportunity to rethink the novel's social significance. Lessing's essay proposes that the 'terrible gap between the public and the private conscience' may be coextensive with a seeming deficiency of language:

> Words, it seems, can no longer be used simply and naturally. All the great words like love, hate; life, death; loyalty, treachery; contain their opposite meanings and half a dozen shades of dubious implication. Words have become so inadequate to express the richness of our experience […].[124]

Lessing turns the apparent loss of language's referential function, and the contradictory consolation it affirms – 'One certainty we all accept is the condition of being uncertain and insecure' – into a condition for the writer to bridge the gap between 'the public and the private conscience'.[125] For Lessing, the writer's acknowledgement that they are 'caught up in a great whirlwind of change' invites 'an end of despair, and the aridity of self-pity' as it is 'the beginning' of 'the minimum act of humility for a writer': 'to know that one is a writer at all because one represents, makes articulate, is continuously and invisibly fed by, numbers of people who are inarticulate, to whom one belongs, to whom one is responsible'.[126] However, in spite of *The Golden Notebook*'s attempt to reinforce the idea that 'inadequate' words could be used to respond to and for those 'inarticulate' others 'to whom one belongs'[127], Lessing found

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[122] Hargreaves, '"…to find a form"', p. 214.
[123] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 10.
[124] Lessing, 'Small Personal Voice', p. 9.
[125] Lessing, 'Small Personal Voice', p. 9.
[126] Lessing, 'Small Personal Voice', p. 9, p. 14, p. 24.
[127] Lessing, 'Small Personal Voice', p. 9, p. 24.

that ‘nobody so much as noticed’ the text’s ‘central theme’ of ‘breakdown’ and had to rearticulate a similar point in her 1971 introduction to the novel:

> The way to deal with […] that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general.[128]

A reading of failure in the novel through the philosophical revision of scepticism allows us to acknowledge the contradictory relationship between the text’s rhetoric of failure and its invocation of community. Lessing’s attempt to rearticulate an ‘inadequate’ language, which can nonetheless acknowledge, as is noted above, a certainty of being uncertain, emulates how, for Levinas, the ethical relation to the other or ‘the *otherwise than being* requires, perhaps as much audacity as scepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to realize this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility’.[129] What is particularly compelling in Lessing’s texts is how, in Ziarek’s words, the ‘incoherence of sceptical discourse’, or its rhetoric of failure, is in constant tension with its misrecognition by a notion of communal unity; Lessing impresses that the certainty of being uncertain is something ‘*we* all accept’.[130] *The Golden Notebook* thus presents a disjunction between its projection of a community, which asserts its coherence by misrecognizing failure or ‘breakdown’ as a theme, and the text’s rhetoric of failure, which disturbs this appeal to a communal unity with the insinuation of having been called to respond to the other.

The Golden Notebook is structured through a realist narrative with, in Lessing’s words, the ‘ironical title’ *Free Women*, which envelops and is punctuated by the different Notebooks of Anna Wulf, a writer suffering from writer’s block.[131] In view of the novel’s reception, Lessing found that she was mistaken to think that *Free Women* would ‘stat[e] a theme’, ‘announc[e] a motif with drums and fanfares’: ‘the essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize’.[132]

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[128] Lessing, *Golden Notebook*, p. 13.
[129] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 7.
[130] Lessing, ‘Small Personal Voice’, p. 9, my emphasis.
[131] Lessing, *Golden Notebook*, p. 8.
[132] Lessing, *Golden Notebook*, p. 10. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.

In her introduction to the novel, Lessing suggests that the following dialogue between Anna and her friend Molly is intended to signpost the novel's central concern:

> "[…] But it occurred to me – if we lead what is known as free lives, that is, lives like men, why shouldn't we use the same language?"
> "Because we aren't the same. That is the point."
> Anna laughed. "Men. Women. Bound. Free. Good. Bad. Yes. No. Capitalism. Socialism. Sex. Love . . ." (p. 59)

Molly's '"point"' – women are different from men – is just one of the numerous points which are presented in the opening section of *Free Women*; Anna's list of polarized positions above sets up the critique of compartmentalizing to come. If we read these points as reflections of separate discursive communities, they could be said to highlight how the focus on one point is contingent upon an exclusion of others, and risks accentuating the divisions between them. This idea is dramatized in the opening lines of *Free Women*: '"The point is," said Anna, as her friend came back from the telephone on the landing, "the point is, that as far as I can see, everything's cracking up"' (p. 25). Where the first '"The point is"' in Anna's direct discourse seems to go unnoticed, or fails to address an audience, its iteration with Molly's arrival characterizes the point as being about, in Dennis Porter's words, 'the desperateness and terrible disorder [Anna] encounters in the world'.[133] The disorder of Anna's '"point"' is underlined in *Free Women*:

> "What's in those diaries then?"
> "They aren't diaries."
> "Whatever they are."
> "Chaos, that the point." (p. 56)

Lessing emphasizes that chaos and disorder is only one of many 'points' that make up the novel by having Molly's ex-husband Richard suggest that '"money is the point"' (p. 56), while their son, Tommy, reminds Anna, '"the point is, you were talking about responsibility. That's what I feel too – people aren't taking responsibility for each other"' (p. 55). Though a first-time reader of the novel is unaware of it, these points could already refer us to the subjects of the different Notebooks, which categorize aspects of Anna's life; Richard's claim that money is the point

[133] Dennis Porter, 'Realism and Failure in *The Golden Notebook*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 35 (March 1974), 56-65, p. 58.

could be read as a distillation of the Black Notebook, which begins with 'doodlings' that 'shift into the £ and back again' (p. 71), and Tommy's point concerning his and Anna's responsibility for other persons may be a condensation of the Red Notebook, and its account of Anna's wavering confidence in the British Communist Party and postwar socialism. The profusion of different points in the opening section of 'Free Women' foreshadows how failure comes to haunt the privileging of one point over another, or, as Lessing found was the case in discussions of the text, the separation of the novel's parts.

If, in Porter's words, *The Golden Notebook*'s 'success as a whole turns on the paradox that, despite its moments of remarkable percipience, we sense an inadequacy in any given part'[134], the text also anticipates the problem of reducing failure to a theme of the novel. In the opening section of *Free Women* Anna asks,

> "Why do our lot never admit failure? Never. It might be better for us if we did. And it's not only love and men. Why can't we say something like this – we are people, because of the accident of how we were situated in history, who were so powerfully part – but only in our imaginations, and that's the point – of the great dream, that now we have to admit that the great dream has faded and truth is something else – that we'll never be any use. After all, Molly, it's not much loss is it, a few people, a few people of a certain type, saying they've had it, they're finished." (p. 66)

Anna's call for a communal admission of failure recapitulates the tension in Lessing's essay noted above; though the text hints at the limits of knowledge with the recognition that 'truth is something else' (p. 69), the invocation of a community or '"our lot"' (p. 66) relies upon, as was the case with Williams, a paradoxical exclusion of these epistemic uncertainties through the use of the term failure. The subtle stutter that troubles Anna's identification of 'a few people, a few people of a certain type' (p. 66) insinuates how even the construction of a community putatively characterized by an admission of failure is dependent upon overlooking, in Ziarek's words, the 'possibility that words might "fail" the speaking subject' projecting that public.[135]

In contrast to the *Free Women* narrative, the Notebook sections of the text amplify how a public is constituted by excluding those persons who fail to coincide with it. In the Blue

[134] Porter, 'Realism and Failure', p. 61.
[135] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 33.

Notebook, Lessing presents Anna's record of how a stammer upset her appeal to community during a lecture on art for the British Communist Party:

> I would say something like this: "Art during the Middle Ages was communal, unindividual; it came out of a group consciousness. It was without the driving painful individuality of the art of the bourgeois era. And one day, we will leave behind the driving egotism of individual art. We will return to an art which will express not man's self-divisions and separateness from his fellows but his responsibility for his fellows and his brotherhood. Art from the West…" to use the useful catchphrase " – becomes more and more a shriek of torment from souls recording pain. Pain is becoming our deepest reality …" I've been saying something like this. About three months ago, in the middle of this lecture, I began to stammer and couldn't finish (p. 312).

The faltering of Anna's lecture on an art which will once again embody a 'communal' (p. 312) unity stems from how she considers 'words' to come 'from some anonymous place', as though they 'have nothing to do with what I am seeing' – 'scenes of death, torture, cross-examination and so on' (p. 314). A similar sense of despair occurs during the breakdown of the Blue Notebook as Anna tries to record how 'words like democracy, liberty, freedom, had faded' (p. 513); she is left with the recognition that 'writing it, and reading what I've written, there's nothing there just words on paper, I can't communicate' (p. 514). The insistence on the separation of what Anna is 'seeing' (p. 314) and words, recapitulates the subject-centred understanding of language that conflates the discontinuities in linguistic practices with the impasse of scepticism: 'knowledge isn't in the words I write down' (p. 514).

However, Lessing's text, in a manner akin to the revision of scepticism, suggests that, in Ziarek's words, the 'interpretation of the failure of the subject-centred conception of language is not an end itself […] but a preliminary, and risky, step in articulating those aspects of signification that are incommensurate with the coherence of rational discourse'.[136] In the Golden Notebook, which supersedes the impasses of the others, Lessing offers a striking enactment of the sceptical argument's performative contradiction:

[136] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 7.

> During the last weeks of craziness and timelessness I've had these moments of "knowing" one after the other, yet there is no way of putting this sort of knowledge into words. Yet these moments have been so powerful, like the rapid illuminations of a dream that remain with one waking, that what I have learned will be part of how I experience life until I die. Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want. Perhaps better with music? But music attacks my inner ear like an antagonist, it's not my world. The fact is, the real experience can't be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. Or a symbol of some kind, a circle perhaps, or a square. Anything at all, but not words. The people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean and the others won't. But once having been there, there's a terrible irony, a terrible shrug of the shoulders, and it's not a question of fighting it, or disowning it, or of right or wrong, but simply knowing it is there, always. It's a question of bowing to it, so to speak, with a kind of courtesy, as to an ancient enemy: All right, I know you are there, but we have to preserve the forms, don't we? And perhaps the condition of your existing at all is precisely that we preserve the forms, create the patterns — have you thought of that? (p. 549)

If we read the passage from the point of view of the sceptical argument, and its presupposition of the centrality of the subject, we are met by the familiar separation of words and 'real experience' and the resignation that 'experience can't be described' as there is 'no way of putting […] knowledge into words' when 'words, patterns, order, dissolve' (p. 549) and lose their referential function. Yet, the extract is more than an evocation of the onset of the desolation of scepticism as it is concerned with what appears through the lens of the subject as the contradictory moment of '"knowing"' that one cannot know anything and that this condition 'is there, always' (p. 549). Though the sceptical position understands its performative contradiction as, in Ziarek's words, a 'deplorable loss of mastery', as 'it concerns itself only with the possibility or impossibility of knowledge', the moment illustrates how a rhetoric of failure can announce what Cavell calls 'the "truth" of scepticism'; the rhetorical model of sceptical thesis affirms it 'is not absorbed by its explicit negative thesis' and illuminates that 'the failure or impossibility of knowledge is intertwined, though not simultaneous, with the

ethical affirmation of otherness'.[137] Lessing's text presents the rift between the ethical and epistemological effects of its rhetoric as a tension between 'moments' of 'bowing' to the other, 'so to speak', and its misrepresentation as 'an ancient enemy' by the community or 'we' that seeks to 'preserve the forms' (p. 549). Paradoxically, the insinuation of the other relies upon their misinterpretation by a community, as their alterity is thereby affirmed as incommensurate with its present.

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This reading of *The Golden Notebook* calls attention to the question of how a response to the other, which I have suggested disturbs Lessing's text as the break between 'bowing' to the other and their misrecognition as an 'enemy' to community, is sustained in language. Comparing the above extract from Lessing's text to Levinas's reading of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* underlines how, although scepticism offers, in Ziarek's words, 'one mode of registering that one misses the other, one mode of acknowledging the opacity of the other with respect to the appropriating movement of thought'[138], Levinas refuses to reduce the ethical relation to an obstacle for the construction of a harmonious community:

> The failure of communication is the failure of knowledge. One does not see that the success of knowledge would in fact destroy the nearness, the proximity, of the other. A proximity that, far from meaning something less than identification, opens up the horizons of social existence, brings out all the surplus of our experience of friendship and love, and brings to the definitiveness of our identical existence all the virtuality of the non-definitive.[139]

Where Levinas rejects equating the other with a 'failure of knowledge', as it adheres to the epistemological framework that would cast it in a wholly negative light, it will be useful to outline how Levinas's conception of language negotiates the paradox that the other disturbs rational discourse by being misrecognized within it. Levinas's notion of language may help us

[137] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 82, p. 92, pp. 87-88.
[138] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 92.
[139] Levinas, 'The Other in Proust', p. 104.

to read a movement towards the other person in Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's experimental texts, where the recourse to a notion of community is refused or only tenuously projected.

Levinas sets out how language is always already affected by the responsibility for the other by elaborating on two modes of signification: the saying and the said. In an interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas elucidates that '[l]anguage as saying is an ethical openness to the other; as that which is said – reduced to a fixed identity or synchronised presence – it is an ontological closure to the other'.[140] Levinas's reading of scepticism in *Otherwise than Being* illuminates how the significations of the saying (the subject's non-thematizable exposure to the other) and the said (the unity and synchronicity of rational discourse or what Levinas also calls the way of the same) rely on each other even though they are not simultaneous:

> Scepticism […] is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said. The contradiction is visible to reflection, which refutes it, but scepticism is insensitive to the refutation, as though the affirmation and negation did not resound in the same time.[141]

Where, as we saw in Williams and Lessing's appeals to community, 'the said thematizes' its temporal discontinuity with the saying, or these 'interruptions of [its] discourse', as 'silences, failure, and delirium', Levinas emphasizes that the 'intervals [insinuating the address of the other] are not recuperated' by the said's thematizations.[142] '[T]he periodic return of scepticism' supports Levinas's point as its reiterations imply a mode of signification that ignores the contradiction of its thesis: '[t]he permanent return of scepticism does not so much signify the possible breakup of structures as the fact that they are not the ultimate framework of meaning'.[143] Scepticism's refusal to abide by its refutation offers to implicitly affirm through its rhetoric how the significations of the saying and the said are out of time with each other.

Levinas's notion of language follows scepticism's unruly revivals of itself insofar as it continually interrupts and renews what his texts have said concerning the ethical saying; the saying is evoked through, in Krzysztof Ziarek's words, a 'cluster of ethical terms: responsibility,

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[140] Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', p. 194.
[141] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 167-168.
[142] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 170.
[143] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 171.

obligation, assignation, proximity, honesty, uprightnesss, the one-for-the other'.[144] It might appear that Levinas is in danger of undermining his own claims; the language through which his text asserts being addressed by the other seems to compromise the other's alterity by stating one's exposure to it. However, the significance of Levinas's ethical language lies as much in the terms themselves as the trace within language to which they refer. The myriad ways of articulating the implicit affirmation of the ethical saying is continuous with Levinas's description of a work: '*A work conceived radically is a movement of the Same towards the Other which never returns to the same*'.[145] This conception of a work can be compared to the Cartesian idea of infinity, in which, as Krzysztof Ziarek elucidates, 'there is no question of "thinking" the infinite' as it overflows thought in such a way as it cannot be comprehended or described in terms of thought.[146] Similarly, Levinas conceives the subject's exposure to the other as a movement mediated by language that never returns to its point of departure. Krzysztof Ziarek elucidates this point: '[t]he "beyond" of the way the face speaks is not another language […]. Rather it is a certain direction in which […] language already unfolds itself'.[147] It is because language always already bears the trace of being addressed by other that Levinas suggests that the ethical 'appeal is understood in the response': '[t]he unheard-of saying is enigmatically in the anarchic response, in my responsibility for the other'.[148] Though 'the saying that comes to me is my own word', the response to the other is the 'singular obedience to the order to go, without understanding the order', and answer to and for the other.[149] Consequently, even as the 'said dissimulates the saying', the '[s]aying always seeks to unsay that dissimulation'.[150] Though the subject's response to the other is thematized by the said 'and dominates the saying that states it', the said does so without 'effacing the unsaying', which haunts it with the enigmatic trace of the other.[151]

If the ethical saying impresses, as Ewa Ziarek puts it, 'that the original position of the subject qua subject is in the accusative "me" rather than the nominative "I" of enunciation', its trace as an unsaying of the said impinges upon and disturbs the traditional understanding of

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[144] Krzysztof Ziarek, 'Semantics of Proximity: Language and the Other in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas', *Research in Phenomenology*, 19:1 (1989), 213-247, p. 221, p. 217. The turn to Krzysztof Ziarek's work stems from Ewa Ziarek's *The Rhetoric of Failure*, which recommends this detailed discussion of the semantics of alterity in Levinas's philosophy.
[145] Levinas, 'Meaning and Sense', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 75-107, p. 91.
[146] Ziarek, 'Semantics of Proximity', p. 221.
[147] Ziarek, 'Semantics of Proximity', p. 220.
[148] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 149.
[149] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 150.
[150] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 152.
[151] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 7, p. 44.

community by emphasizing the uncertainty of communication.[152] In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas claims that '[t]hose who wish to found on dialogue and on an original *we* the upsurge of egos, refer to an original dialogue behind the *de facto* communication'; these theories of the relationship between subjectivity and community rest upon notions of communication 'without giving the original communication any sense other than the empirical sense of a dialogue or a manifestation of one to the other – which is to presuppose that *we* that is to be founded'.[153] Levinas reconceives the communication presupposed by the notion of a community through the movement towards the other outlined above; communication is 'an adventure of subjectivity, different from that which is dominated by the concern to recover itself, different from that coinciding in consciousness; it will involve uncertainty'.[154] For Levinas, communication entails uncertainty because it is undertaken, 'prior to any decision, in passivity', at 'the risk of misunderstanding […], at the risk of lack of and refusal of communication'.[155] The uncertainty of communication is a 'fine risk to be run' because its significance is only made possible by 'sacrifice, which is the approach of him for which one is responsible'.[156] Consequently, in contrast to how, in the said, 'the communicated theme is more important than the contact of communication', Levinas proposes that to communicate is to expose oneself to the infinite responsibility for the other to the point of substitution: '[s]ubstitution […] ends up in saying, in the giving of signs, giving a sign of the giving of signs, expressing oneself. This expression is antecedent to all thematization in the said'.[157]

In other words, Levinas argues that we need to understand signification 'on the basis of the-one-for-the-other […], and not on the basis of a system of terms which are simultaneous in a language for the speaker, and which simultaneity is in fact only the situation of the speaker'.[158] The coherence of communication and community is unhinged by an unsaying of the said, which bears the trace of the ethical saying or the exposure to the other. Levinas's notion of language thus emphasizes, in Gerald Bruns's words, how the exposure to the other is 'a mode of proximity, sensibility, or contact'.[159] Levinas proposes that, '[i]n the form of corporeality, whose movements are fatigue and whose duration is ageing, the passivity of signification, of the

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[152] Ewa Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 50.
[153] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 119, pp. 119-120.
[154] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 120.
[155] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 120.
[156] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 120.
[157] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 193, p. 119, p. 15.
[158] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 77.
[159] Gerald L. Bruns, *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 9.

one-for-another, is not an act, but patience, that is, of itself sensibility'.[160] We can turn to Levinas's account of the materiality of a word to help delineate how sensibility bears the trace of the otherwise than being.[161] In an article on Michel Leiris, 'Transcending Words', Levinas elaborates on how the materiality of language may allow us to overhear how 'the enigma' that haunts the said as an insinuation of 'the proximity of the other as other'.[162] Levinas contends that '[s]ound – and conscience as hearing – includes within itself the splitting apart of the always completed world of vision and art' because sound 'rings out, detonates', 'like the sensory world overflowing itself, forms being unable to hold their contents – the world ripping asunder – that by which *this* world *here* extends a dimension which cannot be converted into vision'.[163] For Levinas, 'the reason it [sound's dimension of transcendence] can still keep the appearance of a phenomenon, as *here*, is that its transcending function only holds sway in verbal sound'.[164] Bruns highlights that the emphasis Levinas puts on 'here' is intended to demonstrate how sound preserves its transcending function by making 'here' resound with 'hear'.[165] The call to 'hear' that echoes in and disturbs the sound of 'here' draws attention to the way that the materiality of language can intimate at an exposure to the ethical address of the other. Levinas's conception of language thus provides a way to understand why Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's apparent failure to address community is often represented as a restless and onerous form of embodiment in their experimental texts. We may be able to reread the rhetoric of failure in Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's texts by following how their work's representations of disjunctions between time and embodiment evoke an ethical exposure to another.

[160] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 55.
[161] Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma', p. 64.
[162] Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma', p. 70.
[163] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcending Words: Concerning Word-Erasing', *Yale French Studies*, 81 (1992), 145-150, p. 148.
[164] Levinas, 'Transcending Words', p. 148.
[165] See Bruns, *The Material of Poetry*, p. 44.

2. 'Poetry of the Inarticulate': The Survival of Eva Figes's Early Experimental Fiction

Introduction

An obituary for Eva Figes, which appeared in the *Guardian* in 2012, suggests that she will be remembered for 'her ground-breaking experimental novels'.[1] However, as Anna Maria Stuby points out, Figes's 'fiction has never been as widely read and discussed as that of other comparable contemporary authors'; in one of the few studies of her novels, Stuby admits there is 'no answer' for the way 'Figes's reputation as a fiction writer has remained somewhat obscured'.[2] The survival of Figes's experimental fiction is strangely entwined with its obscurity, impressing its haunting presence in the contemporary.

Contemplating the survival of Figes's experimental fiction leads one to reflect on how she and part of her Jewish family fled Germany in 1939 when she was seven, as well as her work's paradoxical relation to postwar culture. Where one might have expected Figes's renowned feminist text, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) to have secured the survival of her experimental fictions, their obscurity points to a disjunction between her innovative texts and the postwar public. The word survival permeates Figes's work; the term appears in Figes's discussions of her experiments with form and language, and it recurs in her characterization of her relationship to the collection of experimental writers with whom she associated her early work:

> We all rather stuck together as a sort of group. We were all very young, and in a way I felt very lonely afterwards because I felt I'm the only one who has survived […]. They've all either given up or they've killed themselves, and they've got very little to show for it.[3]

Figes's 'we', which consisted of Burns, Johnson and Quin, collapsed with the early deaths of Johnson and Quin in 1973 and Burns's subsequent move to the US. The obscure survival of Figes's experimental fiction calls for an investigation into her part in the failure of this group.

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[1] Eva Tucker, 'Eva Figes obituary', *Guardian*, 7 September 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/sep/07/eva-figes>

[2] Anna Maria Stuby, 'Eva Figes's Novels', in *Engendering Realism and Postmodernism: Contemporary Writers in Britain*, ed. by Neumeier Beate (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 105-116, p. 105.

[3] Figes, 'Authors' Lives'.

This chapter suggests that we can reconsider how the survival of Figes's experimental fiction seems, in Stuby's words, to 'balanc[e] between two spheres' – 'past and present, reality and imagination/fantasy, personal and public, poetry and prose, pain and pleasure' – by exploring its relationship to discursive communities of postwar English culture.[4] The first part of this chapter outlines the uncertain relationship between the survival of Figes's experimental fiction and the discursive communities invoked by her cultural writings. Though Figes's work can be aligned with the second wave of feminism, the nouveau roman, and the difficulties that faced German-Jewish refugees in postwar England, her experimental fiction refuses to be neatly categorized by these constructed communities and fragile identities. I go on to offer a way to reread how Figes's experimental texts appear to fail to address different publics through what one reviewer called, in allusion to Beckett's work, her text's 'poetry of the inarticulate'.[5]

Figes offers a sketch of her experimental fiction's tenuous survival in the postwar public sphere in a collection of essays and experimental prose, *Beyond the Words* (1975), which includes work by Burns, Johnson and Quin:

> The price of survival is eternal vigilance. I am less concerned now with creating beautiful artefacts and more with the problem of going on, of survival, of grasping where I am and coming to terms with it. For me, now, each book is a life saving act on which my personal survival as a whole human being depends. If I succeed in fashioning structures which can contain the anxieties, the difficulties, the insights which beset me and which I regard as general rather than private to me I am not reassuring anybody, on the contrary, I am being highly subversive, painful, disturbing, but ultimately constructive.[6]

It is striking that Figes cannot take for granted 'grasping where I am', and there is an implicit vulnerability in her hope to 'succeed' in finding a way to make her 'anxieties' 'general rather than private'.[7] I want to suggest that the obscurity of Figes's experimental fiction is entangled with her conception of her texts as 'life saving acts' upon which her 'survival as a whole human being' depends.[8] If the obscurity of Figes's experimental fictions suggests that her attempt to

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[4] Stuby, 'Eva Figes's Novels', p. 110.
[5] Robert Nye, 'A dull head among windy spaces', *Guardian*, 7 April 1967, p. 7.
[6] Eva Figes, 'Note', in *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, ed. by Giles Gordon (London: Hutchinson, 1975), pp. 113-114, p. 114.
[7] Figes, 'Note', p. 114.
[8] Figes, 'Note', p. 114.

successfully communicate her anxieties failed, we can reconsider the different ways in which Figes's work was misrecognized by the public through its refusal to 'reassur[e] anybody'.[9] I will argue that the rhetoric of failure, or 'poetry of the inarticulate', employed in Figes's experimental texts allows us to draw out the ethical significance of her work's relationship to the public sphere; Figes's 'poetry of the inarticulate' interweaves a language of subversion and pain with a notion of human responsibility, offering a way to reread her work's failure to address different postwar audiences.

Figes's Cultural Writings and the Postwar Literary Scene

In her study of tragedy in literature for Calder and Boyars, Figes reiterates her work's uncertain relation to the public sphere: '[m]ost creative writers today tend to think of themselves as outsiders, writing against the consensus of their own society, or writing in the absence of any consensus at all'.[10] Figes's view of writers's opposition to and uncertainty towards the idea of a consensus is a useful indicator of how her experimental fiction's orientation to other persons differed from that which was extended in her cultural writings. Figes's non-fiction works address different postwar publics; Figes's name came to prominence in postwar culture through her work's contribution to the second wave of feminism, while its association with the campaign for authors's rights and the nouveau roman point towards its interaction with other discursive communities. This section presents Figes's relationship to these postwar publics, before considering how her attempt to address a postwar German-Jewish identity comes unstuck. We can trace how the survival of Figes's experimental fiction insinuates a move towards the other by considering how her work's attempt to address survivors of the holocaust fails. I suggest that we can open a way to read the ethical significance of her experimental fictions by drawing upon the rhetoric of failure amplified by her work's stuttering address to survivors of the holocaust.

The obscurity of Figes's early experimental fiction seems strangely at odds with the book that, after its publication in June 1970, propelled her into the public sphere: *Patriarchal Attitudes*. Reflecting on her feminist polemic in 1978, Figes recalls how it appeared at a time when 'echoes of the American women's movement were beginning to reach Britain' and 'women worked together with such a sense of communion and unity of purpose'.[11] *Patriarchal Attitudes*'s analysis of the ways '[w]omen have been largely man-made'[12] helped to initiate a

[9] Figes, 'Note', p. 114.
[10] Eva Figes, *Tragedy and Social Evolution* (London: Calder, 1976), p. 10.
[11] Eva Figes, 'Why the euphoria had to stop', *Guardian*, 16 May 1978, p. 9.
[12] Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (London: Faber, 1970), p. 33.

public discourse through which, in Figes's words, 'women […] found each other'.[13] Figes affirms that her work was 'motivated as much by a wish to stir women out of their passivity, [...] as by anger at a society dominated by men who discriminated against women in so many ways'.[14] Appearing in the same year as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Figes's polemic has come to encapsulate how, as Rita Felski highlights, '[t]he distinctive contribution of second-wave feminism […] lies in its entry into the public domain and its challenge to general cultural consciousness'.[15] Figes's text calls attention to the way 'the language which we use has itself been created, […] that in thinking we use counters that have already been created for us and passed down by tradition'.[16] It also criticizes the tendency to revert to 'traditional' gendered identities, and forget their linguistic construction, at times of crisis:

> because our faith in civilization has been badly shaken we cling all the more desperately to what we hope is our fundamental human nature, our basic and even traditional identities as man or woman […]. When things go wrong we feel lost and tend to think that it is because we have departed too far from tradition, and try that much harder to conform to the image. Which is only a mirage.[17]

Figes's examination of the language and traditions shaping the 'types of women […] society has produced' reflects how the second wave of feminism developed, as Cora Kaplan puts it, 'a political language about gender that refuse[d] the fixed transhistorical definitions of masculinity and femininity in the dominant culture'.[18] In the introduction to her collection of essays, *Sea Changes* (1986), Kaplan acknowledges how, by the mid-1980s, a 'dispersed and fragmented' feminist cultural project and anti-racism campaigns had 'successfully challenged' a 'normative, subliminal, natural consensus around the subordinate status of women and Blacks'.[19] Figes's emphasis on the linguistic and historical construction of gendered identities indicates how her work contributed to the second wave of feminism as her analysis anticipates Kaplan's summary of one of the effects of the diverse and complex movement: '[d]ominant and alternative

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[13] Figes, 'Why the euphoria had to stop', p. 9.
[14] Figes, 'Why the euphoria had to stop', p. 9.
[15] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 11.
[16] Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, p. 19.
[17] Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, p. 34.
[18] Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 6.
[19] Kaplan, *Sea Changes*, p. 6, p. 5.

discourses now move uneasily between old languages of natural, transhistorical sexuality and new languages in which masculinity and femininity are contingent terms whose meaning can be changed'.[20]

After the text's publication Figes's attention to the construction of gender through a patriarchal 'tradition that perpetuates itself in different guises' was offset by the realization that the diverse counterpublic her polemic had helped create risked losing its force through attempts to formulate a feminist identity.[21] In an article celebrating the book's reissue, Figes highlights how '[t]he change of awareness in itself presents a danger to progress'; Figes warns that 'we may be taken in by appearances and forget the reality' as the 'march to sexual equality is proceeding at a snail's pace'.[22] What could be termed, following Felski, as the 'feminist counter-public'[23] is, Figes suggests, 'in danger of being lulled into a false sense of premature complacency' as 'the absolute cash differential between men's and women's earnings had actually widened from £13.50 in 1970 to £25.60 in 1976'.[24] Figes's focus on the economic discrepancy between men and women could be read through Kaplan's sketch of the differences between socialist and liberal humanist feminisms. Figes's concerns mirror how 'socialist feminist criticism' insists on analysing 'the relationship between female subjectivity and class identity', and thereby counters feminist investments in 'a unified self and an integrated consciousness' which claim to 'transcend material circumstances'.[25] Indeed, in *Patriarchal Attitudes* Figes pinpoints the 'rise of capitalism' as 'the root cause of the modern social and economic discrimination against women'; for Figes, capitalism has accentuated 'the sex-role division of woman at home, man at work', and positioned women as 'an economic dependent' through the 'institution of marriage'.[26] The series of articles Figes wrote for the *Guardian* in the 1970s illustrate how her feminist work sought to redress the inequities between men and women's material circumstances; in 'Doubtful benefit' Figes calls for the government to reform their family allowance policy, while in 'Homes begin with charity' she draws attention to the lack of housing for one parent families.[27]

Figes presents her experimental fiction's contradictory relationship to the emergence of a feminist counterpublic by admitting how 'in the early days [she] nearly always had male

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[20] Kaplan, *Sea Changes*, p. 6.
[21] Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, p. 33.
[22] Figes, 'Why the euphoria had to stop', p. 9.
[23] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 12.
[24] Figes, 'Why the euphoria had to stop', p. 9.
[25] Kaplan, *Sea Changes*, p. 152.
[26] Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, p. 15, p. 67, p. 73, p. 75, p. 176.
[27] See Eva Figes, 'Doubtful benefit', *Guardian*, 17 March 1976, p. 11, and 'Homes Begin with charity', *Guardian*, 4 August 1977, p. 9.

protagonists' because it 'seem[ed] impossible to get any sort of universality if you wr[o]te about women'.[28] Figes reiterates her fiction's uneasy relation to a feminist counterpublic in an interview from 1999; 'I don't like to be labelled that way' (as 'a feminist') because it 'seems to me that the things I'm writing about are things that affect all human beings, whichever gender they are'.[29] In the interview Figes goes on to reiterate her view that her 'responsibility' as 'human being' depends upon her writing:

> every citizen has a duty to stand up for certain rights and certain values, but a writer not only has a duty as a human being but has the opportunity to express it either in journalism, or in novels, or in essays, or whatever. I think it lacking in responsibility if they don't do it.[30]

Figes's refusal to align her experimental fiction with a feminist identity distances it from liberal humanist feminism's predisposition towards, in Kaplan's words, 'the repair and reconstitution of female subjectivity', while her promotion of the writer's responsibility to other human beings might be dismissed by socialist feminists for its putative cultural elitism; Kaplan notes that 'socialist feminism has never been as enthusiastically committed to cultural intervention as other sections of the women's movement': 'too much attention to high art […] produces a familiar socialist queasiness'.[31] Yet, Figes's emphasis on the 'responsibility' underlying her experimental fiction, and its problematic relationship to different and divergent postwar feminisms, could be indicative of how her work offers a more radical destabilization of gender, which it might be fitting to read through Judith Butler's performative theory. In *Patriarchal Attitudes* one could argue that Figes unsettles gendered identities, and hints towards the groundless ground of their performance, by fleetingly aligning her critique of patriarchy with the notion of human responsibility that is prevalent in her discussions of her experimental writing: '[p]eople are primarily human beings, and the desire to make them play ready-made male and female roles causes all the trouble'.[32] If Figes's polemic and cultural writings can be affiliated with socialist feminism's concerns for women's material circumstances, the notion of human responsibility knotted up with her experimental fictions complicates her work's

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[28] Eva Figes, 'Eva Figes: An Interview', interviewed by Manuel Almagro and Carolina Sánchez-Palencia, *Atlantis*, 22:1 (2000), 177-186, p. 180.
[29] Figes, 'Eva Figes: An Interview', p. 181.
[30] Figes, 'Eva Figes: An Interview', p. 182.
[31] Kaplan, *Sea Changes*, p. 150, p. 2.
[32] Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, p. 167.

relationship to the second wave of feminism by hinting at the contingencies of gender performances. Though Figes's experimental fiction appears to fail to coincide with what we might think of as an emerging and fragmented postwar feminist counterpublic, its failure suggests that it may disturb the apparent coherence of parts of this counterpublic with an appeal for a responsibility for others. Consequently, failure in Figes's experimental texts could, as Butler puts it, 'haunt the "integrity" and "unity" of the feminist "we"' through its appeal to the other; Figes's text's rhetoric of failure might draw attention to how publics that promote '[i]dentity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary'.[33]

Figes's relationship to the Arts Council's cultural community indicates another way in which her work could be misrecognized by the public. In her 1968 article, 'The writer's dilemma', we can see how Figes's experimental texts were liable to be mistaken for a symptom of what Esty describes as the 'irony' of the Arts Council's domestication of modernism:

> In England nobody really expects a writer to have the intellectual calibre, of say a philosopher or a mathematician: the review columns and the bestseller lists confirm the cosily middlebrow, and people expect novelists and playwrights to entertain, not to tax their thinking powers overmuch.[34]

One could view Figes's description of a 'cosy' English fiction public sustained by 'review columns' and 'bestseller lists' as an indirect effect of the Arts Council's cultural policy. Figes's criticism of the 'cosiness' of postwar British culture and the expectation that the novelist and playwright aim 'to entertain' echoes the characteristics of the public projected by the Arts Council; Keynes told listeners in 1945 that '[y]our enjoyment will be our [the Art Council's] first aim. […] [I]t is a new game we are teaching you to play – and to watch'.[35] In view of the cultural community supported by the Arts Council, Figes struggles to articulate how her revival of modernism is entwined with a responsibility for others. Opposing her work to the 'camp that has Sartre as it most renowned spokesman', and which advocates 'the whole body of one's

[33] Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-21, p. 14, p. 15.
[34] Eva Figes, 'The writer's dilemma', *Guardian*, 17 June 1968, p. 7.
[35] Keynes, 'The Arts Council', p. 369.

creative work must become […] a vehicle for political thought', Figes claims that she belongs to the

> second camp, which holds that a writer's first duty *as a writer* is to his own vision of truth and to his craft. If that sounds like art for art's sake, I suppose it is true, though I do not consider myself a sort of gutless aesthete.[36]

Figes's comments emphasize how she feared that her promotion of a writer's 'duty' to their 'truth' and their 'craft' could be mistaken for 'aestheticism'.[37] Moreover, her anxieties are compounded by the way '[m]odern communications and mass media have accentuated the personality cult'.[38] Figes's attempt to distance her work from the public coordinated by the Arts Council illustrates the ease with which the ethical orientation of her revival of modernism could be eclipsed by the mainstream.

Figes reiterates her apprehensions about the domestication and eclipse of modernist aesthetics by the Arts Council's cultural community in her comments on her first novel, *Equinox* (1966). In an interview with Burns, Figes admits she was 'thoroughly ashamed of' *Equinox* because it was a 'thinly disguised' semi-autobiographical novel, 'distinguished perhaps by poetic language, but not challenging in any other way'.[39] Conversely, the publishers of the novel, Secker and Warburg, turned down her second novel, *Winter Journey* (1967), because, in Figes's words, 'they wanted another […] acceptable middle-brow novel'.[40] Calder connects his view of Figes as 'the most important of the writers outside the fictional mainstream at that time' to the way 'she never compromised or tried to write commercially'.[41] Similarly, the financial

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[36] Figes, 'The writer's dilemma', p. 7.
[37] Figes, 'The writer's dilemma', p. 7.
[38] Figes, 'The writer's dilemma', p. 7.
[39] Eva Figes, interviewed by Alan Burns, in *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods*, ed. by Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London: Alison & Busby, 1981), pp. 31-39, p. 34.
[40] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 34. *Equinox* offers a reflection on its uneasy move into the fiction market through its representation of the difference between Liz and her husband Martin's views of the theatre; 'Martin went for entertainment' (p. 29) and considers the new Beckett play they see '"pretentious rubbish"' (p. 30), whereas Liz finds the 'dramatization of the stark realities of life' part of 'an act of faith, and failure or partial failure' as it is 'inherent in the attempt' (p. 29) (Eva Figes, *Equinox* (Suffolk: Panther, 1969)).
[41] Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 274. In his autobiography Calder recalls how Figes did 'a number of translations for us' including *Family Failure* (1970) by Renate Rasp, a writer associated with German literary movement, 'Gruppe 47' (p. 274).

risk of Calder and Boyars's publishing, in Figes's views, 'some brilliant stuff' from European avant-garde circles is reflected in her blunt comment that 'you didn't get any money from him [Calder]'.[42] The divergence between experimental texts and the commercial expectations of mainstream culture is evoked by Calder's 'rallying cry on bad days'; Bill Webb recalls how his call was Beckett's injunction, '"Fail again. Fail better"'.[43]

The tension between Figes's reliance upon the Arts Council's financial support and her resistance to its absorption of modernism into the mainstream came to the fore in the 1970s, when Figes and other authors endeavored to redress their financial insecurity and peripheral status in the postwar literary scene. In the dedication of her fourth novel, *B* (1972), Figes 'thank[s] the Arts Council for [their] financial assistance during the writing of this book'.[44] Three years later Figes's dependence on the Arts Council's subsidization appears to have been even more acute; in an article from 1975 on an author's protest outside the offices of the Minister of the Arts, Figes is quoted as saying, '"I couldn't go on writing novels and bring up a family without an Arts Council subsidy"'.[45] Figes part in the protest reflects how her anxieties about the body's subsidization converged with the concerns of the group that had formed to promote Public Lending Right bill. In the dedication of her memoir *Little Eden* (1978) Figes made the following appeal:

> Most people who read my books borrow them freely from public libraries and do not buy copies. As a result, my earnings from them are small and like most authors, I find it impossible to live on my literary income. If you want literature to survive, support Public Lending Right.[46]

Figes's attempts to address the welfare and public recognition of authors reflects her involvement in the Writers' Guild – a trade union for professional writers that would become increasingly critical of the Arts Council's subsidization of postwar culture. Having witnessed Johnson's faltering effort to transform the Society of Authors in 1973, Figes responded to the organizations' 'ineffectual handling of the PLR issue' by joining the Writers' Guild when the

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[42] Figes, 'Authors' Lives'.
[43] Bill Webb, 'Calder vs. the old boys', in *In Defence of Literature: For John Calder: Fifty Years of Publishing Literature, Politics, and the Arts* (Toronto: Mosaic, 1999), pp. 61-66, p. 66.
[44] Eva Figes, *B* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).
[45] Nicholas de Jongh, 'Writers in protest over PLR', *Guardian*, 24 April 1975, p. 5.
[46] Eva Figes, *Little Eden: A Child at War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978).

union opened its membership to book authors in 1974.[47] Figes's membership prompted her participation in Maureen Duffy and Brigid Brophy's campaigns for the introduction of the Public Lending Right. In an article entitled 'Battle of the books' from 1976, Figes argues for the bill by emphasizing that its value lies 'not so much in the money involved' – 'for a writer like myself the struggle to survive financially will not be resolved by PLR payment' – but rather in its potential to transform the relationship between authors and their audience:

> I would regard it [PLR] as long overdue public recognition of the fact that by writing books which are freely available to the public at large, I am rendering a public service which deserves to be rewarded and recognised.
> Writers work in lonely isolation out of an inner conviction which needs to be confirmed by the society to which they address themselves. […] To deny authors PLR at this moment would be to fuel feelings of alienation to which writers are anyhow all too prone.[48]

Figes's comments could be read as an implicit acknowledgment of how her early experimental fiction failed to address an audience; they hint that the cultural community created by the Arts Council ensured the survival of some authors and propelled the 'alienation' of others.

In a recent tribute to Figes, Nick Yapp shed lights on how, in the late 1970s and 1980s, she went on to promote 'the welfare and standing of writers in society' through her involvement in the Writers' Guild. Yapp highlights, for instance, that in 1976 Figes and Tim Jeal, 'worked together to draw up a draft Minimum Terms Agreement (MTA) between writers and publishers' – a 'mammoth task' that was made more difficult by 'the struggle to persuade publishers to accept the MTA'.[49] Moreover, when the organization called for the resignation of the Arts Council's director, Charles Osborne, in 1981, Figes was presented as its spokesperson having assumed the role of the chair of the Guild's Book Committee; the Writers' Guild's demand came in light of the plans to reduce literary grants and McGuigan's controversial report of the body's funding operations.[50] The tensions between Figes's calls for the public recognition of authors and the Arts Council underlines the paradox that the institution which had been a crucial

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[47] Eva Figes, 'B. S. Johnson', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 5:2 (1985), 70-71, p. 71.
[48] Eva Figes, 'Battle of the books', *Guardian*, 9 November 1976, p. 9.
[49] Nick Yapp, 'Books and Poetry: Eva Figes 1932-2012', 12 September 2012, <http://www.writersguild.org.uk/news-a-features/books/325-eva-figes-1932-2012>
[50] See Nicholas de Jongh, 'Writers demand talks on grants', *Guardian*, 23 April 1981, p. 2. For McGuigan's report see chapter one.

source of support for experimental writing also hampered the creation of conditions in which it could survive in postwar British culture.

The Feminist Counterpublic and the Mainstream in *B*

We can see how Figes's experimental fiction haunted the cultural communities constructed by the Arts Council and the nascent feminist movement by considering the rhetoric of failure articulated in her novel *B.* Figes's fourth novel is, in Stuby's words, 'a highly reflexive novel in the vein of what would today be called meta-fiction'.[51] The novel presents Paul Beard's attempt to write a novel about his deceased friend and fellow writer identified as 'B.'. As if to offer a critical reflection on the shaky relationship between Figes's early fiction and a feminist counterpublic, *B*'s first-person narrative fragments as Beard recognises that his second wife, Judith, has 'disappeared'.[52] *B* draws attention to the subordination of women through the 'fetishization' of the author. At the beginning of the novel, Judith is seen as a 'helpless satellite' (p. 13) to the 'comfortable living' Beard's books have 'earned' him (p. 31); in Beard's view, '[Judith] enjoys being married to a famous author', although the 'real awe she accords [Beard] as an author […] does not stop her from feeling that the attention I give to my work should really be given to her' (p. 7). The text's representation of gender inequities is offset against and in tension with the faltering reception of B.'s work, which echoes arguments against the state's subsidization of literature; Beard recalls 'a publisher's party' where a 'girl', employed by a publishing firm, told him that '[t]he money they had lost on [B.'s writing] would have kept a deprived family in luxury for years' (p. 19). Beard's guilt about the financial security his fiction has brought him is captured by his presentation of B. 'fl[inging] out his right arm, spilling whisky, and declar[ing] "You do not make it possible for me to continue to exist"' (p. 31), and the 'dark , depressing hallway […], threadbare and dangerous' (p. 44), that leads to the 'infested walls' (p. 46) of the place in the city where B. writes. The novel's hesitant appeals to recognise its account of the pressures of the postwar cultural community as well as its nascent feminism is evoked by Beard's discovery, during his search for Judith, that she 'had difficulty spelling', and could not spell 'supernumerary' (p. 62); the word suggests an inability to keep pace with the commercial pressures of the mainstream and its rendering of subsidized writers as non-existent, while its misspelling insinuates a rhetoric of failure that might preserve the appeal of the otherness of other persons. Indeed, the echo of 'B.' in Paul's surname 'Beard' foreshadows the failure that comes to haunt the narrative, as it calls for an ear to hear who will not B-eard or be heard in the text.

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[51] Stuby, 'Eva Figes's Novels', p. 106.
[52] Figes, *B*, p. 53. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.

Where the representation of B. as a deceased friend and ideal double of Beard's authorship indicates how a character can be incorporated into a fiction – 'because [B.] is dead I now have a duty to make him exist on the page, use my memory' (p. 31) – Judith resists narration. Paul's admission that 'Judith has disappeared' (p. 53) sparks a breakdown of 'his male egotism' (p. 31) insured by his writing a novel on B. Beard's acknowledgment of Judith's disappearance makes the narrative's focus on B. stutter, as the verb 'to be' goes missing for a moment in Beard's note, 'My wife, not a character in one of my novels. That was the rub' (p. 58). In Beard's narrative, Judith seems to 'rub' out and unsettle (or rub against) the question provoked by the allusion to *Hamlet*, and draws attention to the narrator's collapse:

> I recalled those lectures I used to give to literature groups a decade or so ago. You see, I tried to explain, although I have known my wife for two years and lived with her, that does not mean I could possibly really know her. The notion of character is a false concept (p. 58).

Disturbed by his fiction's failure to know, and thereby possess and neutralize the alterity of Judith, Beard's writing begins to fracture as he notes how 'I had lost my bearings, that my mind was beginning to move in absurd circles instead of progressing steadily from A to B' (p. 63). The way Judith 'ke[eps] receding, eluding [Beard's] grasp', her face 'no more than a white blank', insinuates the violence of a determination to possess Judith (p. 116). With Beard's writing faltering, the narrative is arrested with the sudden emergence, mid-sentence, of the 'angle of curved chin and throat, the sound gurgled down inside as, her mouth momentarily thrown open, she gasped for breath, panting no, no' (p. 117). The blank page that follows echoes Judith's face reduced to a 'white blank', and suggests the breakdown of Beard's virile attempt to grasp Judith is haunted by the breathless gasp of a call to responsibility coming from the other person.

B's appeal to overhear a 'gasp' as a rift in Beard's narrative on B. illuminates how the rhetoric of failure in Figes's fiction unsettles her experimental fiction's alignment with the formation of the feminist counterpublic, which, as we have seen, *Patriarchal Attitudes* helped to shape. In contrast to how Figes's polemic states that women's exclusion 'from education and public affairs' has resulted in her voice approximating 'a vast black ocean of silence stretching back into the past', the gasp in *B* offers a response to this silence without ignoring how the significance of the loss of women in history may be beyond recovery.[53] *B*'s sensitivity to the

[53] Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, p. 152.

difficulty of, in Figes's terms, 're-angl[ing]' history so as to acknowledge how 'half the population is never mentioned in official History' is evident in its doubling of the death of Judith with Beard's first wife, Martha. Where the text hints that Beard suffocated Judith, Figes leaves open the possibility that Martha's death from '"a high consumption of alcohol combined with sedatives"' may have been '"accidental"' (p. 143), which implicitly thwarts Beard's virility by reiterating how 'forces beyond [his] control conspired to undo [his] efforts' (p. 23).

'Writers Reading' and the Nouveau Roman

Another public through which we can explore the uncertain survival of Figes's work is suggested by the overlap between the circulation of European avant-garde texts in the postwar literary scene and 'Writers Reading'. Calder suggests that Figes contributed to his attempt 'to try to form a group of writers, including Ann [Quin], into a school like the *nouveau roman* in France and the *Gruppe 47* in Germany'.[54] Figes reiterates Calder's description of the faltering formation a group of postwar British experimental writers in her contribution to the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*'s focus on Johnson's work. Figes states that she has 'only once in [her] life belonged to something which could be called a literary group, and that came to an end with the death of B. S. Johnson':

> Ann Quin had killed herself by swimming out to sea only weeks before, and shortly after these two deaths Alan Burns, closer to both of them than I had ever been, chose to dig himself into an American university, and stayed there. Their loss still makes me feel solitary, and bereft.[55]

She goes on to give a description of the way 'Ann, Alan, and [herself]' 'shared with [Johnson]' 'the belief that the seamless "realist" novel is not only not realistic but a downright lie', while foregrounding the differences between their works:

> The four of us had very different talents and preoccupations, but we shared a common credo, a common approach to writing. All of us were bored to death with mainstream "realist" fiction at a time when, in England, it seemed the only acceptable sort. We were concerned

[54] Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 274.
[55] Figes, 'B. S. Johnson', p. 70.

> with language, with breaking up conventional narrative, with "making it new" in our different ways. We all used fragmentation as a starting point, and then took off in different directions.[56]

Figes connects the group's failure to concur with a public to 'the prevailing climate of the period', namely 'English conservatism and insularity'; she supports her claim by contrasting it to the way, 'abroad, writers like Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Grass, and Borges were doing their best work'.[57]

We can explore the significance of Figes's experimental text's apparent failure to emulate the small audience Calder and Boyars created for the nouveau roman in postwar Britain by drawing on Burns's interview with Figes. In Burns's introduction, Figes's work is said to follow Nathalie Sarraute's 'The Age of Suspicion', and its description of 'specific perceptions as they register themselves on a flawed sensory apparatus, and […] the small but significant movements in consciousness'.[58] Lucien Goldmann's commentary on papers given by Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute at a conference in Brussels provides a way to explore the relationship between Figes's experimental novels and Sarraute's work. Goldmann counters the accusation that the 'nouveau roman' is 'a set of purely formal experiments' and an 'attempt to evade social reality' by impressing that Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet consider their fiction 'as born out of an effort […] to grasp, in its most essential way, the reality of our time'.[59] Goldmann's analysis of the 'social transformations that […] created the need for a new novel form' offers another way to understand how Figes's fiction's misrecognition by the public insinuates that her work is knotted up in her responsibility to others. Goldmann claims that 'reification' in 'the liberal society' has 'reduced […] trans-individual values, transforming them into properties of things and left as essential, manifest human reality only the individual'.[60] Consequently, Goldmann suggests that 'the humanist creation that […] correspond[s] to the reificational structure of liberal society [is] the history of the problematic individual as expressed in Western literature from *Don Quixote* to Stendhal and Flaubert'.[61] In Goldmann's view, Sarraute's focus on 'interhuman relations' avoids 'the reifying illusion' encapsulated by the novel's focus on the individual by 'limit[ing] the world of her works to the only domain in which she can still find

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[56] Figes, 'B. S. Johnson', p. 71, p. 70.
[57] Figes, 'B. S. Johnson', p. 71, p. 70, pp.70-71.
[58] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 31.
[59] Lucien Goldmann, 'The Nouveau Roman and Reality', in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (London: Tavistock, 1975), pp. 132-55, p. 132.
[60] Goldmann, 'The Nouveau Roman', p. 138.
[61] Goldmann, 'The Nouveau Roman', p. 138.

the reality that seems to her to be essential': 'the feelings and human experience *anterior* to all expression, to what she calls tropisms, sub-conversation, sub-creation'.[62]

A comparison between Sarraute's outline of 'tropisms' and Figes's reflections on her prose affirms how her writing was orientated towards a responsibility for others. *Tropisms* (1963) resembles, in Sarraute's words, a 'collection of prose poems'.[63] Similarly, Figes recalls that the 'starting point' for her fiction was the realization that 'you can write non-poetry in a poetic way': 'it [the novel] should be in some way poetic'.[64] Sarraute explains that she called her first book 'tropisms' to reflect how it was 'made up of a series of movements': 'the instinctive, irresistible nature of the movements, which are produced in us by the presence of others, or by objects from the outside world'.[65] Figes's poetics echoes Sarraute's insofar as we consider her fiction's answerability for 'her survival as a whole human being'[66] through her aim 'to make a direct emotional impact through prose' and 'hint at things, to say more than one thing at once' in a similar way to 'the indirectness of music'.[67]

The historical context in which Sarraute formulates her conception of 'tropisms' serves as an introduction to the final way in which this chapter considers the survival of Figes's experimental fiction. Sarraute proposes that the need to find a way to register an orientation to other persons in prose is pressing because we have, in her words, 'entered the age of suspicion'.[68] Where 'character' had been 'the meeting ground' of author and reader, Sarraute suggests that in modern fiction 'not only are they wary of the character, but through him, they are wary of each other'.[69] With the collapse of the notion of 'character', fiction 'has now become the converging point of their [the author and reader's] mutual distrust, the devastated ground on which they confront each other', and Sarraute links this development to the idea 'that today's reader prefers accounts of actual experiences […] to the novel'.[70] Sarraute summarises fiction's need to answer for its seeming dissociation from others and the world by asking, '[w]here is the invented story that could compete with […] those of the Concentration Camps, or the Battle of Stalingrad?'.[71] In 1978 Figes echoed Sarraute by accusing English fiction and its

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[62] Goldmann, 'The Nouveau Roman', p. 139.
[63] Nathalie Sarraute, *Tropisms and the Age of Suspicion* (London: John Calder, 1963), p. 7.
[64] Figes, 'Authors' Lives'.
[65] Sarraute, *Tropisms*, p. 9.
[66] Figes, 'Note', p. 114.
[67] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 35.
[68] Sarraute, *Tropisms*, p. 85.
[69] Sarraute, *Tropisms*, p. 85.
[70] Sarraute, *Tropisms*, p. 85, p. 89.
[71] Sarraute, *Tropisms*, p. 89.

commitment to 'the social realist tradition' as having refused to acknowledge 'the harsher lessons of the twentieth century'.[72]

Postwar German-Jewish Survivors and Figes's 'Poetry of the Inarticulate'

We can elucidate how the survival of Figes's fiction evokes its uncertain relationship to a problematic identity, which was actuely concered with the 'attempt to come to grips with the problems of the second half of the twentieth century', by drawing on her accounts of her family's escape from Nazi Germany, and their housemaid's survival there, in *Little Eden* (1978), *Tales of Innocence and Experience* (2003) and *Journey to Nowhere* (2008).[73] Figes's family's escape from Germany in March 1939 and their adaptation to living in England is presented in her record of her evacuation in Cirencester. *Little Eden* describes her family's attempt 'to hide, become English', having left Germany when Figes's father's business trip resulted in him having to be bribed out of Dachau concentration camp.[74] Leaving family and their housemaid, Edith, behind in Germany, the first rule of adapting to life in England was to 'never speak German'; the 'language of [Figes's] childhood had become the tongue of lunatics and maniacs' and she 'always gave "stateless" as [her] nationality'.[75] When she and her younger brother were evacuated to a small boarding school in Cirencester, Figes recalls how she was deeply unsettled by a fellow boarder labelling her 'a Jew'; Figes, who 'had never heard the word before, and […] did not know what it meant', was horrified that 'other people [could] know things about me that I did not myself'.[76] The 'identity' that Figes's fellow boarder 'had planted on [her] so bewilderingly' made Figes increasingly aware of '[u]named tensions' within her family: 'things unsaid, hinted at, a dark horror at the heart of the family which could not be spoken about but brooded over the dining table, turned small disputes about everyday trifles into momentous schisms'.[77] Where Figes notes that her family appeared to be among the 'Jewish refugees [who] applied for British citizenship and were naturalized',[78] Figes's 'naturalization' was undone by the way her relationship to her German-Jewish identity became 'less [of] a mystery and [a] terrible reality'.[79] When she was twelve her mother 'gave [her] ninepence and

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[72] Figes, 'The State of Fiction', p. 39.
[73] Figes, 'The State of Fiction', p. 39.
[74] Figes, *Little Eden*, p. 19, p. 14.
[75] Figes, *Little Eden*, p. 19, p. 22.
[76] Figes, *Little Eden*, p. 73.
[77] Figes, *Little Eden*, p. 129.
[78] Eva Figes, *Tales of Innocence and Experience: An Exploration* (Rothly: W. F. Howes Ltd., 2003), p. 128.
[79] Figes, *Little Eden*, p. 130.

sent [her] to the local cinema. "Go and see," she said'.[80] Figes offers the following description of the moment that she 'came down the steps of the Odeon', 'mute, tearful and stupefied', having viewed the newsreel of Belsen concentration camp and the images of 'dazed survivors with huge haunted eyes'[81]:

> everything was suddenly distant, alien […]. I had lost my tongue. I could not speak a word of the language I had learned. I felt it was a lie, the bank on the corner, the municipal flowerbed, the bus stop.[82]

For years after Figes was haunted by a recurring dream: 'the day of departure, a grey March morning, small figures waving from the edge of the airfield while we waited for the plane to take off'.[83]

Figes's work's faltering address to German-Jewish survivors in postwar Britain is reflected by the word that closes her account of Edith's survival; Figes uses the word '*verschollen*' – 'Disappeared, missing, lost. But not forgotten' – to suggest 'the lack of a satisfactory ending' for Edith's story and the way it 'troubles [her] profoundly'.[84] This absence of a sense of closure is also presented in Figes's recollection of the way she tried 'to understand the incomprehensible by reading a copy of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* as soon as it was published' in 1961.[85] Figes reports how she felt numbed reading 'every last footnote' of the '[c]old matter of fact' history, which was 'ruthlessly in control' of its presentation of the '[l]ogistics of killing, organizational structures, industrial complicity, officialese'.[86] Similarly, Figes emphasizes her unease at the 'rational self [that] seeks to comprehend the incomprehensible', and acknowledges how 'reason loses its grip' when it is overwhelmed by '[t]he dead [that] are waving goodbye but will not let go'.[87] Figes's evocation of how the 'dead are waving goodbye, but will not let go' could be considered as an instance when her address to German-Jewish survivors fails.[88] Though the moment when, for Figes, 'reason loses its grip' and 'fails' to 'comprehend the incomprehensible' is rendered in her

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[80] Figes, *Little Eden*, p. 131.
[81] Figes, *Little Eden*, p. 131.
[82] Eva Figes, *Journey to Nowhere: One Woman Looks for the Promised Land* (London: Granta 2008), p. 122, pp. 122-123.
[83] Figes, *Journey to Nowhere*, p. 10.
[84] Figes, *Journey to Nowhere*, p. 184.
[85] Figes, *Innocence and Experience*, p. 131.
[86] Figes, *Innocence and Experience*, p. 132.
[87] Figes, *Innocence and Experience*, p. 133.
[88] Figes, *Innocence and Experience*, p. 133.

memoirs as a linguistic and epistemological impasse – 'I had lost my tongue. I could not speak' – it signals how a similar rhetoric of failure is employed in her experimental fiction, which could be used to rethink their survival.[89]

One way to draw out the significance of Figes's stuttering attempt to come to terms with her own and other's identity as German-Jewish survivors is provided by her early experimental fiction, which implicitly explores the stammers and silences that troubled Figes's relationship to this fragile identity. In her memoirs Figes notes in passing that '[w]hen the tension [within her family] became too much and the storm finally broke, I found myself like a lightening conductor, suddenly charged with what for me became a guilt of horrendous proportions'.[90] Figes's description of her childhood evokes her second novel, *Winter Journey*; the description of her family tensions as a storm charged with guilt parallels *Winter Journey*, which was inspired by, and took its title from, Franz Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise* and its presentation of 'an old person, lonely and rejected by society' exposed to a winter landscape.[91] Since Figes chose 'to work with an old person, because everyone who survives becomes old, it's a common experience', we could consider the novel as a tacit attempt to articulate the tensions that troubled Figes's view of herself as a German-Jewish refugee in postwar England. Failure in *Winter Journey* provides a way to track how Figes's fiction explored the difficulty of surviving; as we shall see, the text enacts a breakdown in subjectivity to evoke an approach of the other providing a way to reread the obscurity of Figes's work's relationship to the public.

Figes intimates at her texts's rhetoric of failure in her discussions of *Winter Journey*. In her interview with Burns, Figes notes that, after 'read[ing] [William] Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* [(1929)]', she 'wanted to write a book about being old, the defective human being'.[92] *Winter Journey* presents Janus Stobbs, an old and lonely person not far from death, and all but deaf, as he survives a day in London; he visits a library, his daughter (Nan), before returning to his rented room. In a review of the novel, Robert Nye suggests that 'all the odds and sods of Janus's pointless existence are drawn together in a jerky, rambling style that is […] reminiscent of Beckett in that it makes a kind of poetry of the inarticulate'.[93] Figes's text's 'poetry of the inarticulate' emphasizes the aural – 'somehow you have to have an ear for it [language]' – and the discontinuities and ambiguities to which it gives rise.[94] During the composition of *Winter Journey*, Figes reveals that she suffered from 'a bad abscess in one ear' and was 'shock[ed]' to

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[89] Figes, *Innocence and Experience*, p. 133, p. 122.
[90] Figes, *Little Eden*, p. 129.
[91] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 35.
[92] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 34, p. 35.
[93] Nye, 'A dull head', p. 7.
[94] Figes, 'Eva Figes: An Interview', p. 184.

find that 'deafness wasn't silence'.[95] The experience accentuated Figes's sensitivity to the limits of one's senses as well as the alterity of others: '[w]e live in different worlds. The child's perceptions are so fantastically different from the adult's, the sick person's from the healthy'.[96] Figes's recognition that '[w]e are all defective though we don't think we are' is reflected in her novel's sound texture, which resounds with cracks and stutters; we might read the onomatopoeia of its opening lines as symptomatic of how Figes attempted to 'make a direct emotional impact through prose, to break through the rational prose structures'[97]: 'Numm bll num mun ssooo sss tck. I dreamt, that was it. Not a soul about'.[98] The sounds and echoes of *Winter Journey*'s prose demand that, in Bill Webb's words, 'we feel the stammer of that old heart, […] as if we had inherited […] the pain of all his experience, and the pulse of will that keeps him going'.[99] In the reading that follows I will set out how *Winter Journey's* 'poetry of the inarticulate' amplifies the vulnerability of a faltering sensibility, which unhinges its address to a public with an exposure to the alterity of the other.

My readings of Figes's experimental texts, *Winter Journey* and *Konek Landing* (1969), expand on Silvia Pellicer-Ortin and Susana Onega's interpretations of the centrality of a language of affect in Figes's fiction. In an essay that aligns Figes's work with 'Trauma Studies', and its affiliation with the 'ethical turn in literary criticism and philosophy', Pellicer-Ortin asks whether Figes's early experiments anticipated 'the turn to ethics experienced by literary criticism and moral philosophy in the late 1980s'.[100] In her reading of *Winter Journey*, which investigates how we might consider Janus as 'suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', Pellicer-Ortin proposes that 'the sheer difficulty in unravelling the plot […] brings to the fore Janus's utter Otherness'.[101] Pellicer-Ortin concludes her poststructuralist and psychoanalytic reading of *Winter Journey* by drawing a parallel between Dominick LaCapra's 'concept of empathic unsettlement' and Levinas's 'ethics of alterity'; the text 'establishes a Levinasian "face-to-face relationship" between readers and characters', which 'makes it impossible for readers to identify with [Janus], while at the same time the extreme emotionality of the events narrated beg for the readers' empathic unsettlement'.[102] The reading of *Winter Journey* that follows builds on Pellicer-Ortin's work by stressing how Figes's 'poetry of the inarticulate'

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[95] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 36.
[96] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 36.
[97] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 36, p. 35.
[98] Eva Figes, *Winter Journey* (London: Faber, 1967), p. 9. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.
[99] 'Winning Work of Fiction', *Guardian*, 25 November 1967, p. 3.
[100] Silvia Pellicer-Ortin, 'The Ethical Clock of Trauma in Eva Figes's *Winter Journey*', in *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction* (New York: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 37-60, p. 42.
[101] Pellicer-Ortin, 'The Ethical Clock of Trauma', pp. 37-60, p. 60.
[102] Pellicer-Ortin, 'The Ethical Clock of Trauma', p. 59, p. 60.

enacts a collapse of 'rational prose structures' through its presentation of Janus's hearing. In a sleepless early morning we listen to '[t]hat train, I couldn't have heard that train, not without my aid on. And yet I always hear it, I always have heard it, every night in the small hours' (p. 11). The text impresses what Janus will 'hear' even if there is nothing to be heard, as Janus's hearing does and does not depend on whether he has turned on his hearing aid. Moreover, Figes's emphasizes how, for Janus, 'reason comes to a stop, isn't a straight line, is so far, then it ties itself in knots, no one could disentangle them again' (p. 15). Janus's vulnerability to being lost in misconceptions of the welfare state – symbolized by the 'hearing aid' – is stressed in his despairing question, 'What happened to the care? No one left over to. Throw out and start again, that's their motto. They' (p. 47). Janus's exasperation at his sense of an impersonal consensus – 'Who are they […]?' (p. 47) – is fractured by the missing voices that haunt his hearing. Where the 'hearing aid' may resound with the idea that the reader could be here to aid Janus, the uncertainties that resound through the text suggests that the exposure to his hearing (or trial of conscience) is disturbed by the alterity of the other.

The ambiguities of the sounds that resound through *Winter Journey*'s rhetoric of failure are evident in the text's presentation of the persistence of missing voices. When we are introduced to Nora, Janus's partner, it seems as though she is present beside Janus: 'Nora stirring by now, grumbling about me having to get up, awake anyway, but grumbling' (p. 12). The present continuous 'stirring', 'grumbling' and the immediacy announced by 'now' (p. 12) gives the impression that Nora is with Janus in his room. It is only when Janus's landlady, Maggie Griffin, is heard complaining through a wall that we are informed of Nora's absence: 'should have given the old codger notice, he's no use to himself or anyone else. [...] Should have tied his notice to quit on Nora Stobb's wreath' (pp. 17-18). Janus, alone, is left with an echo of Nora's view of 'who is to blame for hard times': 'Men, she'd say in her rock bottom voice, all you can do is kill each other and then come home and give us more kids to fill the gap. Women' (p. 25). Reverberations of Nora's voice trouble Janus's hearing, highlighting his part in the violence and self-interest of men. Janus's son Ted is said to have had 'no time for' the former's interest in clock mechanics, the 'precision, care involved' (p. 64), as the latter moved to Australia to 'sell fast' (p. 64). However, Janus's bitterness towards his son wavers as Nora's voice resurfaces, stating 'You drove him, she said, you drove him as far as he could go' (p. 64). Janus's guilt at driving people away is compounded by his anonymity in the speed and cacophony of London's traffic. With 'noise coming from all directions', the city is 'all too fast for' Janus as he finds himself 'only half-way across' the road while the lights have already sped through 'green and then amber to red' (p.46). When someone helps him across the road, Janus repeats his plea, 'What happened to the care?', but receives little support in the words that meet him: 'Come on, Dad, let's get across, shall we? Haven't got all day. All day' (p. 63). That the

passerby addresses Janus as 'Dad' augments how the pressure of the traffic's noise drives his growing sense of guilt through voices from missing times; they do not have 'all day' for him. Janus's relationship with his son impinges again when Nora's earlier rebuttal, 'You drove him' (p. 64), works its way into the re-emergence of how 'Ted drove him to it' (p. 81): '[Ted's] face so stark white and I could hear him say Dad Hit Me Mum when Nora got in. And he didn't' (p. 81). The clash and collusion of the sounds of lost voices and 'boom[ing]' (p.59) traffic driving into Janus makes the text tremble, as it barely holds together the 'pressure of noise in the head' (p. 59), a 'frail wall between two seas of sound' (p. 42).

Where Janus's relation to Ted tremors with the return of words heard and not said, and which typify Nora's claim that men 'kill each other' (p. 25), Janus's relationship with his daughter, Nan, echoes Nora's image of women as posited in the 'gap' to which men 'come home' (p. 25). Unnerved that Janus's parcel of washing includes Nora's skirt, Nan exclaims '"Are you out of your mind?"' (p. 70), before questioning Janus further: '"You didn't expect me to wash it, did you?"' (p. 71). The questions strike Janus with the 'gap' (p. 25), the emptiness of the home and domestic role defining and closing his relation to his daughter; Janus 'can't let her in, not that she wants. But when people say that they mean: my own daughter. The shame' (p. 71). The moment is followed by another desperate, unvoiced statement, 'I'm your father' (p. 71). The fact that what Janus would say he cannot say, and that this unsaid reverberates in his hearing, insinuates the appeal of another time dislocating his own: 'Janus did not answer, he could not answer. He stared at the red and white pattern on the table and weak tears ran down his face. Now there was no shame left' (p. 71). *Winter Journey* closes with the acknowledgement, 'Yes, but I hear her now and she can't hear me answer' (p. 118), as though its broken hearing admits it is overwhelmed by being out of time with an obligation to other persons.

Konek Landing

If we have followed an ethical discord in the fractured temporality insinuated by *Winter Journey*'s 'poetry of the inarticulate', it is important to reiterate how this language has been characterized in terms of the body; *Winter Journey* induces the disorientation of hearing in on an increasingly vulnerable mishearing. What seems to be at stake in Figes's representation of hearing Janus mishear is a fractured language of embodiment, which is sensitive to the temporal disjunction implied by the address of the other. Levinas's description of 'ethical subjectivity' as a 'living human corporeality, as a possibility of pain, a sensibility which is of itself the possibility of being hurt' emphasizes the body's (de)position in his conception of the ethical

relation to the other; how the 'for-the-other (or sense) turns into by-the-other, into suffering by a thorn burning the flesh, but *for nothing*'.[103] These descriptions of the body's vulnerability, sensibility, exposure to the other person also draw attention to the corporeality of Levinas's language insofar as his text enacts the way the 'subject in saying approaches a neighbor in expressing itself, in being expelled, in the literal sense of the term, no longer dwelling'.[104] As Levinas reiterates in *Otherwise than Being*, the 'unsayable saying' lets 'itself be reduced, without effacing the unsaying in the ambiguity or the enigma of the transcendent, in which the breathless spirit retains a fading echo'.[105] The breathlessness of Levinas's text, and the trace of the other it evokes, is suggested by the restless rewritings and iterations of his work. As we shall see, Levinas's conception of language as a disrupted mode of embodiment helps follow the rhetoric of failure in Figes's *Konek Landing*.

Figes suggests that '[o]n a personal level [*Konek Landing*] dealt with the extermination of the Jews'; she 'never thought about [her] German-Jewish past again in the way [she] did before [she] wrote that book'.[106] The text concerns Stefan Konek, who, in Figes's words, as 'a survivor of the ghetto and an orphan, [eventually] finds himself in a veterans' home for German soldiers'.[107] Figes recalls how John Berger felt the '"book makes a physical impact on you"', which was 'what [Figes] was trying to do' by 'pushing language to its limits', and emphasizing its 'sound texture'.[108] Onega approaches *Konek Landing* through Freud and Breuer's definition of trauma 'as a malfunctioning of the conscious memory triggered off by the subject's incapacity to react adequately to a shocking event'.[109] Comparing psychoanalytic 'talking cure' to 'the I-you relationship of narrator-narratee in testimonial writings', Onega proposes that 'the need of an adequate addressee to abreact trauma points to the double function of trauma narratives both as cathartic instruments of individual healing and as transmitters of trauma to those who have not directly experienced it'.[110] For Onega, in *Konek Landing* the 'resistance of the narration to express the traumatic events in linguistic terms is compensated for by the sustained use of archetypal symbols and the imposition of an all-encompassing mythical pattern that facilitates the transmission of trauma sensorially and empathically instead of logically'.[111]

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[103] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 51, p. 52.
[104] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 48-49.
[105] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 44.
[106] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 37.
[107] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 37.
[108] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 37, p. 37, p. 36, p. 37.
[109] Susana Onega, 'Affective Knowledge, Self-awareness and the Function of Myth in the Representation and Transmission of Trauma: The Case of Eva Figes' *Konek Landing*', *Journal of Literary Theory*, 6:1 (2012), 83-102, p. 83.
[110] Onega, 'Affective Knowledge', p. 83.
[111] Onega, 'Affective Knowledge', p. 83.

Where Onega's reading of trauma in *Konek Landing* considers the affect of trauma in relation to an 'adequate addressee', the recuperative structure of abreaction, and a 'compensatory' narrative strategy of symbols, the Levinasian reading that follows will read towards an ethical proximity to the other that haunts Figes's text. We might read in the text's rhetoric of failure reiterations of breathless collapses of the assumption of an embodied position, which insinuate a response to the ethical address of the other person.

The irreducible ethical discord stammered by *Konek Landing*'s faltering sensibility entails its disturbance of the publics to which it appeals. Onega's article supports this proposition in view of the text's problematic evocation of Figes's work's relationship to survivors of the holocaust; 'the affective knowledge […] transmitted to the readers' in *Konek Landing* comes 'at the cost of indirection and ambiguity, without truly contributing to the working through of the collective trauma of the Holocaust'.[112] We can tentatively expand on the fragility and loss that characterises *Konek Landing* by drawing on Figes's record of the conversations she had with her housemaid Edith, who survived in Berlin during the Second World War. In *Journey to Nowhere*, Figes recalls being unable to sleep when she was sixteen following a conversation with Edith as she found herself thinking 'of the faces' from her childhood in Germany: '[a]nd Edith, just one of the many, countless faces without names who had been part of a vanished world from which I had escaped. From which Edith too, had also resurfaced once more, clinging to us after the shipwreck'.[113] Figes's narrative recalls how Edith had told her of the places she was forced to take shelter: 'I had to go and live in a *Judenhaus*. One of those places they put Jews who had been turned out of their own homes. It was awful. I can't begin to tell you. Overcrowded everybody crammed together'.[114] Later in her account, Figes presents her recollection of hearing how, 'I [Judith] was spending most of my time in [a] cellar. About six of us were living down there' and how '[t]here was a young boy terrified of being called up and sent to the eastern front. By this time there were a lot of deserters, even though it was punishable by death'.[115] In her reconstruction of their conversations, Figes claims 'it became clear to me that Edith did not live in the real world. She was stuck in the past', and goes on to identify herself with those who 'find themselves having to confront ghosts from the past, lost ones who will not rest in peace, who have no resting place where we can place our offering'.[116]

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[112] Onega, 'Affective Knowledge', p. 83.
[113] Figes, *Journey to Nowhere*, pp. 100-101.
[114] Figes, *Journey to Nowhere*, p. 78.
[115] Figes, *Journey to Nowhere*, p. 95, p. 96.
[116] Figes, *Journey to Nowhere*, p. 106, p. 139.

We can see how *Konek Landing* anticipates *Journey to Nowhere*'s record of the fractured and restless time experienced by German-Jewish refugees in the postwar years through the contrast between the open-ended 'landing' of the text's title and the finality of the 'landed' presented at the end of the novel. In a care home for soldiers, who murmur, 'nobody cares about us', one voice is deliberately 'drowned' out, as he jeers, 'They all piled on top of one another, fighting for the last bit of air, so the kids and women landed down at the bottom'.[117] The solider, known as 'Brest', is presented 'breathing hard', 'toss[ing] his body about in the large chair, trying to find a comfortable position by pushing with his one arm' (p. 169). Figes impresses that 'the point about these soldiers' is that 'they [are] pathetic in a way': 'the soldiers are also victims'.[118] Stefan's repeated encounters with and departures from people bearing the absence of others culminates with these soldiers, to whom he cannot give any time as they exacerbate his attempt to evade his own position as a deserter of a navy. The text's stutter between times evoked by the difference between 'landing' and 'landed' is reiterated in Figes's description of the novel as pointing towards 'things in one's past that are like a thorn in one's flesh, and [how] they irritate'; the past as a thorn puncturing the body evokes how the time of the other unsettles one's assumption of a place to place a response to them.[119]

The narrative enacts the uncertainty of a body continually being undone by the appeal from persons beyond its own time; the text is split between Stefan's attempts to evade recognizing his status as a deserter of a navy somewhere in postwar Europe, and recollections of the places he fled as a child having survived the loss of his mother and father. The text's breathlessness is evident in the following excerpt from a sentence or paragraph that describes Stefan hiding from the police who wear 'uniform tunics':

> Legs beginning to prickle, back aching, feet dead how did I pass the time wriggling toes pee-ed into my pants once sniffing dipped fingers into the warm trickle licked at it how did I ever get through the first I was a caveman she suggested that so I wouldn't make a sound because the lion was prowling about outside in the forest waiting to get his jaws into me gobble me all up so I sat there very quiet for what must have been hours holding my breath listening men's voices once I heard them then I was really frightened they were shouting so I

[117] Eva Figes, *Konek Landing* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 168, p. 170, p. 169. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.
[118] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 38.
[119] Figes, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 38.

> thought if they take her away who is going to let me out no one started to cry then called out mummy softly at first then louder (pp. 17-18)

The way Stefan's memory of an attempt to fictionalize his situation as a 'caveman' hiding from 'the lion' cannot hold together in the restless body of the text indicates the failure of how, as Figes notes, 'the lie direct and the lie indirect [are] used to shield children, and on occasions ourselves, from unpalatable truths'.[120] Fictions at once enable Stefan's survival and pierce him with loss, as finding himself without his mother and father he is told 'of course mother or father will come back, but just for now you are going to have a nice holiday with auntie, and just for game you are going to have a new name. You are now Pavel Zuck' (p. 27). In a jarring premonition of Figes's *Journey to Nowhere*, Stefan's aunt is called 'Edith', who imposes a story on Stefan; its urgency and cautionary tone betray its collapse: 'Now, she warned your name is Pavel, remember, your father is dead, your mother has gone away to nurse her sister your aunt. Repeat that, let me hear you say it now' (p. 29). The iteration of 'now' that begins and ends the attempt to pin down Stefan's new identity draws attention to its dislocation by the passing of other times, obliquely and fleetingly acknowledged in the withdrawal of his mother and father.

Stefan's grounding in the space and time of the text is repeatedly unsettled by his encounter with women suffering the loss and ruin of men. In search of shelter, Stefan happens to mention his name to an elderly women, Nelly, who lost a son of his name '[m]any years ago now' (p. 69). Nelly insists that Stefan 'must come back with her', the former's 'eyes almost lashless watering', 'smell of her bad breath, small white hand clutching his arm' (p. 69). Stefan wakes in an 'airless room, push[ing] back the too hot feather quilt' and is told by Nelly that she has kept his 'butterfly collection' (p. 72). The suffocating domesticity – '[n]et curtains across the windows, stuffy, radiators full on' (p. 71) – escalates as Nelly places under Stefan's eyes 'his' butterflies, 'each creature the rusted pin stuck through its dry back, one wing dropped off, dust obscured, Latin label':

> Afraid to breath fearing that the expelled air the breath coming out of him would send the dusty grubs to their final disintegration him held with lungs caught holding the foul air pinned there the pin itself crusted with rust: pain through nerve ends, recognition, a collection of trivia uglier than old leaves, the last ray of a bygone summer it was

[120] Figes, *Innocence and Experience*, p. 92.

> better not to remember, light photons dead, the eye having seen
> nothing, a distant agony perpetuate (pp. 72-73).

The withdrawal of air tightens the text, which comes close to fainting in the juddering 'him held lungs caught holding', before hinting towards a pain and a fleeting memory 'it was better not to remember' (pp. 72-73). Stefan is confronted with his will to forget in a notebook of the man who has left Nelly and her daughter, Lili, reiterating his own unsettling position: '*But there is no one, nowhere to turn* […]. *Why should I waste my last breath in struggling to mitigate their guilt*?' (p. 79). The notebook, whose pages 'dropped off at the spine' (p. 78) and which Stefan has to hold 'carefully to stop them disintegrating, falling away from the central thread' (p. 79), evokes the collapse of the text's body in its attempt to respond and follow times that escape its breathing.

Konek Landing's escalation of its rhetoric of failure is enacted through the text's fragmentation that accompanies Stefan's arrest and imprisonment for deserting the navy; a 'number among other numbers' (p. 128), unsound sounds unravel the saying offered at the beginning of the novel: 'mens sana in corpore' (p. 20) ('a sound mind in a sound body'). The gaps in the text presents a faltering sensibility which exposes its exposure to the other person through a restless rehearing of times that have escaped being heard:

> Ears unstoppered now, the flaw in the cracked pot traced with one
> forefinger, soothing eyepads re-moved for dust, inflammatory, to
> irritate, scratch,
> and if rubbed
>
> Now the ship has arrived I am reluctant to leave,
> am in no condition for leaving
>
> How to
>
> Imagine I was not born (p. 135)

'Doubly aware of sounds' and with an ear for hearing what goes missing in its breathing, the text seems to go on in a 'halt' as though it were 'a heart missing a beat I have not heard before' (p. 136). The body of the text's tears between times, trying to hear 'a wisp of sound blown

away, impossible to say' (p. 156), intensifies its vulnerable sensibility as a move towards the other:

> he was tearing at the sur-
> face with his fingers, face pulled into a grimace, eyes
> inward, black, the awful itching, arm muscles pro-
> truding; perhaps it was only water, but sores gleamed
> in the falling light, running, probably suppurating
>
> up for air now (p. 143)

With Stefan having fallen overboard the ship that he had abandoned, the text's restless respiration still has time to call to the other escaping it:

> coughing dark drops choking on his own blood now ribs broken still
> breathing though harshly now fighting punctured agonies invading
> black perhaps tasting thick black oil spitting salt swallowing blood
> sobbing mother hold me tight screaming in the dark (p. 164)

The tears in the text may insinuate how it tries to address a public in an unheard of way through the fluidity of the blood and tears that reiterate how one must 'fail again, fail better' in answering to the call of the other person.

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The experimental texts that Figes produced following *Winter Journey*, *Konek Landing*, and *B* affirm her contention that 'things that [she] was repressing or keeping in the background in order to keep them under control were […] able to come out' after the publication of *Patriarchal Attitudes*.[121] In comparison to her early experimental fiction, *Days* (1974) and *Nelly's Version* (1977) are notable for their explorations of female subjectivities. The texts present what we might call 'limit experiences' to challenge constructions of gender. *Days*

[121] Eva Figes, interviewed by Olga Kenyon, in *Women Writers Talk: Interviews with Ten Women Writers*, ed. by Olga Kenyon (Oxford: Lennard, 1989), pp. 69-90, p. 76.

focuses on the immobility of an unnamed narrator as she lies in a hospital bed reflecting upon her relationships to her mother and daughter, and the oppressive silence signified by the 'chair intended for a visitor, should he come'; the woman's day is haunted by the refrain 'Nobody has come' (p. 13, p. 43, p. 77) as if to turn pain and muteness enforced by patriarchy back on itself.[122] *Days*'s attempt to present an embodiment of the silence imposed upon women could also be considered to act as an implicit challenge to liberal feminism's construction of a representative identity for women. Similarly, *Nelly's Version* offers a direct subversion of how, in Figes's view, 'self-consciously feminist fiction [was] hampering itself by taking off, being propagandist'.[123] In the text Figes plays on the protagonist's amnesia to upset the conventions of the psychological thriller and critique how reified notions of femininity were taking form through 'realist' texts and 'limit[ing] the imagination'.[124] Another striking feature of these later experimental texts is that both were reinvented for television and film in the decade after their publication; in 1981 Figes adapted *Days* for the BBC2 Playhouse series, while in 1983 *Nelly's Version* was made into a film by Maurice Hamilton with the help of Channel 4's financial backing.

Yet in spite of the Figes's later texts's exploration of new subjects and their circulation in different forms, the acute concern with the problems of surviving that permeates her early experimental fiction underpins the haunting legacy of her work. In response to a question about how she felt being viewed as 'one of the last survivors of the experimentalist tradition' during an interview from 1999, Figes spoke of how,

> I do feel alone [...]. I always thought that one of the good things about my situation is I'm ahead of my time, therefore when I get older I will come into my time, but that hasn't quite happened.[125]

Figes's early experimental fiction work, as something that came to soon and never arrived, may be symptomatic of its ethical dimension and how it calls us, in Levinas's words, to 'one who has come, to be sure, but left *before* having come'.[126] The disturbing thing about her work is that it leaves tears in its context of reception, unsettling its identification with a feminist counterpublic and its relationship to German Jewish refugees in England. This inquiry into the 'survival' of

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[122] Eva Figes, *Days* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 13, p. 43, p. 77.
[123] Figes, *Women Writers Talk*, p. 77.
[124] Figes, *Women Writers Talk*, p. 77.
[125] Figes, 'Eva Figes: An Interview', p. 182.
[126] Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma', p. 68.

Figes's early experiments has shown how its recovery in contemporary culture is vulnerable, shaky and uneasy, as whichever way we address and characterise it through publics we risk making her fiction, as Figes put it, part of a 'trade of reassurance'.[127] That is not to say that her fiction asks us to circumvent its uncertain role in the construction of what we might address, with varying degrees of confidence, as the publics of second-wave feminism, the commercial fiction market, the nouveau roman, and German-Jewish refugees in postwar Britain. The survival of Figes's early experimental fiction accentuates how a need to try to recover a body of literary work may emanate from the times of persons who we are unable to address or recall. In a comment from late in her career perhaps Figes captures the haunting survival of early experiments when she acknowledges, 'I always feel that a subject matter for a book is not the one that you choose but one that chooses you. You know, it's an idea that will not go away'.[128]

[127] Figes, 'Note', p. 113.
[128] Figes, 'Eva Figes: An Interview', p. 182.

3. 'Allornothinger': Quivers of Truths in the Experimental Fiction of B. S. Johnson

Introduction

Jonathan Coe concludes his biography of B. S. Johnson by observing that Johnson's theory – 'literature is about some telling of truth believed in by the author' – is 'untenable'.[1] Yet, for Coe, 'self-doubt' and 'vulnerability' 'made B. S. Johnson the artist he was': 'it was because he agonized over those novels […] that they quiver with nervous energy even now'.[2] It is interesting that Coe dismisses Johnson's truth-telling before suggesting that we can trace its failure to Johnson. A similar characterisation of Johnson's truth-telling is presented in some of the recent reappraisals of his fiction in literary studies. Philip Tew and Glyn White suggest that 'Johnson was in danger of being forgotten as a postmodernist who wasn't postmodern, and a realist who had rejected (conventional) realism' because of the 'awkward' way he 'prized truth in his writing'.[3] Following Coe, Tew and White suggest that there is something 'awkward' about Johnson's presentation of his truth even as they retain the idea that Johnson 'prized it in his writing'. Julia Jordan's foreword to the *Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson* (2013) echoes these interpretations:

> At the heart of his governing authorial injunction – to tell the truth – lies a perceptible trace of uncertainty, a concession of unease: while attesting a belief that truth can be represented, Johnson betrays his fear that it may be a mirage. Truth is an opaque thing, and Johnson's anxious attempts to fix it to the page are palpable in the works collected here.[4]

These readings may indicate how a concern to compensate for Johnson's critical neglect after his suicide in 1973 risks obscuring the significance of the failure of Johnson's truth-telling. What might go missing in this readiness to characterize the uncertainty of Johnson's truth-

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[1] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 169, p. 452.
[2] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 452.
[3] Glyn White and Philip Tew, 'Introduction: Re-Reading B. S. Johnson', in *Re-Reading B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Philip Tew and Glyn White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 3-13, p. 6.
[4] Julia Jordan, 'Foreword', in *Well Done God: Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. xv-xx, p. xvii.

telling in terms of his insecurity or willpower is an acknowledgement of the ways in which Johnson's work failed to address a public in the postwar literary scene.

This chapter suggests that the unease surrounding Johnson's truth-telling reflects how it was tenuously constructed through the appearance and circulation of his texts in the postwar public sphere. I aim to explore how the violent reactions and defensive recoils that characterized Johnson's truth-telling in postwar culture may have accentuated his work's susceptibility to the social injustices it tried to counter. I suggest that we can approach Johnson's truth-telling as a series of stuttering identities, which recapitulate the cultural and social forces that implicitly underlie their construction. My reading of Johnson's truth-telling is prompted by Wendy Brown's study *States of Injury* (1995), and its outline of

> what Nietzsche named the politics of *ressentiment*: Developing a righteous critique of power from the perspective of the injured, it delimits a specific site of blame for suffering by constituting sovereign subjects and events as responsible for the "injury" of social subordination.[5]

The congruity of reading Johnson's truth-telling as symptomatic of 'a politics of ressentiment' is suggested by his claim, from 1964, that he wrote out of 'a desire to get my own back on people who have hurt me' and 'repay in some indirect way those people who have helped me'.[6] A provisional guideline for this chapter's analysis of the construction of Johnson's truth-telling in the postwar literary scene is provided by Brown's suggestion that 'in believing truth-telling about our experiences to be our liberation […] we forget that this truth has been established as the secret to our souls not by us but by those who would discipline us through that truth'.[7]

The first part of the chapter sketches how Johnson's truth-telling struggled to realize itself through a selection of the different identities he tried to assume in the postwar literary scene: a campaigner for authors's economic rights, a journalist, and a creative writing fellow. Following Brown's work, I propose that the identity Johnson presents in his polemics and cultural writings presupposes his autonomy, and denies his social construction in such a way as to make his truth-telling vulnerable to producing a politics of ressentiment. In contrast, the rhetorical devices of

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[5] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 27.
[6] B. S. Johnson, 'Holes, Syllabics and the Succussations of the Intercostal and Abdominal Muscles', *Northern Review*, 1:2 (1966), reprinted in *Well Done God: Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 386-397, p. 386.
[7] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 42.

his experimental fictions impress that the presupposition of subjectivity underlying the presentation of his truth is dependent upon and constantly undone by its quivering address to others. This tension between the 'I' that asserts itself in Johnson's polemics and that which stammers in his experimental fictions could be at the root of the tendency to attribute the failure of Johnson's truth-telling to Johnson. Patricia Waugh suggests, for instance, that 'Johnson's 'search for a lost "sincerity", a truth to the inner human being"' shows how '[he] failed, tragically and inevitably, to get out from under a "net" which increasingly closed in on him until his suicide'.[8]

In a reading that breaks with this trend, Carol Watts argues that the 'lineaments [of Johnson's work] are to be read less in [its] authorial pronouncements, and more in the formal experiments of his writing'.[9] For Watts, 'the seeming egotism of that Johnsonian voice', permeated with 'its angers and points of impasse', betrays an 'encounter' with 'non-identity', which she compares to the 'Beckettian Not-I': '[t]he formal engagement with non-identity in Johnson's work becomes a means of forcing an encounter with those excluded from the conservative certainties of bourgeois life, even as they are made the object of those certainties'.[10] In the second half of this chapter, I suggest that we can reread the moments in which Johnson's truth-telling fails as the trace of an ethical encounter with those persons omitted from public discourse. I do this by offering readings of failure in his experimental texts through the poststructural revision of scepticism which, as Ziarek has shown, Levinas draws upon to support his ethics of the other. I will argue that the instances in which truth-telling fails in Johnson's experimental texts disturbs the publics upon which his truth-telling implicitly relies with an acknowledgement of having been called to respond to the other. My analysis of failure in Johnson's work outlines the following irony of his truth-telling; his polemics's politics of ressentiment reduces failure to a theme of different publics (or himself) in such a way as to obscure its ethical significance as a rhetoric in his texts. This double reading of failure in Johnson's work thus serves as a way to appreciate its haunting legacy; it warns against reading failure as a theme of Johnson's work, and inadvertently reinforcing polarizing identities and sites of blame. Instead it traces how failure in his experimental texts acts as a subtle acknowledgement of the other.

The chapter is structured through two readings of Johnson's famous introduction to his collection of shorter prose, *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (1973). The

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[8] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 98.
[9] Carol Watts, '"The Mind Has Fuses": Detonating B. S. Johnson', in *Re-Reading B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Philip Tew and Glyn White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 80-91, p. 87.
[10] Watts, '"The Mind Has Fuses"', p. 91, p. 82, p. 88.

first reading sketches how the truth-telling presented in Johnson's essays and cultural writings is predisposed to a politics of 'ressentiment' through its attempt to deny its dependence upon postwar publics. I offer an outline of Johnson's truth-telling as a series of faltering identities, whose unacknowledged reliance upon and reiteration of the norms of postwar publics precipitated the eclipse of the significance of failure in his work. The second reading of Johnson's 1973 introduction suggests that we could recover the moments in which Johnson's truth-telling fails as an insinuation of how his work disturbs postwar culture with a response to the ethical address of the other.

Identities of B. S. Johnson's Truth-Telling in the Postwar Public Sphere

In *States of Injury* Brown analyses contemporary American politics through Nietzsche's notion of 'ressentiment'. She outlines how social formations can lose their force and exacerbate the inequities they seek to redress by configuring themselves within the terms and procedures of state institutions. Exploring the limitations of identity-based politics in a range of American contexts, Brown highlights the 'irony that rights sought by a politically defined *group* are conferred upon depoliticized *individuals*; at the moment a particular "we" succeeds in obtaining rights, it loses its "we-ness" and dissolves into individuals'.[11] Brown examines this irony in different political contexts by calling upon Nietzsche's theory of 'ressentiment'. Brown elucidates that it is 'the prior presumption of the self-reliant and self-made capacities of liberal subjects, conjoined with their unavowed dependence on and construction by a variety of social relations and forces, that makes *all* liberal subjects […] vulnerable to *ressentiment*'.[12]

We can see how Johnson's truth-telling made itself vulnerable to producing a politics of ressentiment by considering the polemic he wrote months before his suicide. In his 1973 introduction, Johnson states that a 'useful distinction between literature and other writing for me is that the former teaches one something true about life'.[13] Where Johnson's 'truth-telling' foregrounds its resistance to '[t]elling stories' and 'fiction' by emphasising how '[l]ife is chaotic, fluid, random', his work's presupposition of the person to whom life happens makes it susceptible to ressentiment; Johnson contends he writes 'to come to terms with things that have happened to me', and insists that 'the only thing the novelist can […] call exclusively his own is the inside of his own skull'.[14] Brown highlights that the subject's presumption of their

[11] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 98.
[12] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 67.
[13] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 14.
[14] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 14, p. 12.

autonomy 'cast[s] the liberal subject into failure, the failure to make itself in the context of a discourse in which its self-making is assumed'.[15] Johnson's claim that 'I write because I have something to say that I fail to say satisfactorily in conversation, in person' reflects how his assumption of his autonomy underpins his writing, and sets his work up to perpetuate rather than compensate for his failure as a 'person'; Johnson regrets how he cannot sustain 'the sheer technical joy of forcing almost intractable words into patterns of meaning and form', since these patterns are only '(for the moment at least) mine'.[16] The way Johnson's truth-telling distorts and tacitly preserves his failure as his own is encapsulated by the exclamation, 'Such a hostage to fortune!', with which he dramatizes his insurmountable struggle to 'contain an ever-changing reality'.[17] Because the chaotic reality the novelist must contain is, for Johnson, 'their own', the novelist's failure to tell the truth about their life's chaos is intertwined with a similar response to that which, in Brown's reading of his work, Nietzsche calls 'suffering'. Johnson's statement that he writes to 'retaliate on those who have hurt me' and 'repay those who have helped me'[18] seems symptomatic of the way Nietzschean 'suffering' 'must either find a reason within itself (which redoubles the failure) or a site of external blame upon which to avenge its hurt and redistribute its pain'.[19] Johnson's assumption of his self-sufficiency spuriously intensifies his own failure to represent his chaos as it simultaneously aggravates his need to establish failures elsewhere; Johnson asserts that 'it must be a confession of failure on the part of any novelist to rely on that primitive, vulgar and idle curiosity of the reader to know "what happens next"', and suggests that '[w]here I depart from convention, it is because the convention has failed, is inadequate for conveying what I have to say'.[20] What is unfortunate about Johnson's polemics and his confrontations with the postwar literary scene is how their failure to realize his truth not only perpetuates his frustration at himself and others, but simultaneously obscures his work's rhetoric of failure.

Warner's theory may shed light on how we can consider Johnson's truth-telling as a series of stuttering identities, whose 'ressentiment' partly emanates from Johnson's refusal to admit his relationship to postwar publics.[21] In his 1973 introduction, Johnson asserts that 'to the extent a reader can impose his imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my (vision), not something conjured out of his own imagination'.[22] In contrast

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[15] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 67.
[16] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 18.
[17] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 19, p. 17.
[18] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 18.
[19] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 67.
[20] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 14 p. 19.
[21] Warner, *Publics*, p. 62.
[22] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 28.

to the conflict Johnson presents between a reader's imagination and '[his] words', Warner underlines that as a public 'is text-based' the formation of identities, such as 'author' and 'reader', depends upon them being conjured into being through a discourse shared with strangers; public speech is 'addressed to indefinite others, [and] in singling us out it does so not on the basis of our concrete identity but by virtue of our participation in the discourse alone and therefore in common with strangers'.[23] Johnson's response to 'the question of for whom I write' insinuates how the presentation of his 'I' and truth-telling relies upon its 'address to indefinite others', despite his attempt to confine his work's audience to himself:

> I am always sceptical about writers who claim to be writing for an identifiable public. How many letters and phone calls do they receive from this public that they can know it so well as to write for it? […] I think I […] have personally had about five letters from "ordinary readers", people I did not know already that is […].
>
> No, […] I write perforce for myself, and the satisfaction has to be almost all for myself […].[24]

Johnson's contention that a writer cannot write for a public without 'know[ing] it' is at odds with the 'No' that introduces the claim to 'write perforce for myself'; the vocative, 'No', betrays how his text's 'addressees are essentially imaginary' and 'exist by virtue of their address' even as 'No' tries to maintain that to write for a public a writer must 'know it'.[25] Warner connects this traditional and narrow understanding of the public as 'real persons in dyadic author/reader interactions'[26] with a 'particular language ideology': '[d]iscourse is understood to be propositionally summarizable; the poetic or textual qualities of any utterance are disregarded in the favour of sense'.[27] Warner suggests that this language ideology 'obscures the importance of the poetic functions of […] language', and enables 'the constitutive circulatory of publics to disappear from consciousness'.[28] Moreover, it neutralizes the 'stranger-relationality' of public discourse: '[s]trangers are less strange if you can trust them to read as you read or if the sense of

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[23] Warner, *Publics*, p. 67, p. 77-78.
[24] Johnson, 'Introduction', pp. 28-29.
[25] Warner, *Publics*, p. 73.
[26] Warner, *Publics*, p. 115.
[27] Warner, *Publics*, pp. 114-115, p. 115.
[28] Warner, *Publics*, p. 115.

what they say can be fully abstracted from the way they say it'.[29] The moment above encapsulates how Johnson's truth-telling relies on its refusal to admit his work's address to an audience, and obscures the significance of failure in his work by rendering it in terms of his identity or a knowable public. Johnson's work's denial of how its truth-telling exists by virtue of its address and being addressed by others makes it vulnerable to ressentiment because it sets up the opposition between his person and the public in such a way as to, in Brown's words 'fix[…] the identities of the injured and injuring as social positions'.[30] As we shall see, the identities of Johnson's truth-telling seem, as Brown puts it, to 'recycle and reinstate rather than transform the terms of domination that generated [them]', and obscure the significance of failure in his experimental fictions from himself and the public.[31]

The first identity through which Johnson's truth-telling struggled to establish itself in public is evident in Johnson's attempt to reform the Society of Authors. Johnson's assumption of the role of a spokesperson for authors's economic rights stemmed from his work's conflict with and reliance upon the dominant public of the postwar fiction market. In his 1973 introduction Johnson suggests that he needs 'to speak very clearly and very loudly' against the 'hundreds of thousands of readers' who 'gorge' the fictions produced by 'nineteenth-century novelists' because his words may be drowned out by 'the din of the marketplace vendors in pap and propaganda'.[32] Johnson's struggle with the mainstream reached its peak in the early 1970s, a time when, in Coe's words, 'the nuts and bolts of surviving in the literary marketplace' were the 'primary topic of conversation'.[33] Johnson vented his frustrations with authors's commercial subordination in an article on the Society of Authors in *Tribune* in June 1973. On the basis of the Society's surveys into writers's earnings in 1965 and 1973, which had revealed 'writers were now even worse off', Johnson claimed that the Society was 'to blame for this remarkable failure to defend the incomes of writers'.[34] The article asserts that '[t]he truth is that [the Society of Authors] is a weak, reactionary, badly-led organisation with a rigid, undemocratic structure that reduces its effectiveness to virtually nil. It is not a trade union'.[35]

A postcard Johnson received from his friend and fellow experimental writer, Burns, shortly after the article's publication hints at rebellion it inspired in other authors: 'I've just

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[29] Warner, *Publics*, pp. 115-116.
[30] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 27.
[31] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 7.
[32] Johnson, 'Introduction', pp. 15-16.
[33] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 132.
[34] B. S. Johnson, 'The Author's Plight – the Need for a Union', *Tribune*, (June, 1973), reprinted in *Well Done God: Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 461-464, p. 461.
[35] Johnson, 'The Author's Plight', p. 461.

joined the Society of Authors so if you need any help in overthrowing and trampling on the old guard please let me know'.[36] However, when Johnson followed up his article by making a speech at the Society's Annual General Meeting, a concern with finding a site upon which to vent his anger eclipsed a discussion of how authors might reinvent their relationship to the fiction market. Figes 'remember[s] sitting next to [Johnson] at a very rowdy […] Annual General Meeting of the Society of Authors where he called for the instant resignation of the entire Committee of Management'.[37] Having highlighted how 'authors are being picked off one by one because there is no support by their professional organisation', Johnson turned his attention to 'the composition of the Committee of Management':

> No doubt some of you are put off by the manner in which I have expressed my own dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs. […] Think for yourselves; and remember that if you vote against this action, or if you abstain, you are endorsing failure, a known, admitted and demonstrated failure by the administration over the last seven years. Do you want another seven years of failure? Something must be done to make the Society of Authors into a positive force for success on behalf of writers; and the first thing to do is to clear away the known failures.[38]

Johnson's motion failed by twenty votes to fifty-eight. The speech's criticism of the consensus politics of the Society's 'Committee of Management' (the committee was 'nominated by the existing committee' and through their 'close connections with publishing and bookselling') is weakened through, in Coe's words, the 'violence of Johnson's tone' and its attacks on 'individual Committee members'.[39] We might read the way in which Johnson eclipses his speech's address to others with his attempt to assign blame as indicative of how his polemic's presumption of his autonomy tries to fix the identities of the 'injured' and 'injuring'.

Johnson's failure to turn 'the Society [of Authors] into a trade union' echoes his earlier attempts to oppose the public of mainstream fiction through the formation of a writers's 'co-operative'.[40] In an article for *Socialist Commentary* from June 1965, Johnson claims that the

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[36] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/3.
[37] Figes, 'B. S. Johnson', p. 71.
[38] Quoted in Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 349, p. 347, p. 351.
[39] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 347.
[40] Johnson, 'The Author's Plight', p. 463.

view that 'English publishing is a "cottage industry"' is 'not quite true, for publishing in this country […] is in fact in economic terms closely comparable with very early capitalism'.[41] Johnson proposes that 'the basic producers of the wealth', or authors, 'combin[ing] to form a co-operative' 'would knock hell out of publishing as it is now' as '[a]ll profit from a book published by such a co-operative, once costs were covered, would go to the author'.[42] Moreover, Johnson stresses that '[t]he real capital would be the talent of the co-operating authors'.[43] A more detailed outline of Johnson's 'co-operative' appeared in an article in *New Society* in January 1969[44], and it fleetingly took form in July of the same year; 'Writers Reading's' booking pamphlet announced that '[t]he ten writers in the following brochure constitute the first co-operative group'.[45]

In a letter to Peter Redgrove from 1973 Johnson offers an insight into why 'Writers Reading' struggled to take off:

> [the co-operative] is in limbo at the moment because not enough co-operators came forward. My idea was that you needed at least ten professional writers to form the first; writers of established reputation. Only four presented themselves, and there was a certain amount of un-committedness amongst them.[46]

The creation of the co-operative may have been impeded as much by 'un-committedness' of its members as the reassertion of 'truth-telling' that its attempt to address a public incited. Burns recalls how Johnson was 'furious' with Quin's 'silent' reading at the group's first event at the ICA in November 1969; Burns suggests it was characteristic of 'the key quality of Bryan – integrity, or, if you like, truth-telling, he would not simply go with the fashion or the tide'.[47] Johnson's 'fury' may indicate how his recoil from an indefinite address to others – taken to its extreme by Quin's silence, which relies on others to characterize it – provoked his truth-telling in such a way as to put it in tension with the 'co-operative'. Indeed, Burns's depiction of Johnson's 'irrepressible integrity', and how he viewed 'himself as a very considerable writer', is

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[41] B. S. Johnson, 'Writing and Publishing: or, Wickedness Reveal'd', *Socialist Commentary* (June 1965), reprinted in *Well Done God: Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 377-381, p. 377.
[42] Johnson, 'Writing and Publishing', p. 380.
[43] Johnson, 'Writing and Publishing', pp. 380-381.
[44] See B. S. Johnson, 'A Living for Writers', *New Society*, 9 January 1969, p. 58.
[45] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39.
[46] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/10.
[47] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 405.

presented in close proximity to the way money was 'a measure of his success, it was like his everyday battle'.[48] A similar point is made by Figes: 'Bryan's stance was always aggressive, even belligerent, whether the cause was modernity in literature or money, his other great obsession'.[49] Perhaps the co-operative's failure stemmed from the way it was tainted by the norms of the public of the postwar fiction market, which subtly subordinated Johnson's invocation of its social force – '[t]he real capital would be the talent of the co-operating authors' – to frustrations concerning author's earnings.[50] Johnson's exclamation, 'Such a hostage to fortune!', could refer to his subjection to capital as much as to the chaos of his life.[51]

We can elaborate on how Johnson's truth-telling reflected and recycled the conventions informing the public of mainstream fiction by considering how 'Writers Reading' applied to the Arts Council 'for subsidy & any other assistance'.[52] Because, as Raymond Williams points out, 'the greater part of the Council's money went to sustaining primary producers, and only after that to sustaining and developing means of distribution', the Arts Council at once supported individual experimental writers as it exposed them to a commercial market place.[53] Moreover, McGuigan highlights that, 'for publishers, the ultimate test of the Arts Council literature policy [was] whether it succeed[ed] in oiling the wheels of commerce'.[54] In his description of Johnson's time on the Literary Panel of the Arts Council, Alan Brownjohn evokes how the Arts Council funding of authors may have alienated and subtly pitted them against each other. On the one hand, 'when [Johnson] served' on the panel 'he would spend endless time trying to advance the cause of particular writers […]: people like Eva Figes, Alan Burns, Ann Quin'.[55] On the other, Brownjohn suggests that on the occasions Johnson applied for grants he 'played a little on their [the panel's] feeling that they would be very mistaken and rather unkind not to give so earnest a writer a grant'.[56] Brownjohn's view of Johnson as an 'earnest writer' might reflect how the promotion and circulation of Johnson's 'truth-telling' could be considered a product of rather than a form of resistance to the postwar cultural mainstream. When an early version of his 1973 introduction appeared in *Vogue* in 1966, the novelist Gordon Williams, provoked by 'the placing of your argument in that magazine', accused Johnson's '"experimental" devices […] of having been grafted on artificially – almost as though your contact with the culture market made

[48] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 392.
[49] Figes, 'B. S. Johnson', p. 71.
[50] Johnson, 'Writing and Publishing', pp. 380-381.
[51] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 17.
[52] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/39.
[53] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 163.
[54] McGuigan, *Arts Council*, p. 91.
[55] Quoted in Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 270.
[56] Quoted in Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 270.

you think you had to put up a display of avant-gardism'.[57] Gordon Williams's charge that Johnson's experiments were commercially driven is supported by the way the *Observer* announced in 1965 that Johnson's '£800-a-year contract with Secker and Warburg to write two novels in three years […] put[s] him in the exceptional class of being a salaried novelist'.[58] Though Johnson's attempts to transform the Society of Authors into a trade union and create a writer's co-operative could have formed counterpublics that changed the postwar literary scene, his truth-telling eclipses them with his person and a reiteration of the commercial drives of the fiction market.

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Johnson's position on the Arts Council literary panel, an intermediate body 'made possible', in Raymond Williams's words, by the 'British state and its ruling class', serves as an introduction to the tension between Johnson's truth-telling and a working-class public.[59] We can explore how Johnson's truth-telling and its presupposition of his autonomy is at odds with his working-class background by comparing it to Richard Hoggart's anxieties about the misrepresentation of the working-classes in his study *The Uses of Literacy*. Hoggart highlights that 'many major English writers […] over-emphasize the salty features of working-class life' and have 'never quite lost the habit of seeing the working-classes through the cosy fug of an Edwardian music-hall' and 'the latest bon-mot of their pub-pal "Alf"'.[60] For Hoggart, representations of these features of the working-class life 'have to be rejected more forcefully […] because there is an element of truth in what they say and it is a pity to see it inflated for display'.[61]

One could consider Johnson to reify, as Coe puts it, 'a disappearing ideal of working-class community'[62], or, in Hoggart's view, the 'element of truth' in the ways and sayings of their community, in his role as a journalist.[63] In his writings on football, Johnson's work's allusions to the working-classes are compromised by the professional distance entailed in his role as a reporter. 'Bloody Blues', published in the *Observer* in 1965, recalls how 'after the war ended, and as soon as [Johnson's father] was out of the Kate he started taking me and a Pratt's two-gallon petrol tin to Stamford Bridge' to watch Chelsea play 'on alternate Saturday

[57] Quoted in Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 223.
[58] 'Rate for the job', *Observer* (Weekend Review), June 6 1965, p. 22.
[59] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 165.
[60] Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 5.
[61] Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 5.
[62] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 259.
[63] Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 5.

afternoons'.[64] Where 'Kate', cockney rhyming slang for 'Army' ('Kate Carney'), might suggest Johnson and his father's consonance with the dialect of Hammersmith's working-classes, it is, for Johnson, his father's 'swearing' that forms the 'bond between [them]'.[65] The moment may reflect how Johnson's presentation of his working-class background is shaded with a tacit displacement of its idioms with his frustrations at being isolated from it. Indeed, in the opening sentence of his report on a match between Fulham and Arsenal from 1964, Johnson once again hints at his frustration and anger with how his role as a journalist alienates him from his view of the working-classes:

> ARSENAL played unwilling straight man to Fulham's knockabout comic in a crude but entertaining music hall turn amid the Craven Cottage mud and rain yesterday, but, like a coerced member of the audience resentfully asserting his individuality, finally made sure that the laugh was on the home team.[66]

Johnson's rendering of the game as a 'music hall' double act reflects, in Coe's words, his work's 'loyalty to a dying tradition – the British music hall, whose (working-class) practitioners were rapidly being pushed aside to make way for a new generation of (middle-class and Oxbridge-educated) comedians'.[67] In homage to this 'dying tradition', Johnson produced a short film for the BBC's *Release* programme 'called *Charlie Whildon Talking, Singing and Playing*'.[68] Conversely, Johnson's resentment towards his own elevated position is captured in his depiction of the player as someone 'resentfully asserting his individuality'; it is as if his professional role severs and stifles his relationship to working-class community he longs to save, and as a result inflates his representation of them.[69]

We can also note how Johnson's work compromises its relationship to a certain notion of a working-class community through the way his truth-telling appears to aspire towards the position of what we might call a literary ruling class. The conceptions of 'truth' Johnson ascribes to Beckett's work intimate how his invocations of the working-classes is compromised

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[64] B. S. Johnson, 'Bloody Blues', *Observer* (18 April, 1965), reprinted in *Well Done God: Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 371-373, p. 371.
[65] Johnson, 'Bloody Blues', p. 371.
[66] B. S. Johnson, 'The laugh is on Fulham', *Guardian*, 6 December 1964, p. 20.
[67] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 129.
[68] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 258.
[69] Johnson, 'The laugh is on Fulham', p. 20.

by the aesthetic elitism of his truth-telling. Johnson reads the moment in which the narrator of Beckett's *The Unnameable* (1953) proposes that, in regard to the character 'Murphy and the others', 'nothing could happen to them, of the things that happened to me' as an evocation of Beckett's authorial sovereignty: '[h]ow can an invented character stand exactly for what you want to say unless he *is* you?'.[70] Similarly, in his review of *How It Is* (1964) Johnson suggests that the 'novel is the nearest any writer has ever come to the accurate transcription of a man's thoughts in all their chaotic complexity', and asserts 'it is [Beckett's] example (towards truth and away from storytelling) which makes it clear that almost all novelists today are anachronistically working in a clapped-out and moribund tradition'.[71] The 'high-modernist elitism' and, in Tew's words, 'obsession with self' that Johnson advances through the 'truth' he reads in Beckett's novels were challenged by Gordon Williams in their correspondence.[72] Williams, who Coe describes as a 'working-class Scot with solid socialist principles', criticised Johnson for 'putting up a spirited justification [for writers] to shrug off real problems and bury their heads in a desert of introspection and narcissism'.[73]

Gordon Williams's proposal that Johnson was setting himself up as 'a glorified school-of-writing instructor' points towards the final faltering identity through which this chapter considers Johnson's truth-telling.[74] In a lecture Johnson gave to students at Belfast University in 1964, and which was subsequently published in *Northern Review* in 1966, Johnson is critical of how 'an active discouragement of writing' is 'common to many universities'.[75] Johnson contends that, as the 'majority of writers' have been 'exposed to a university education', 'the university has despite itself acquired a special responsibility towards potential writers' that 'is not generally realised'.[76] The University of Wales fulfilled this 'special responsibility' for Johnson when they chose him as the first Gregynog Arts Fellow in 1970. Johnson found the Gregynog Fellowship '[s]o beneficial' that he 'introduced the idea on the literature panel of the Greater London Arts Association: as a result, a pilot scheme consisting of two Fellows will this

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[70] Johnson, 'Holes, Syllabics', p. 392.
[71] B. S. Johnson, 'A review of *How It Is* (Calder) and *Play*, *Words* and *Music* and *Cascando* (Faber) from the *Spectator*, 26 June 1964', reprinted in *Well Done God: Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 420-422, p. 422.
[72] Philip Tew, 'Moving Beyond Modernism in the Fiction of B. S. Johnson: Charting Influences and Comparison', in *The Legacies of Modernism*, ed. by David James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 53-71, p. 55.
[73] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 219.
[74] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 219.
[75] Johnson, 'Holes, Syllabics', p. 388.
[76] Johnson, 'Holes, Syllabics', p. 388.

year [1972] start, probably at Goldsmiths' College and Woodberry Down Comprehensive School'.[77]

Johnson's support for the formation of creative writing fellowships appeared in the paper Peter Redgrove presented to the Arts Council in November 1972, 'The Writer in Education'. Redgrove's report presents a survey of 'the views of practising writers, and makes recommendations for the establishment of posts for writers in universities'.[78] In his contribution, Johnson describes his six months as Gregynog Arts Fellow as 'an almost ideal existence, free from financial worry'; he was 'able to work at his own limits' and 'to a certain extent decide my own rules and practice' as 'the first [writer] to whom the fellowship had been awarded'.[79] Perhaps Johnson was attracted to the apparent self-determination of being the 'first' Gregynog Arts Fellow because of the way it gave him time to consolidate his work in the minor tradition he had described in his lecture: the 'tradition of the stupidly mis-named anti-novel […] but which should really be acknowledged as the tradition of the ultra-novel, the essential novel, the novel for the novel's sake', which runs 'from Petronius and Apuleius through Rabelais, Cervantes, Burton, Nashe and Stern to James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Flan O'Brien'.[80]

Johnson's assertion that it is 'despite itself' that the 'university has […] a special responsibility' reflects the resentment towards the postwar educational system through which his support for creative writing fellowships took shape. In an article for *Education and Training* from 1973, Johnson claims that the texts he 'was obliged to read' studying English at King's College London 'seemed, by any standards I […] was taught, bad boring and irrelevant'.[81] Despite noting that his first novel, *Travelling People* (1963), 'would have been a worse book but for' the input of his friend and 'critic', 'Dr Tillinghast'[82], Johnson was 'convinced of the utter uselessness of lit crit': 'no one, but no one, can think themselves into the position of the writer'.[83] Johnson's disaffection with the university's literary public might stem from 'the roundabout way [he] had joined [his fellow English undergraduates at King's College] after [his] failure at [the age of] eleven'.[84] Where Johnson notes that he does 'not remember being told [he] had failed' his eleven plus examination, he emphasizes how a teacher, whose name,

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[77] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/10.
[78] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/10.
[79] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/10.
[80] Johnson, 'Holes, Syllabics', p. 391.
[81] B. S. Johnson, 'The happiest days?', *Education and Training*, (March, 1973), reprinted in *Well Done God: Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 465-471, p. 470.
[82] Johnson, 'Holes, Syllabics', p. 391.
[83] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 169.
[84] Johnson, 'The happiest days?', p. 469.

'remarkably, was Proffitt', 'took us elven-plus rejects and shook us, restored our confidence, showed us we certainly mattered to someone'.[85] Seven years earlier in *Trawl*, Johnson had provided the following representation of the way Proffitt 'redressed' the self-esteem of 'eleven-plus rejects':

> Now I see it was perhaps his intelligent resentment of the educational system which had declared us to be less that first-rate and implied that therefore we were hardly worth bothering with, even at our own levels, that he tried so hard and so successfully with us.[86]

Johnson's endorsement of Mr Proffitt's 'intelligent resentment' depends upon a tacit compliance with the way he was 'underestimated by the educational system'.[87]

That Johnson's promotion of creative writing fellowships was in danger of reinstating the hierarchical educational system it defines itself against is evident in the way Johnson's work subordinates teaching to writing as a profession. Johnson suggests that he 'saw many of [his] earlier selves going to waste, waste, in [the] five years' of supply teaching that preceded 'support[ing] [himself] wholly by writing'[88], and in an article in the *Observer* he refers to teaching as '"hack work"'.[89] Similarly, Johnson considers his 'odd literary or film award' to have been 'won against […] those teachers and contemporaries who so misjudged me'.[90] Johnson's backing of creative writing fellowships, coupled with the way his truth-telling appears to rule out addressing literary or educational publics, may have intensified his work's vulnerability to the imbalances emerging from the postwar education system. We might note this vulnerability in his unsuccessful applications for the Henfield Fellowship at the University of East Anglia, where Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson were setting up what would become their renowned creative writing course. In March 1972, Bradbury informed Johnson of the English department's decision: 'I am sorry you did not get the Henfield this time. […] But I thought you might like to know that you were considered very seriously indeed'.[91] When Johnson followed up his application the year after he received another rejection spared of the encouragement of the first: 'It was very good of you to apply for the Henfield Fellowship this

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[85] Johnson, 'The happiest days?', p. 467.
[86] B. S. Johnson, *Trawl* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 85.
[87] Johnson, 'The happiest days?', p. 470.
[88] Johnson, 'The happiest days?', p. 470.
[89] Quoted in 'Rate for the job', p. 22.
[90] Johnson, 'The happiest days?', p. 470.
[91] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/3.

year'.[92] It may be that Johnson's promotion of creative writing fellowships helped form a literary public that would institutionalize 'creative writing', and make it pervasive in such a way as to defuse the conditions for the emergence of an audience for experimental fictions.

The Failure of Truth-Telling in *Albert Angelo* and *The Unfortunates*

When Coe tries to explain why Johnson never had the success and recognition that Laurence Sterne received in his lifetime, he proposes that 'it is because his novels, in the end, are too introverted, too solipsistic. Like Sylvia Plath's, his books "were not intended in any sense primarily to communicate with others"'.[93] Coe supports his claim for the solipsism of Johnson's work through the suggestion that 'Johnson's radical scepticism about what fiction could achieve [...] was too radical'.[94] We can formulate a way to rethink Johnson's apparent solipsism by rereading his 'radical scepticism' through Levinas and Ziarek's analyses of the sceptical thesis. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas claims that to conceive the ethical relation to the other or 'the *otherwise than being* requires, perhaps as much audacity as scepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to realize this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility'.[95] A moment in Johnson's posthumous novel, *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975) illustrates the 'audacity' of his work's 'radical scepticism', which asserts the impossibility of knowledge and yet dares to realize this impossibility by stating it:

> If it really is impossible to know anything, then it is impossible to
> know even this.
> Or even that.
> Or even the other.[96]

The moment could be read as enacting the 'performative contradiction' that, as Ziarek notes, 'philosophy has always been eager to detect in the sceptical position': 'the classical refutation of scepticism points out again and again [that] by denying the possibility of truth, the sceptical thesis negates all philosophical theses, including its own'.[97] If Johnson's truth-telling in his polemics distorts failure in his work by presenting it as his own or by projecting onto a

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[92] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/3.
[93] Jonathan Coe, '"Great spunky unflincher": Laurence Sterne, B. S. Johnson and me'. The 2004 Laurence Sterne Memorial Lecture given at the King's Manor, York on Friday 11 June 2004 with an introduction by Martyn Bedford, <http://asterisk.org.uk/2004Lecture.pdf>
[94] Coe, '"Great spunky unflincher"'.
[95] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 7.
[96] B. S. Johnson, *See the Old Lady Decently* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), p. 72.
[97] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 84.

community or institution, his experimental texts provide a way to reread failure in his work; the contradictory moments in which truth-telling fails in Johnson's text and yet dares to state its failure not only intimates at how his autonomy is socially constructed but also insinuates the discord between community and the response to the alterity of the other.

We can suggest a way to reread the 'unquestioned centrality of the subject' in Johnson's work by reconsidering his introduction to his collection of shorter prose, *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, through the philosophical revision of scepticism. The imposing propositions of Johnson's 1973 introduction, such as a 'piece of writing is a failure' if the 'reader can impose his imagination on my words', waver when they consider language: '[l]anguage, admittedly, is an imprecise tool with which to try to achieve precision; the same word will have slightly different meanings for every person. But that is outside me; I cannot control it'.[98] Johnson's view of language mirrors 'the interpretation of the failure of the subject-centred conception of language', which sees it as, in Ziarek's words, 'an end in itself'[99]; social linguistic practice is 'outside me; I cannot control it'.[100] One could dismiss Johnson's claim that the intersubjective nature of language is outside of him and his control insofar as it enacts the 'performative contradiction' of the sceptical thesis; Johnson's proposal that he is outside the language he cannot control is articulated through the language he cannot control, and thereby indicates how he is constituted through rather than apart from language. However, following Cavell and Levinas's rereadings of scepticism, this moment of failure in Johnson's truth-telling need not be confined to negative epistemological consequences; it could be considered as signifying an 'interruption of the totality of knowledge' by an affirmation of alterity, or the 'truth' scepticism.[101]

At this point it will be useful to recall how Levinas's ethics of the other draws on the way 'the "truth" of scepticism', as Ziarek puts it, 'is not absorbed by its explicit negative thesis'.[102] In Levinas's reading, scepticism articulates a temporal dislocation between the significations of the 'Said' and the 'Saying': [s]cepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said'.[103] We can detect how 'the affirmation' of the saying and its 'negation' in the said do not, as Levinas puts it, 'resound in the same time' in Johnson's work by reconsidering the rhetoric of his 1973 introduction. The performative contradiction enacted

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[98] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 28.
[99] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 7.
[100] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 28.
[101] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 3.
[102] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, pp. 87-88.
[103] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 167.

through the tension between Johnson's statements about his narrative devices and the rhetoric that articulates them is evident in his introduction's attempt to demonstrate the following claim: '[n]o sooner is a style or technique established than the reasons for its adoption have vanished'.[104] The series of parentheses that interrupt the introduction's statement on how it imposes patterns on 'chaos' and 'change' might be read as the text's exposure to the ethical address of the other; they suggest an inability to stay in time with 'change', 'chaos' or the intersubjective character of language that Johnson 'cannot control':

> Even in this introduction I am trying to make patterns, to impose patterns on the chaos, in the doubtful interest of helping you (and myself) to understand what I am saying. […]
>
> This (and other things I have said) must appear paradoxical. But why should novelists be expected to avoid paradox any more than philosophers?
>
> While I believe (as far as I believe anything) that there may be (how can I know?) chaos underlying it all, another paradox is that is still go on behaving as though pattern could exist, as though day will follow night will follow breakfast. Or whatever the order should be.[105]

The temporal disjunction suggested by the parentheses that punctuate the attempt to 'grope towards it [an account of his truth-telling], in another way' reiterates how his text's failure to present his truth resembles the rhetoric of the sceptical argument, which is, in Levinas's words, 'sensitive to the difference between my exposure to the other […] and the exposition of the said'[106] that betrays it:

> I have a (vision) of something that (happened) to me
> something which (affected) me
> something which meant (something) to me[107]

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[104] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 17.
[105] Johnson, 'Introduction', pp. 17-18.
[106] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 168.
[107] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 19.

Where the failure of truth-telling in Johnson's polemics tends to produce anger or resentment towards postwar publics or himself, a focus on the rhetoric through which these failures are articulated in his experimental fictions may provide a way to reread how Johnson's truth-telling quivers in responding to the alterity of the other. In my readings of *Albert Angelo* (1964) and *The Unfortunates* (1969) I will set out how the failure of Johnson's truth-telling collapses the identities his texts posit against the postwar education system (*Albert Angelo*), and mainstream culture and literary studies (*The Unfortunates*), with an exposure to the other.

In his 1973 introduction Johnson claims that in *Albert Angelo* he 'broke through the English disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically'.[108] The third part of the novel, 'Development', culminates with a description of Albert Angelo, '"an architect manqué" who 'earns [his] living by teaching', 'laz[ing] at his drawing board' and pondering the 'seven weeks's summer holiday […] ahead of him'.[109] The description is interrupted, mid-sentence, by the exclamation, 'OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!' (p. 163). In the following section, 'Disintegration', the text reiterates, in a smaller voice or echo of itself, 'fuck all this lying', and goes on to expose how 'what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero' (p. 167). '[W]riting about my writing', the text paradoxically counteracts what it calls its 'almighty aposiopesis' in the act of stating it, and persists despite having suggested its inability to continue: 'Im trying to say something not tell a story telling stories is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality' (p. 167). Commenting on a later taunt in this section of the novel – 'Tell me a story, tell me a story. The infants' (p. 169) – Tew observes how '[Johnson's] energy and resentments are palpable'.[110] Tew considers 'Disintegration' as the moment in which 'Johnson declares his own presence'; Johnson 'emerges into the frame of the narrative to address the reader',[111] and 'proselytises with a socialistic intention, aiming to radicalise if not revolutionize the reader'.[112] Robert Bond draws attention to the politics of 'ressentiment' one encounters by reading 'Disintegration' as an enactment of Johnson's authorial autonomy; 'the novel's subjectivism [...] works to assert the

[108] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 22.
[109] B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 29, p. 12, p. 163. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.
[110] Tew, 'Moving Beyond Modernism', p. 66.
[111] Philip Tew, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 25.
[112] Tew, 'Moving Beyond Modernism', p. 66.

supposed fatedness of reduced' and 'deprived' 'capitalist experience'.[113] For Bond, the text 'couples an illusory dispersal of social resentment and disaffection [...] with a proto-Thatcherite emphasis on individual responsibility and self-reliance'; the novel's 'modernist subjectivism' helps to 'abstract the subject form the social determinants of [their] resentment'.[114] My reading of the novel sets out how the text's attempt to 'tell the truth about [...] my truth' (p. 167) positions an identity against the postwar education system. Close readings of the rhetoric through which the text's truth-telling fails suggests that we can rethink the failure Albert projects onto the postwar education as an insinuation of having been called to respond to the other.

What the novel refers to as its 'social comment on teaching' (p. 176) reflects one postwar public upon which Johnson's truth-telling redistributes its frustrations. In his role as a supply teacher Albert 'face[s] the staff as an outsider' (p. 37) and considers himself a '*sarsen*', a 'stranger boulder[…] out of place', '*amongst dirt and stuff like that*' (p. 95). Albert's assumption of a position apart from the teachers is seen to be affirmed by the way 'the staff chatter and laugh: the air polluted with the camaraderie' (p. 40), and impresses his status as 'injured': '[s]upply teachers mean inconvenience to him [the Deputy Head]. They upset his timetable and they are often untrained and incompetent' (p. 29). The anger Albert projects back upon the postwar education system, having refused to admit his participation in its public, is presented through his conversations with his fellow teacher, Terry: 'we talk about how education is so desperately old-fashioned, of such low productivity, and of the waste, the waste, and of the ineffectual cosiness of our colleagues, of the other teachers' (p. 52). In one example of how Albert and Terry's apparent alienation from the education system 'breeds such frustration in [them] that in revolt, in desperation almost, [they] become like delinquent teachers' (p. 52), the echo that shadows Albert's expletives may insinuate how their anger is haunted by the address of the other:

> he unzipped his fly and attempted to impose the pattern of art on nature. Terry joined in, laughing, and made the whole area into a sea, the paving awash over the patterns, running the subtle tracery under the lamp's light.
>
> "Bastard! Bastard!" shouted Albert. The facades on side reflected the sound, the gaptoothed bombsite on the other sucked in the sound:

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[113] Robert Bond, 'Pentonville Modernism: The Fate of Resentment in B. S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo*', *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, <http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/london-journal/>

[114] Bond, 'Pentonville Modernism'.

> "Baa! Baa!" gave back the facades, more gently, and the gaptoothed bombsite took the echoes as greedily and as gratefully as it had taken the original sounds (pp. 125-126).

The anger that emanates from Albert's thwarted attempt to 'impose the pattern on art nature', or we could say to impose his truth on the postwar education system, is interrupted by '"Baa! Baa!"' (p. 126). The sound recalls a faltering nursery rhyme and unsettles Albert and Terry's attempt to separate their positions as 'black sheep' of the postwar teaching public with the appeal from and for the future of those persons their disillusionment threatens to neglect.

The tensions stemming from Albert's refusal to admit his relationship to the education system are also redirected at his students. When Albert 'clamp[s] down' on an unruly class he instils his students with a sense of their own wounded identities: 'You hit one of them. It is the wrong one to hit: he has a bad ear, the others tell you in chorus, and you have hit him' (p. 46). Albert's desperate threat to a class – 'All you have to do at the moment is to listen. Then you don't get hurt' (p. 102) – reflects how his redistribution of his frustration fuels the students's; having been hit by Albert, one student protests 'You ent sposed to 'it kids on the 'ead!' (p. 70). Similarly, Albert's warning that he will keep the class in after the school is met by a band of objections that reassert their 'rights':

> —You can't keep kids in
> more than half an hour.
> —It's a rule.
> —The L.C.C. say so. *The bastards know it all!* (p. 80)

Albert's anxiety that as '*All violence rebounds society*' his punitive attempts to impose order on the class could lead to one student '*tak*[ing] *it out on another kid. Or on something*' (p. 70) intensifies with the '"report of [his] predecessor's suicide"' a girl '"put[s] on [his] desk without a word"' (p. 127); his students are '"all chipping in for a gasring for [him]"' (p. 128). The novel sets up its performance of how "the violence will out" if '"we go on half-educating these kids"' by having Albert acknowledge that '"the kids take breaking up [for the school holidays] rather literally"': '"Last term windows were broken and a couple of doors kicked in"' (p. 147). The page that rests directly beneath the one that recalls how '"windows were broken"' has a hole in it that corresponds to the position of the words '"were broken"' (p. 147) on the page above. Turning over the page, the text appears to have been subject to the student's violence; its 'window' of representation has been fissured, and warns there may be more to come as the

holes in the pages look ahead to someone who 'died instantly' (p. 153) from a knife wound. The moment in which Albert's attempt to impose his order upon a geology lesson is undone by a student assigning another pattern of meaning to his words suggests how the address of the other interrupts the violent atmosphere that pervades the novel's representation of the postwar education system:

> Then, too, there are
> different impurities which
> give you different sorts of ig-
> neous rock. Two of these
> other sorts are basalt and
> gneiss. Basalt and gneiss:
> spelt like . . .
> —Basil is nice? *I'll get that fucking kid and*
> *beat . . . No, I won't.* (p. 83)

The student's destabilisation of Albert's intended meaning could be said to dislocate the attempt to 'impose' a 'pattern' on the class, and the violent retribution that is seen to result from the failure to do so, with the temporal disjunction or '*beat*' of having already responded to the other: '*. . . No, I won't*' (p. 83).

Misplaced sounds also thwart Albert's attempt 'to realise in practice his theoretically absolute freedom of will, freedom from the passed' in regard to his relationship to Jenny: 'In most things he succeeded: but for Jenny, with the memory and grief of whom he had not come to terms, upon which he hand not imposed a pattern' (p. 134). During his geology lesson Albert passes around the class 'a piece of gneiss' (p 84), which he and Jenny came across on their trip to Balgy, and recalls how Jenny '*kept on calling it*', '*nice gneiss*', '*gnice neiss*' (p. 91). Though 'Disintegration' claims that 'the end of this book' has had a 'definite effect of release from 'the influence of her memory, suffering the pain of her betrayal' (p. 171), the text's misogyny is called into question through the presentation of the 'earliest clear recollection' of Jenny: 'she passed in the corridor' (p. 48). The way Jenny is remembered as having 'passed in the corridor' (p. 48) evokes how Albert cannot affirm his 'freedom from the passed' (p. 134) as the iteration '*nice gneiss*', '*gnice neiss*' (p. 91) impresses sounds that cannot be synchronized, and resound in another time from Albert's will to impose a pattern upon them. The misplaced sounds that unsettle Albert's autonomy and his attempt to 'impose' his 'patterns' is reiterated in his report of calling the school register. Where at first the students 'chorus, "He's not here"' when 'Jackie

Weir['s]' name is called, later repetitions of their refrain break, as if the fact that he is 'never in class' has interrupted the construction of their world: 'after a couple of days, it was "Jackie Weir—He's a queer", mingled with "He's not here"' (p. 128). Perhaps the moment gives away how Albert's virile attempt to retaliate on Jenny's 'sexual betrayal' and assert his autonomy is already undone by the affect of another person all but absent in the novel: that 'boy of fourteen who had talked more sense to him about sex than he had been able to command himself' (p. 135).

The Unfortunates

As we have seen, the rhetoric through which truth-telling fails in *Albert Angelo* intimates that it is haunted by a response to the other, which calls into question how its 'allornothinger' is predisposed to a politics of 'ressentiment'. Levinas's proposal that a work conceived as an 'orientation' to the other is a work 'without remuneration, [and] whose result is not allowed for in the time of the agent', serves as a way to approach the failure of truth-telling in *The Unfortunates*.[115]

The idea for *The Unfortunates* occurred to Johnson when he arrived at the 'main railway station at Nottingham' to 'report a soccer match for the *Observer*':

> when I came up the stairs from the platform into the entrance hall, it hit me: I knew this city, I knew it very well. It was the city in which a very great friend of mine, one who helped me with my work when no one else was interested, had lived until his tragic death from cancer some two years before.[116]

Tony Tillinghast was, in Coe's words, 'a serious, assiduous scholar bent on an academic career', with whom Johnson had formed a relationship when he and the other editors of the King's College London student magazine met the corresponding editorial board at the University of Nottingham in the late 1950s.[117] In his lecture to students at Belfast University from 1964, Johnson interrupts his discussion of *Travelling People* with the remark that 'in this novel, and in all my later work, I was grateful for the advice and constructive criticism of Anthony Tillinghast

[115] Levinas, 'Meaning and Sense', p. 93.
[116] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 24.
[117] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 21.

[…]. I miss his help'.[118] Johnson reiterates how he 'used to rely on […] Tony' while speaking to Burns:

> He [Tony] looked at the first two novels and improved them by his suggestions, he acted as a rein on my self-indulgence. He died of cancer, and it's all recounted in *The Unfortunates*. Since then I've never trusted anyone enough, no one at all.[119]

For Johnson, Tony's absence seems to mark the closure of his work's address to a literary readership; where Tony was there 'when no one else was interested'[120], in his absence Johnson states he is no longer able to trust 'anyone enough, no one at all'.[121] Without Tony and the literary public for which he might have stood, Johnson's work seems to try to protect itself from further loss; in an article on the novel's publication, Johnson is quoted as saying '"I never think of 'the reader' […] because there is never any evidence that any reader exists. […] I write for myself"'.[122] What Johnson's reassertion of his writing's self-referentiality risks hiding is not only its refusal of the alterity of a literary public but also the way *The Unfortunates* offers another way to approach its representation of the 'criticism of literature'. Though the narrator of *The Unfortunates* suggests Tony, in his academic research, is 'expend[ing] himself on dead men's work', the text's attempt to approach Tony's absence implicitly calls for a redefinition of the 'dead men's work' it purports to reject.[123]

In an article on the novel's publication and reception, Hugh Hebert suggests that *The Unfortunates* is 'a very good example of the way in which a writer, in answering purely technical questions as truthfully as he knows how, can open a different kind of truth to his reader'.[124] For Hebert, the 'different kind of truth' the text points toward emanates from the way its 'format communicates, as you shuffle through, not even reading, a strong sense of vulnerability'; reading the novel is 'like opening a box of old letters' and comes with a sense of

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[118] Johnson, 'Holes, Syllabics', p. 390-391.
[119] B. S. Johnson, interviewed by Alan Burns, in *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods*, ed. by Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London: Alison & Busby, 1981), pp. 83-94, p. 91.
[120] Johnson, 'Introduction', p. 24.
[121] B. S. Johnson, *Imagination on Trial*, p. 91.
[122] Hugh Hebert, 'The man inside the box', *Guardian*, 15 March 1969, p. 9.
[123] B. S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (London: Picador, 1999), 'The opera singer', p. 2. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.
[124] Hebert, 'The man inside the box', p. 9.

'almost prying'.[125] When the book was featured on the BBC's *Release* programme in 1969, Johnson explained why he wanted the novel's twenty-seven loose signatures or sections to be presented in a box and arrive in the reader's hand in a random order, saving those marked 'first' and 'last':

> "the past and present interact in a completely random manner, without chronology. This is the way the mind works, my mind anyway . . . and I wanted the book to be as near as possible a transcription or version of how the mind worked during the eight hours of this particular day"[126]

Two readings of the novel reflect how it enacts a temporal dislocation between a subject-centred truth-telling concerned with the accuracy of representation, or 'a transcription of the mind', and another 'truth' that interrupts the assumption of such a position and insinuates having been called to respond to the other. In Kaye Mitchell's view, the 'act of re-ordering that the reader performs mirrors that of the narrator in reconstructing (re-membering, giving a body or substance to) his memories of Tony; both acts attempt to fend off meaninglessness or death'.[127] Where Mitchell's emphasis on 'the act of reading' as 'a self-conscious act of construction' shows how the text could give rise to a politics of 'ressentiment' – a perceived failure to reconstruct memories or memorialise Tony might vent its frustrations upon itself or others – Watts suggests another way to read how the narrator regrets, 'I fail to remember, the mind has fuses' ('Then they had moved', p. 5). For Watts, 'I fail to remember' is 'a registering not simply of the inability to remember, but of a short-circuiting, as if the mind, faced with something traumatic, will blow, like a fuse box'.[128] Watts characterizes the text's 'short-circuiting' as an 'affective overload' and an 'encounter with a condition of non-identity', specifically the 'non-identity' Johnson 'asserts […] with his reader', and which might be compared to the 'Beckettian Not-I'.[129] If Mitchell and Watts's readings suggest that the novel entails hesitations between presence and absence, a failure of representation and an affective overload, we might read these

[125] Hebert, 'The man inside the box', p. 9.
[126] Hebert, 'The man inside the box', p. 9.
[127] Kaye Mitchell, '*The Unfortunates*: Hypertext, Linearity and the Act of Reading', in *Re-Reading B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Philip Tew and Glyn White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 51-64, p. 61.
[128] Watts, '"The Mind Has Fuses"', p. 80.
[129] Watts, '"The Mind Has Fuses"', p. 80, p. 82.

hesitations as testament to how, in Levinas's words, the 'temporal continuity of consciousness is *overwhelmed*' in the response to the other person.[130]

When the twenty-seven sections of the novel are taken out of their box, the reader reveals the football report printed on its inside.[131] The report, 'From B. S. Johnson', carries the headline 'SUB INSPIRES CITY TRIUMPH' and could be read as an derisive allusion to the text's critique of the 'butchery by the subs' ('Last', p. 3) or sub-editors who decide 'the story' of the narrator's match report; the 'subs' are presented as needing no 'excuses' to edit the report in spite of the fact that it is 'twenty words or so under length' ('The pitch worn', p. 9). The text's account and critique of the process of writing the football report may reflect how Johnson, in Zulfikar Ghose's words, 'was always anxious that his words appear in the paper as he had dictated them and was always furious when he found that some of his phrases […] had been edited out'.[132] Indeed, Coe reveals how Johnson articulated his 'deep resentments' with the *Observer* sports pages by covering his press cuttings with 'irritated scrawls: "cut", "hideously cut", "made nonsense of"'.[133] In addition to the 'subs', the narrator's anger is directed at the 'methods of the Heavy Mob, who are presented as having their telling phrases thought out in a notebook already' for the 'mutli-million circulators' ('The pitch worn', p. 9). The novel's critique may be said to oppose the public of a postwar mainstream culture through its attack on how 'well-paid pseuds' make 'the football fit whatever it is they imagine their readers want them to say', and are 'ready to defend their principles to the death as long as they do not conflict with their financial interests' ('Time!', p. 5).

Though the narrator apparently opposes the 'Heavy Mob', his challenge to the mainstream culture implicitly restates its inequities. The narrator worries that 'this bloody reporting' may 'destroy' his 'own interest in language' as he regrets having to 'us[e] under the pressure of deadlines the words which first come into my head, which is not good, relying on chance' ('Time!', p. 7). The 'something' the narrator feels his reporting has 'mislaid' suggests a presupposition of his authority and freedom as a writer, whose thwarted will to power threatens to foreclose the possibilities 'chance' might afford him; the narrator exclaims, 'Christ! No!' when a goal is scored eight minutes from time as it subordinates his control over his writing to 'the story, as the subs will think' ('The pitch worn', p. 8). Indeed, although the narrator separates himself from the 'Heavy mob', when he questions how 'the household names go on doing it, for years' he is exasperated to admit that it is because of 'the thought of the money, I suppose, the same as I do. The same as I do!' ('The pitch worn', p. 8). That the

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[130] Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma', p. 68.
[131] Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, (Box).
[132] Quoted in Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 199.
[133] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 199.

narrator's resistance to the mainstream risks reinstating its commercial drive is evident in his attempts to reject an association with the popular journalists: 'Or am I envious of these household names, the Heavy Mob? Christ no, no, it is only the money they take I'm envious of' ('Time!', p. 5). Where 'Christ! No!' ('The pitch worn', p. 8) reflects the narrator's resentment towards the 'subs' and a displacement of what 'chance' may bring with a regret about the loss of his freedom as a writer, 'Christ no, no,' ('Time!', p. 5) betrays how a commercial self-interest eclipses a concern for his readers.

These examples of how the text's representation of the narrator's resistance to the public of the mainstream uneasily overlap with its elevation of his writing could reflect the uncertainty surrounding *The Unfortunates* as commercial object. Johnson acknowledged the novel's marketability in a draft of a letter he wrote to Secker and Warburg after the publishers attempted to reduce his annual salary; he referred to *The Unfortunates* as the 'most original, novel, exploitable for novelty book since the war'.[134] Perhaps what defends the book from how it could be perceived as an attention-grabbing commodity is the way in which upon encountering the text's football report before its signatures we are unaware that anything could be missing from it. The concluding sentence of the final report reads, 'Gordon hit a fierce shot, the ball struck Mull's outstretched foot and went over Edson into the goal', while the text presents the narrator dictating his article to the copy-editor in the following way: 'Gordon mishit a long ground shot with the same anti hyphen climatic inefficiency with the same anti hyphen c l i m a t i c inefficiency which had characterized the whole match' ('The pitch worn', p. 11). Where the protracted 'c l i m a t i c inefficiency' may suggest the narrator's impatience and anger with what his writing is reduced to under the time constraints of his job, the fact that 'mishit shot' is supplanted by 'hit a fierce shot' in the final report inserts a subtle temporal disturbance into reading the text, as if before unwrapping the text we are already called to respond to what goes missing in the account of the day presented by the box.

The text's scepticism towards Tony's professional role in an academic community – how he 'engaged in the publication of [a] new academic magazine' full of those 'hair-splitting correspondences with rejoinders, redefinitions, from number to number, which are waged so viciously, […], in these petty circles' ('Then he was doing research', p. 4) – is in tension with the way the narrator tries and fails to 'place his order, his disintegration' ('Frist', p. 4). Where at one time the narrator suggests he was grateful for Tony's 'criticisms' of his prose – 'academic standards' gave it a 'collective-subjective value' ('Again the house', p. 1) – on a later occasion the narrator asserts that his 'comments were not really constructive, [...] but were almost petty, almost irrelevant. [...] Nothing he said, after this draft was finished, made me change a word'

[134] Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 266.

(‘Sometime that summer,’ p. 3). The narrator remembers how the closer he got to the end of his degree ‘the more I wanted to write myself: the more involved I became with other people’s crap, the more I wanted nothing more than to get on with my own crap’ (‘The opera singer’, p. 1). Convinced that ‘the only use of criticism was if it helped people to write better books’, the narrator emphasises his refusal of a literary ‘public’ by balking at the idea of giving Tony the ‘chance of influencing, of making better, a piece of what set out to be literature’: ‘Let the dead live with the dead, I must have said, too, I would not have let pass a chance of saying something like that, or in those exact words’ (‘The opera singer’, p. 1, p. 2).

The narrator’s denial of the debt his work owes to Tony and a literary public is unhinged at another moment in his day; he observes it is ‘pity that I only heard after his death that exact definition of academicism as Yesterday’s answers to today’s problems’ (‘Again the house’, p. 5). That the narrator may have ‘let pass a chance of saying’ what another memory suggests he certainly said to Tony indicates how inconsistencies of his act of remembering, from moment to moment, are akin to the description of Tony’s academic magazine, which consists of ‘rejoinders, redefinitions, from number to number’ (‘Then he was doing research’, p. 4). We can also note how the narrator continues to learn from Tony in a criticism of his claim to knowledge:

> And so on and so forth, that was a phrase Tony used too much, for suggesting continua of thought or information or knowledge, in conversation, And so on and so forth, to end almost every sentence, on one occasion, I remember, it annoyed me, the repetition (‘Again the house’, p. 2).

Yet upon remembering a carving from a visit to the ‘Chapter House’ at ‘Southwell’ the narrator defends his reading of it by claiming he ‘did not see the point of representing natural things, thus, why it is all tied up with truth, with things being what they are, and so on and so forth.

There was some good carving, too […]’ (‘Southwell’, p. 1). The narrator’s unwitting repetition of Tony’s saying for a ‘continua of thought or information or knowledge’ suggests he continues to be ‘in conversation’ with what Tony taught. Their relationship is reiterated through the narration of his day: ‘I had a motorbike, you could lay my Ariel Red Hunter over further on a bend than you can a scooter, I know, the respective centres of gravity, and so on and so forth, but now I know how it must have seemed to those watching’ (‘This poky lane’, pp. 1-2). The narrator’s unknowing repetitions of ‘so on and so forth’ expose how the

epistemological continuity associated with the phrase rests upon a discontinuous response to Tony's alterity.

The narrator's representation of Tony as a 'pedagogue', whose 'tidy mind' is compared to 'documents in the Public Records Office', unravels through the breakdown of the 'knowledge, learning, information' that 'flowed [from Tony] regularly, pointedly phrased' ('First', p. 3). Just as the narrator recalls how 'Tony liked his food, a trencherman' ('I had a lovely', p. 2), he emphasizes how Tony seemed to be predisposed to '[a]nything which served his desire to know, to learn, he had that voracious appetite to understand, to enquire […], an enthusiasm for completeness' ('Then he was doing', p. 3). The narrator's presentation of Tony as an avid reader and their 'long talks broken partly by eating' is disrupted by the withdrawal of the presumption of one's ability to speak, eat and read. Having visited him in hospital after his radiotherapy, Tony is reported as rejecting the narrator's suggestion that 'it was a good chance for him to read':

> he said No, he couldn't read, in the circumstances, and I could never understand why, all through his illness, that it deprived him of his ability to read, as he had always read so much, the way he read, the way he held a book, turned over its pages, was so practised, so professional, […] the way a craftsman holds his tools ('Just as it seemed', p. 7).

The memory of Tony's inability to turn over a book's pages subtly reflects how a reader cannot grasp or get to grips with *The Unfortunates*'s unbound sections, and accentuates how the text's accounts of Tony losing his ability to speak and eat disturb the narrator's view of him as embodying an appetite for knowledge, and delivering his 'discourse'. The representation of Tony as devouring knowledge is unsettled by the memories of the treatment that 'destroyed his saliva glands, so that he had to keep taking sips of water, liquid' ('Just as it seemed', p. 8), and of the '[m]eals without him, for the first time, […] not know[ing] what he ate' ('So he came', p.4). Similarly, what is perceived as the accurate and regular flow of Tony's 'discourse' is upset by the memory of him being 'unable to talk really, […] finding talk very exhausting, lapsing from time to time' ('So he came', p. 4): '[his] breathing too, was affected, there were now great pauses in his conversation as he sighed to the limit of his lungs, unnatural pauses, unsyntactical, which gave his words curious emphases and dramatizations, bathos' ('Then they had moved', p. 3).

We can see how the text insinuates the narrator's exposure to the alterity of Tony through the way the narrator's presumption of his ability to remember and narrate falters, as if responding to Tony's vulnerability. The opening line of 'First' hints at the disturbance haunting the narrator: 'But I know this city!' ('First', p. 1). 'But' suggests the exclamation is a rejoinder to some form of doubt, of which we have no knowledge, and which consequently unsettles the line's assertive claim to 'know' ('First', p. 1). Because the idea of knowing is brought into question, the narrator tries to reassert his ability to know the place where he can place Tony, and thereby confirm the knowledge that is seen to characterize him; the first line is repeated almost verbatim and perhaps more forcibly: 'but no, I know this city' ('First', p. 1). The narrator seems to reinforce a sense of certainty through the 'no' that slips into the iteration of the phrase as the defiance of the 'no' seems determined to 'know' ('First', p. 1). Yet perhaps the insertion of 'no' in claiming to 'know', and the subtle jar in temporality that resounds in their sounds, is already an insinuation of his exposure to Tony; the intrusion of 'no' echoes how Tony 'said No, he couldn't read', and impresses there is more to him than ways of knowing and his apparent thirst for knowledge. Similarly, having bought a pre-match snack, the narrator asserts how he 'enjoy[s] this ham, here, now, in this way, on this bench, in this place' only for his sense of certainty concerning time and place to recall the withdrawal of the appeal of the other disrupting it; the narrator savouring his ham – 'greaseproof, unfold, the moist pink and white, ah, and the bite, the salt satisfaction' – quivers, as the appetizing 'shoulder' ('This poky lane', p. 6, p. 3) of ham jars with the memory of how 'the tumour was on [Tony's] collarbone, that they had cut him open to remove it but had found that its feelers or fingers or tentacles had grasped right round the collarbone' ('Just as it seemed', p. 5). Indeed, even as the narrator admits he eats 'to take my mind off why I was ever here before, my mind runs at it, like the tongue seeking the fibre of gristle caught between teeth, or a cavity, who knows' ('This poky lane', p. 3), the presumption of his ability to take his mind off Tony is upset by how the 'gaps visible between [Tony's teeth] were unexpected': 'And his teeth, I never remember seeing Tony's teeth before' ('So he came to', p. 1). When taken out their wrapper and their box, the text's signatures or sections are prone to being misaligned and scattered, as if the 'unexpected' shock of seeing Tony's teeth continues through the text's unbound body and the lapses of time that already escape it. The memory of June, Tony's partner, calling when 'we [the narrator and his partner] had already arranged to go [to visit them]' reiterates how the time of the other insinuates itself prior to the presumption of one's freedom; the narrator's assumption that they are bound to go is unbound by the appeal from a time beyond them: 'there was no need for us to come down now, on Saturday for he had died that evening' ('June rang', p. 1).

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This double reading of the failure of truth-telling in Johnson's work provides a way to revise Tew's assessment of the critical neglect of authors connected to 'Writers Reading': 'Johnson's loose grouping resisted both the "realist" fiction that seemed to prevail from the 1950s to the early 60s, *and* the literary establishment. They were regarded as rebellious, inappropriate'.[135] It is possible to highlight the limitations of Tew's description of Johnson's group's resistance to a conservative literary establishment by calling upon Brown's reminder, which she draws from Foucault, that '"resistance" is figured by and within rather than externally to the regimes of power it contests'.[136] In light of the revival Johnson's work and the implicit investment in his identity, this chapter has argued that it is crucial to acknowledge the failure of Johnson's truth-telling in the context of his work's volatile relationship to postwar discursive communities. This rereading of Johnson's failure gives us a way to understand why his work fell into relative obscurity after his early death, and provides a way to trace his text's sensitivity to the alterity of the other.

We can reiterate Johnson's faltering relationship to constructed publics of the postwar literary scene by recalling the architectural drawing Albert Angelo attempts to work on during a Whitsun bank holiday (only to waste his day at a pub); the three lines on his piece of paper are the start of 'an arts centre for a town of half a million' (p. 108). The moment anticipates how, in 1969, Johnson himself would be commissioned by the Arts Council to 'examine the possibility of establishing a National Poetry Centre', with its own 'bookshop, a mail-order distribution service and a poetry-reading venue'.[137] In his account of how the Poetry Society was temporarily taken over by radical, '"neo-modernist"' poets in the 1970s, Peter Barry highlights that Johnson was employed by the Arts Council to 'carry out a survey of opinion and investigate [the] practicalities' of creating a National Poetry Centre.[138] Johnson 'sought the views of 377 persons or organizations and received 229 replies': '[t]hose who opposed the idea felt (as summed up by Johnson) that "Any Poetry Centre would inevitably falls into the hands of cliques and factions – a prophetic judgement, from the Arts Council's viewpoint'.[139] Johnson's survey of poets for the Arts Council affirms George Garrett's view; Garrett, who acted as Johnson's American counterpart in their roles as editors of the *Transatlantic Review*, claims Johnson was '"closely in touch with what was happening in English-language poetry; more so,

[135] Tew, 'Moving Beyond Modernism', p. 68.
[136] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 3.
[137] Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2006), p. 16.
[138] Barry, *Poetry Wars*, p. 16.
[139] Barry, *Poetry Wars*, p. 16.

probably, than any other poet in England or America at the time"'.[140] Yet, despite his relationship to the Poetry Society, which was, in Barry's words, 'one of the most conservative of British cultural institutions'[141], and his intimate knowledge of a 'flourishing' poetry scene and its numerous '"little" magazines', in his articles on poetry Johnson would try to uphold his truth-telling:

> once a poet makes communication with an audience more important than expression of his own self, his work becomes something different which, whatever else it deserves to be called, does not deserve the name poetry. True poetry is written for the poet's sake, and for no other reason […].[142]

Johnson's notion of 'true' poetry reiterates how, as Brown puts it, in the case of the 'self-interested subjects produced by liberal cultures and capitalist political economies', 'their individuation and false autonomy is also their vulnerability'.[143] As we have seen, Johnson's promotion of himself as a self-contained truth-teller sets him up to fail again in view of heterogeneous poetry circles in postwar British culture, which he observed but to whom he refused to acknowledge his relationship. The inevitable failure of Johnson's attempts to defend his concept of the poet accentuates his vulnerability to his own sense of alienation, and the violent redistribution of its frustrations. At the same time, his apparent delimitations of his own and other's failures obscures how the poetics of his experimental fictions insistently impress a vulnerability through their stutters and gaps, which subtly subvert even some of their most imposing assertions with an insinuation of having already responded to the other: 'I · · always with I · · one starts from · · one and I share the same character · · are one · · · · · one always start with I'.[144]

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[140] Quoted in Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 306.
[141] Barry, *Poetry Wars*, p. 2.
[142] B. S. Johnson, 'A Hard Glance at the Poetry Business', *London Life*, 16 April 1966, reprinted in *Well Done God: Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 412-416, p. 412, p. 416.
[143] Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 19.
[144] Johnson, *Trawl*, p. 7.

4. ‘A Sort of Nervous Charge’: Disconnection and National Culture in Alan Burns’s Cut-Up Texts

Introduction

In Ian McEwan’s ‘“muted and distorted autobiography”’[1], *Sweet Tooth* (2012), a doctoral student called Tom Haley claims that Alan Burns was ‘by far the best experimentalist in the country’.[2] A budding writer at the University of Sussex in 1972, Haley thinks that Burns’s publishers, Calder and Boyars, have the ‘[b]est list around’.[3] McEwan’s novel fleetingly acknowledges how Calder and Boyars helped to introduce the work of innovative American and European writers to the postwar British public. However, in his ‘uncensored’ autobiography Calder notes that their ‘New British school’ ‘never took off’, despite the fact that Burns ‘had the energy and organizing ability to lead a movement’.[4] In his journals, Rayner Heppenstall confirms Calder’s comment on Burns, recording his part in the formation of ‘Writers Reading’; ‘[a]vant-garde novelists’, including Johnson, Figes and Quin, were brought together ‘at the house of […], Alan Burns, off Portobello Road’ in 1969.[5] *Sweet Tooth*’s passing reference to Burns makes the failure to revive experimental fiction in postwar Britain more conspicuous as McEwan’s work has come to be seen as representative of the English literary novel. In contrast, a critical reading of Burns’s work has been all but absent in postwar literary studies.[6]

This chapter examines how the rhetoric of failure in Burns’s cut-up texts enacts a critique of the limits of the public in postwar British culture. Burns’s poetics is informed by Dada and Surrealist techniques of collage, fragmentation and the juxtaposition of incongruous images, and seeks to produce ‘*iron in every line*’.[7] Though, as Charles Sugnet notes, Burns ‘devoted very little ink and time to polemics’, he formulates his ‘“aleatoric” method of (de)composition,

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[1] Rachel Cooke, ‘Ian McEwan: “I had the time of my life”’, *The Observer*, 19 August 2012 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/19/ian-mcewan-sweet-tooth-interview>

[2] Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), p. 184.

[3] McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 184.

[4] Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 273.

[5] Rayner Heppenstall, *The Master Eccentric: The Journals of Rayner Heppenstall, 1969-1981*, ed. by Jonathan Goodman (London: Allison & Busby, 1986), p. 26.

[6] The exceptions are one half of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* from the summer of 1997, part of an essay by N. H. Reeve, and a forthcoming essay by Jeannette Baxter. See *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 17:2 (Summer, 1997) and N. H. Reeve, ‘Reflections on “Fictionality”’, *The Contemporary English Novel, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies18* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 113-130.

[7] Alan Burns, interviewed by David W. Madden, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 17:2 (Summer, 1997), 122-45, p. 129.

largely by describing the working methods of other artists'.[8] In a 1982 article, 'Writing by chance', Burns draws upon a range of works from artists and writers associated with Dada and Surrealism (including André Breton, Kurt Schwitters, René Magritte, Max Ernst and Paul Klee) to support his claim that '[a]bsolute aleatoric art is rare, but it happens'.[9] The article also cites the Beat writer, William Burroughs, with whom Burns is usually compared. Burns's texts parallel Burroughs's cut-ups insofar as they present, in Eric Mottram's words, 'a monstrous, ambivalent parody of organization, […] through forms of prose and plot which are themselves experimental acts of revolt'.[10] Following Burroughs, Burns's textual practice involves cutting up, folding, shuffling and reworking existing texts to create a new composite one. In an article by the novelist Paddy Kitchen from 1970, Burns explains that in his cut-up novels he is trying to '"work more like a painter"', '"plac[ing] images side by side"' to '"let them say something uncertain and fluctuating"'.[11] Burns aligns his view that '"the particular selection and juxtaposition [of images]"' is '"mysterious"' and '"not amenable to verbal description"' with an uncertainty about '"mak[ing] any pronouncement or statement about anything"': '"I cannot make confident statements about people, their relationships and their developing personalities because I don't think it is possible to *know* another person. All one can do is select images"'.[12] I will argue that the construction of a seemingly knowable and complete public in postwar English culture helped to obscure how Burns employed an aesthetics of failure and fragmentation to challenge the misrepresentation of community and evoke the alterity of our relations to others.

What makes Burns's work haunting is the way its eclipse insinuates a sensitivity towards interpersonal relations that differs from the identity-based social movements and countercultural revolts emerging in or around 1968. McGuigan suggests that 'the radical campaigns waged by the "'68 generation" emerged within the intelligible terms of the social-democratic discourse of access forged during the 1960s'.[13] Burns's texts challenge the notion of the public that framed these revolts, articulating a more elusive note of dissent than the countercultural investment in subjectivity. Reading Burns's formulation of his cut-up technique, or what he calls

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[8] Charles Sugnet, 'Burns's Aleatoric *Celebrations*: Smashing Hegemony at the Sentence Level', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 17:2 (Summer, 1997), 193-199, p. 193.
[9] Alan Burns, 'Writing by chance', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 29 September 1982, pp. 11-12, p. 11.
[10] Eric Mottram, 'The Algebra of Need', in *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), pp. 54-59, p. 55.
[11] Quoted in Paddy Kitchen, 'Surrealism and sculpture in words', *Times Educational Supplement*, 18 September 1970, p. 21.
[12] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Surrealism and sculpture', p. 21.
[13] McGuigan, *Culture*, p. 59. McGuigan notes that this 'social-democratic discourse' 'had sources going back to the 1930s', citing the influence of the Arts Council.

'disconnection', through Warner's theory will provide a way to map how his cut-up text's nervous address to other persons came to be forestalled by its interactions in English culture. The first section of this chapter sketches Burns's work's relationship to the Arts Council and the postwar censorship debate, and charts how his work's modes of articulation were inhibited by projections of a complete and knowable public. It goes on to analyse how the aesthetics of failure and fragmentation Burns employed in his responses to the radical protests of 'The Angry Brigade' and the 'Prague Spring' resist being incorporated into constructions of the public prevalent in postwar British culture.

The second half of the chapter sets out how we could recover Burns's work's rhetoric of failure, and its acknowledgement of the incommensurability of interpersonal relations; in doing so it suggests that it might be helpful to recall how Burns's cut-up technique is entangled with idea that he did not '"think it is possible to *know* another person"'.[14] We can develop a way to read the ethical significance of Burns's cut-up texts by turning to his engagement with the work of an expatriate Polish writer, Witold Gombrowicz, whose experimental texts were also published by Calder and Boyars. In 1975 Burns wrote what we might call a 'cut-up review' of Gombrowicz's texts for the creative writing magazine of Morley College, *More*. Burns's review of Gombrowicz's work is significant as it is his most sustained commentary on another writer currently available, and because Gombrowicz extends surrealist techniques to highlight the danger of neutralizing the alterity of relations to other persons.[15] My reading of Burns's engagement with Gombrowicz's texts takes its lead from Ziarek's work, which has helped to introduce Gombrowicz as 'a Polish avant-garde writer' on the 'margins of European tradition' to an Anglo-American audience, and argued for the ethical dimension of his texts.[16] The parallel between Burns and Gomrbowicz's works underlines how postwar modernist writers seemingly detached from an immediate audience drew upon a sense of failure to disrupt misrepresentations of the public and call attention to the alterity of our relations to others.

Ziarek observes that reading Gombrowicz around the time of the 'cultural thaw' in Poland during the 1980s 'was like a demystifying warning against uncritical glorification of dissidence itself – a sobering caution against monumentalization of both repression and freedom, a corrosive parody of politics based on authenticity, liberation, or collective

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[14] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Surrealism and sculpture', p. 21.

[15] Katarzyna Jerzak suggests that 'surrealist modes of writing come close to, and ultimately are at the bottom of Gombrowicz's method. See Katarzyna Jerzak, 'Defamation and Exile: Witold Gombrowicz and E. M. Cioran', in *Gombrowicz's Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality*, edited by Ewa Ziarek (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 177-210, p. 191.

[16] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 202.

enthusiasm'.[17] In *The Rhetoric of Failure* Ziarek outlines how Gombrowicz's work explores the limits of collective and individual forms of political protest by suggesting that the 'process of decomposition' in Gombrowicz's novels presents a 'radical testimony to the impossibility of inhabiting a common discursive universe', and thereby impresses a need to acknowledge and respect the alterity of the other.[18] Considering Burns's 'cut-up review' through Ziarek's analysis of Gombrowicz's texts I develop a way to read an ethical exposure to the other in Burns's cut-up novels *Europe After the Rain* (1965) and *Celebrations* (1967). In my reading of *Europe After the Rain* I suggest that Burns's text stages how attempts to reconstruct community and national identity in the postwar era are complicit with the eclipse of alterity. *Celebrations* follows *Europe After the Rain* by offering a more explicit subversion of the misrepresentation and manipulation of public discourses. Burns's use of a charged parataxis in *Celebrations* registers and implicitly challenges the notion of the public embedded in mainstream English culture by repeatedly collapsing attempts to exploit the appeal to a spurious communal unity. I suggest that Burns's experimental texts represent a tentative attempt to rethink community on the basis of a non-appropriative relation to the other, even as his work's attempt to articulate this through its rhetoric of failure was obscured by the censoring effects of its interactions with postwar British culture.

Burns's Experimental Poetics, the Public and English Culture

Born into a middle-class Jewish family in 1929, Burns attended Merchant Taylors' school before training as a lawyer. Burns turned to writing in the early 1960s, though he was, as he put it in a radio programme from 1983, 'a very nervous writer'; reflecting on his early work, he notes that 'I had seen the composition of lengthy fiction as tremendously intimidating' and had 'a terrific sense of my own inadequacy'.[19] Burns's nervousness extends to his relations to an audience. Kitchen's 1970 profile of Burns reveals that he had hoped that 'his publishers would handle the public relations' only to 'realize that to add personal to stylistic inaccessibility was too much'.[20] In her letters, Burns's friend, Quin, alludes to how he and his partner, Carol, were reluctantly and gradually pulled away from their home in a remote village in Dorset to the literary circles and networks of London. After the publication of Burns's second novel, *Europe After the Rain*, Quin records how a party hosted for Burns by Calder and Boyars 'went off well

[17] Ziarek, 'Introduction', in *Gombrowicz's Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality*, edited by Ewa Ziarek (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 1-30, p. 3.
[18] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 219.
[19] 'Plot or Not', BBC Radio 3, 3 January 1984.
[20] Kitchen, 'Surrealism and sculpture', p. 21.

– tho' [Burns] hadn't been looking forward to it'.[21] Similarly, in the autumn of 1968 Quin mentions having received '[l]etters from Carol, somewhat frantic; they are all, she, Alan the children living more or less in one room' and '[h]ating London, finding it hard to adapt to a kind of "social chit-chat" after solitariness and silences of living in the country so long'.[22]

Burns elaborates on the tensions of his initiation into the literary culture of London in an interview from 1969. In answer to the question of whether he thought of himself 'as an English writer working in the tradition of the English novel', Burns states that '[t]he English novel and Englishness itself mean very little to me. […] I'm more interested certainly in the European novel and in the Russian novel, insofar as those terms have any meaning at all'.[23] Burns goes on to state that he 'hope[s] to class [him]self with the radical element' of postwar culture; the 'only' 'society [he] would write for' would be 'the kind of stateless society that the anarchists envisage' even if it is not 'a practical possibility in [his] lifetime'.[24] Burns's uncertain and volatile comments are informed by his 'marxist' view that 'the cultural values of any particular society are created by the dominant class'.[25] Burns's political standpoint, and its reiteration in his texts, resonated with the anxieties of the New Left; during an appraisal of *Europe After the Rain* in the *New Left Review*, a critic suggested that

> we are not dealing here, as in Kafka, with a person seeking, however vainly, to understand; we are dealing with the bewildered contemporary for whom the state of the world is past understanding. In this such a work, even one as well written, may tell us as much about contemporary society as about *Europe After the Rain*.[26]

The reviewer's proposal that there is an overlap between the text's refusal 'to posit a project which […] could be intelligible in human terms' and 'contemporary society'[27] suggests that Burns's work may have struck a chord with an impasse that characterized the relationship between the New Left and English culture; under Perry Anderson's editorship, the *New Left*

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[21] Stanford, Stanford University Libraries, Robert Creeley Papers, 1950-1997 M0662, Quin to Creeley, undated letter.
[22] St Louis, Washington University Libraries: Olin Library, Robert Sward Papers, MSS110, Quin to Sward, letter 5/8/68.
[23] Alan Burns, interviewed by Peter Firchow, in *The Writer's Place: Interviews on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain*, ed. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), pp. 50-62, p. 50.
[24] Burns, interviewed by Firchow, p. 55 p. 56.
[25] Burns, interviewed by Firchow, p. 54.
[26] R. F., 'Europe After the Rain', *New Left Review*, I/32 (July-August, 1965), 96, p. 96.
[27] F., 'Europe After the Rain', p. 96.

Review put forward the view that 'British culture […] is a deeply damaging and stifling force, operating against the growth of any revolutionary Left'.[28] Burns's text's critiques of organized forms of power seems to have offered an alternative way to engage with the impasse that confronted the New Left, and which Robert Hewison summarises as follows: 'the culture which […] [was] one of the prime obstacles to change, also supplie[d] the locale in which analysis as a prelude to change c[ould] take place'.[29] My analysis of Burns's work will sketch how the muting effects of English culture are played out in his work's relationship to the appearance of more limiting constructions of the public.

We can shed light on how Burns's work at once challenged and was obscured by the notion the public that took shape in postwar British culture by reading an outline of his 'cut-up' technique through the 'double movement' that, for Warner, is 'always at work' in a public.[30] It may be useful to recall how Warner suggests that one part of a public's 'double movement' consists in the way it 'address[es] indefinite strangers' and 'puts a premium on accessibility'.[31] The other side of this 'double movement' entails that public speech's indefinite address corresponds to the cultural context of its reception, as the attempt to articulate an 'infinitely accessible language' would risk 'miss[ing] other equally important needs of publics': 'to concretize the world in which discourse circulates, to offer its members direct and active membership through language, to place strangers on a shared footing'.[32] Burns's reflections on his work in an 'Essay' from 1975 indicates how his use of his cut-up technique, or 'disconnection', was attuned to and risked dislocating the 'double movement' at work in public discourse. Burns describes 'disconnection' as an attempt to 'stretch the two arms of metaphor and still find a link between' by 'ingenious or devious or extravagant or so-called surrealist methods'.[33] That the styles through which Burns unwound and retied the arms of metaphor involved an address to indefinite others is implied by his observation that 'disconnection' 'expressed my own social estrangement, my distance from others, with the dual sense of superiority and yearning for closeness. Paradoxically, the act of wrenching images apart expressed a need to hold them close, like people'.[34] Burns's outline of disconnection insinuates that the structure of 'metaphor' allows strangers to come together or, in Burns's words, 'hold[s]

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[28] Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review*, I/50 (July-August, 1968), 3-57, p. 57.
[29] Hewison, *Too Much*, p. 282.
[30] Warner, *Publics*, p. 108.
[31] Warner, *Publics*, p. 108.
[32] Warner, *Publics*, p. 108.
[33] Alan Burns, 'Essay', in *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, ed. by Giles Gordon (London: Hutchinson, 1975), pp. 62-68, p. 65.
[34] Burns, 'Essay', p. 65.

[others] close' by stabilizing their use of language, and concretizing the world of their discourse. Moreover, Burns's essay warns that the harmonization of a discursive community through a 'network' of 'nods assents [and] agreements' is one way organized forms of power, such as 'State[s]', 'workplace[s]', 'institution[s]', and 'school[s]', exert their 'subtle dominance'.[35] In contrast, what Burns's disjunctive technique accentuates is, in Warner's terms, the 'risked estrangement' that is 'essential to all publics'; since public discourse 'commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger' it 'puts at risk the concrete world that is its given condition of possibility'.[36] Burns contends that his notion of 'disconnection' '"achieve[s] a subject pointing in one direction, and the object arriving from another direction, and a verb hovering uncertainly and rather nervously between"', and thereby implies that it might unnerve a public's positive content with the alterity to which its rhetorical devices are sensitized.[37] In my analysis of Burns's work's interactions in the postwar literary scene, I will outline how his text's attempt to preserve and respect the alterity of the other through, in Sugnet's words, a 'disjunctive and contradictory style' was neutralized through its alignment with the limited view of the public that permeated English culture.[38]

We can examine how the notion of the public in English culture came to dampen the dissidence of Burns's experimental poetics by tracing the relationships between Calder and Boyars, the Arts Council, and Ian McEwan. While interviewing Johnson in the early 1970s, Burns acknowledges that his experimental fiction 'was partly made possible by the backing I got from John Calder'.[39] An article from 1970 reveals that Burns was able to take up experimental writing full time thanks to 'a £50 a month subsidy' provided by his publisher.[40] The 'extraordinary risks with language'[41] that Burns took with his work appeared to have paid off when Angus Wilson, the chairman of the Arts Council's literature committee, recognised his third novel, *Celebrations*, as a '"mysterious, rich and engrossing book"'.[42] Burns was duly awarded an Arts Council grant of two thousand pounds in 1969.

At the same time that the Arts Council supported experimental writers and provided Calder and Boyars with, in Calder's estimate, 'something like 15 percent of the total advance

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[35] Burns, 'Essay', pp. 66-67.
[36] Warner, *Publics*, p. 122, p. 113.
[37] Quoted in John Hall, 'Novels from the Unconscious: Alan Burns talks to John Hall', *Guardian*, 30 April 1970, p. 10.
[38] Sugnet, 'Burns's Aleatoric *Celebrations*', p. 197.
[39] Quoted in B. S. Johnson, interviewed by Alan Burns, in *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods*, ed. by Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London: Alison & Busby, 1981), pp. 83-94, p. 92.
[40] Hall, 'Novels from the Unconscious', p. 10.
[41] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 128.
[42] Wilson's tribute appears on the back cover of Alan Burns, *Babel* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1969).

money [they had] available [in 1969]', the body subtly subdued the experiments it supported by projecting them as part of its notion of a cultural community. In an interview from 1969, Burns expresses his 'immense gratitude' for the Arts Council's support and the kind words of the Chairman of the Arts Council's literary panel, Angus Wilson, before stressing his wariness of 'the unseen strings attached' to their patronage: namely the 'very subtle process' through which 'the ruling literary clique' mutes unorthodox writers by 'treating [them] extremely generously'.[43] Burns supports his view that 'literature in England [is] a kind of old boy network' by suggesting that '[i]f there is any obvious physical manifestation of the ruling literary clique, I would have thought it was in the so-called literature panel of the Arts Council'.[44] Burns is confounded by the way that, although he sees his work as that of a 'fairly uncompromising radical', 'the old boys' have 'treated me extremely generously. To that extent, what can I say?'.[45] Burns's stuttering attempt to speak out against the Arts Council, which is almost muted by his admission that it is comprised of 'such nice folks', implicitly confirms Williams's suggestion that the body's 'consensus procedures' helped to give the 'impression of independent public responsibility but […] prevent[ed] or limit[ed] any clear and coherent exercise of it'.[46]

We can sketch a repercussion of the Art Council's consensus by noting how Wilson might have been influential to Burns's induction to creative writing posts in universities. In 1971 Burns was the first recipient of the Henfield Writing Fellowship at the University of East Anglia, where the year before Wilson had 'started the MA course in Creative Writing' with Malcolm Bradbury.[47] Burns's role put him in contact with Ian McEwan, who was among the first to enrol on the now famous course. McEwan recalls how 'Alan Burns, the lawyer turned novelist', contributed to his work: '[a]fter reading my stories he told me to read Beckett's trilogy because I appeared to be "unconsciously influenced". I took his advice, and immediately understood what he meant'.[48] The connection between Burns and McEwan might reinforce Jeanette Baxter's suggestion that we can read McEwan's 'early work within the tradition of dissident Surrealism'.[49] However, around the time that his early, disquieting short stories were earning him the nickname 'Ian Macabre', McEwan distanced his work from postwar experimental fiction in the Arts Council's leading literary magazine, the *New Review*. In 1978

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[43] Burns, interviewed by Firchow, p. 56.
[44] Burns, interviewed by Firchow, p. 57, p. 58.
[45] Burns, interviewed by Firchow, p. 58.
[46] Williams, 'The Arts Council', p. 164.
[47] Malcolm Bradbury, 'Creative Writing and the University – Andrew Wilkinson Lecture', <http://malcolmbradbury.com/uea_creative_writing.html>
[48] Ian McEwan, 'Class Work', <http://malcolmbradbury.com/uea_ian_mcewan_class.html>
[49] Jeanette Baxter, 'Surrealist Encounters in Ian McEwan's Early Work', *Ian McEwan*, ed. by Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 13-25, p. 14.

McEwan proposed that '[t]he formal experimentation of the late sixties and early seventies came to nothing largely because the stuff was inaccessible'.[50] McEwan goes on to suggest that the 'artifice of fiction can be taken for granted', and that '[e]xperimentation […] should have less to do with formal factors like bursting up your syntax […] and more to do with content – the representation of states of mind and the society that forms them'.[51] Where Burns refuses to thematize his work's sensitivity to others, it is interesting that McEwan relegates the 'formal' devices of experimental fiction on the basis that we can presuppose the artifice of fiction and a notion of society. Since McEwan's comments appear in the Arts Council's principal publication, we might consider them to reflect how the body's projection of a knowable cultural community paradoxically contributed to a misrecognition of the experimental writing that it sponsored.

The refracted representation of this history presented by McEwan in *Sweet Tooth* may be indicative of how Burns's experimental texts came to be defused by the public constructed by the Arts Council in postwar English culture. *Sweet Tooth* reimagines the Arts Council's subsidisation of literature through the genre of the 'spy novel'. The novel opens through the first-person narration of Serena Frome, a member of MI5 in 1972, who is given the task of posing as a representative of a fictional cultural institution and recruiting a writer who has sympathies with his '"hard-pressed fellows in the Eastern bloc"'.[52] The aim of the project is to discourage a perceived surge in leftish politics amongst writers. When Serena suggests MI5 might implement their scheme through the Arts Council, a senior official reveals that Angus Wilson, '"just the sort we could have worked with"', '"all but threw me out of a third-floor window"' at the suggestion.[53] Serena's cover is compromised as she falls in love with the writer her fictional company is funding, Tom Haley. If Tom and Serena are romantic counterparts their literary tastes appear to diverge. Serena craves a '"naïve realism"' and '"detest[s]"' Johnson's *Albert Angelo*.[54] In contrast, Tom is a fan of Burns's *Celebrations*, which he is surprized to find on his partner's bookshelf. Serena's apparent dismissal of Tom's preference for postwar experimental fiction is, as we shall see, an example of what James Wood has described as McEwan's 'addict[ion] to the withholding of narrative information, the hoarding of surprises, the deferral of revelations'.[55] I want to suggest that the implicit irony of the text's seeming

[50] Ian McEwan, 'The State of Fiction: A Symposium', *New Review*, 5:1 (1978), 50-51, p. 51.
[51] McEwan, 'State of Fiction', p. 51.
[52] McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 92.
[53] McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 94, p. 95.
[54] McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 65, p. 184.
[55] James Wood, 'Containment: Trauma and Manipulation in Ian McEwan', in *The Fun Stuff and Other Essays* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), pp. 180-191, p. 183.

exclusion of experimental fiction could be read as a reflection of the subtle way the Arts Council at once enabled the production of Burns's texts and limited their reception.

Sweet Tooth seems to resolve the tension between MI5's spurious cultural patronage and Tom and Serena's relationship with a sweet and disquieting metafictional twist. Having discovered that Serena is an agent, Tom reveals, in the letter that closes the novel, how he has retaliated by 'spying' on her. Tom's attempt to gather material for a novel that would 'write [Serena] out of [his] system' comes unstuck as by trying to 'recreate [Serena] on the page' he finds, 'I still love you. No, that's not it. I love you more'.[56] The novel ends with 'a declaration of love and a marriage proposal', which chimes with Serena's 'old-fashioned view that this was how a novel should end, with a "Marry me"'; Tom asks Serena's permission 'to publish one day this book' with the proviso that if 'you still love me and your answer is yes, then our collaboration begins and this letter, with your consent, will be Sweet Tooth's final chapter'.[57] That the novel ends with Tom's letter insinuates Serena's consent, and seems to subordinate the first-person woman's voice to a male author's in a deeply unsettlingly way. The reciprocal relationship implied by *Sweet Tooth*'s metafictional twist could be read through Wood's suggestion that McEwan's 'manipulation of secrecy' acts to 'master and contain' the 'trauma[s]' and contingencies upon which his novels often turn; in *The Child in Time* (1987), for instance, 'McEwan hoards [the narrative's secrets] until the very end of the book, the better to provide a rush of harmony, as the bereaved couple finally replace their mourning with new life'.[58] McEwan, as Wood puts it, has 'it both ways, at once decrying too much pattern and making use of too much pattern'; his characters 'object to the fakery of "turning points" in fiction, but they are themselves embedded in books devoted to such mechanisms'.[59] Though the irony of McEwan's metafictional twist nods towards its debt to postwar experimental writing, it remains unspoken until the final chapter of the novel. The text's almost silent manipulation of its narrative devices thus appears to side with, in Wood's words, 'domestic harmony' and 'neutralize trauma'.[60] In other words, the novel's final twist seems to align experimental textual practices with the construction of an unspoken consensus, while diminishing how the allusion to Burns and Johnson's work points to a more radical and fragile mode of dissent.

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[56] McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 318, p. 319.
[57] McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 319, p. 320.
[58] Wood, 'Containment', p. 183.
[59] James Wood, 'The Manipulations of Ian McEwan', *London Review of Books*, 31 (8), 20 April, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n08/james-wood/james-wood-writes-about-the-manipulations-of-ian-mcewan>
[60] Wood, 'Containment', p. 183.

Where McEwan's novel could be read as symptomatic of a knowing assimilation of the rhetorical devices of experimental fictions into a more palatable form, Sutherland contends that Calder and Boyars were an exception in the atmosphere of 'passive, but pervasive censorship' created by postwar 'English publishers'.[61] Sutherland's observation serves as an introduction to Burns's work's interactions with the postwar censorship debate and the construction of a more bounded notion of the public. Calder was, in Geoffrey Moorhouse's words, 'fairly consistently up to his neck in controversy about what we should be allowed to read, see or say'.[62] In 1963 Calder and Boyars published Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1963), which 'several London publishers' had 'shied away' from because, as the *Guardian* noted, it had been 'branded pornographic'.[63] Calder and Boyars followed *Tropic of Cancer* with a string of books that tested the loosening of censorship laws that had followed the Obscene Publications Act of 1959, including Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book* (1964) and Williams Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch* (1964). Calder and Boyars's tangles with the culture at once enabled and restricted by the new law came to a head in 1966 when a Conservative MP, Sir Cyril Black, took out a private prosecution against Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1966).[64] The magistrate found the book obscene and, in his words, '"likely to deprave and corrupt"'.[65] The trial before jury that ensued in 1967 as a result of the publishers's refusal to stop printing the book entailed Calder and Boyars 'risk[ing] liquidation', and in their defence they assembled a party of witnesses that included Frank Kermode and Bernard Williams. Burns, who had trained as a barrister, also gave evidence for the firm and, as Calder recalls, 'fortunately his new novel *Celebrations* was well-received in *The Times* on the day he appeared'.[66] Nevertheless, the jury returned a guilty verdict, and Calder and Boyars 'were fined £100 and ordered to pay £500' on top of their legal costs, which the publishers estimated at 'between £10,000 and £15,000'.[67] Calder's criticism of the verdict suggests a reining in of the ways in which texts could address others: 'the writer who tries to create compassion for the "underdeserving", trapped in the sewers we have bequeathed them, and understanding for the sexual eccentric […] will stand to lose his good name and his copyright, and ruin his publisher'.[68]

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[61] John Sutherland, *Offensive Literature: Decensorship in Britain, 1960-1982* (London: Junction Books, 1982), pp. 21-22.
[62] Geoffrey Moorhouse, 'Publisher in the firing line', *Guardian*, 27 July 1970, p. 6.
[63] 'Tropic of Cancer', *Guardian*, January 31 1963, p. 7.
[64] Sutherland, *Offensive Literature*, p. 71, p. 67.
[65] Sutherland, *Offensive Literature*, p. 67.
[66] Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 321.
[67] Sutherland, *Offensive Literature*, p. 70.
[68] John Calder, 'Exit Last Exit', *New Statesman*, 1 December 1967, p. 757.

In 1969 Burns's work almost provoked another legal struggle for Calder and Boyars; *The Observer* reported that '[a] young novelist is to challenge W. H. Smith, Britain's largest booksellers, over a decision not to display his new book in its 740 shops and stalls because they feel the cover may cause offence'.[69] The cover in question was that of Burns's fourth novel, *Babel* (1969), and was designed by his partner Carol; it consisted of a photo montage of the Queen, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Alain Delon, Marianne Faithfull and some naked limbs. The following week *The Observer* retracted its story as W. H. Smith had asked them 'to point out that no such decision had been taken'.[70] That the controversy surrounding Burns's novel did not materialize might be symptomatic of how, in Sutherland's words, '[t]he same [censorship] battles [of American culture] have […] been fought over in England – but always late and always on a minor scale'.[71]

If the 'minor scale' of the censorship debates in England signals how the indefinite address of Burns's daring cover was absorbed and ignored by the public, then it also helps to understand the anonymity of Burns's sole non-fiction work. In *To Deprave and Corrupt: Technical Reports of the United States Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (1972), Burns presents an edited summary of a 'National Survey [held in America] of some two and a half thousand adults and 800 adolescents, researching their "sex attitudes, sex behaviour, and experience with erotic materials'.[72] In the text's introduction, Burns states that he 'wanted to make this a readable and popular book' in the hope that it would highlight 'its relevance to and impact on the current debate on censorship'.[73] We could attribute the way the book was overlooked to its colourless and lengthy summaries of 'scientific' surveys.[74] The technical vocabulary of *To Deprave and Corrupt* seems to reflect how a text's mode of address, in Warner's words, 'cedes its hope of transforming […] the space of public life' when it 'adapts' itself to 'the performatives of rational-critical discourse', and attempts to 'acquire agency in relation to the state' by focusing on 'policy'.[75] The shift from the uncertainty sparked by *Babel*'s cover – a text that enacts the clashes between myriad unequal voices – and Burns's non-fiction survey may reflect the muting of his work's experimental poetics by the establishment of a circumscribed notion of the public.

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[69] 'Author attacks book firm ban', *The Observer*, 1 June 1969, p. 6.
[70] The retraction appeared in the 'Letters' section of *The Observer*, 8 June 1969, p. 6.
[71] Sutherland, *Fiction and the Fiction Industry*, p. 21.
[72] *To Deprave and Corrupt: Technical Reports on the United States Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, ed. and abridged by Alan Burns (London: Davis-Poynter, 1972), p. 9.
[73] *To Deprave and Corrupt*, p. 11.
[74] See introduction of *To Deprave and Corrupt*.
[75] Warner, *Publics*, p. 124.

Failure and Radical Forms of Protest in *The Angry Brigade* and *Palach*

In response to the guilty verdict handed to *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Calder warned that, failing 'reforms' to the Obscene Publications Act, 'those who believe in literary freedom will have to use guerrilla tactics to ridicule the authorities and to keep the issues under discussion'.[76] An undated note Burns wrote to Johnson indicates how he considered engaging with the radical forms of protest Calder had threatened: 'many thanks for the subversive lit. The Manual of the urban gurilla [guerrilla] – the south american one – is very useful & the others may come in handy – though I still don't know how to make a BOMB!'.[77] The exchange of subversive literature with Johnson reflects how, in Burns's words, 'politically we were in general agreement, we were socialists'.[78] Brian Crews contends that Burns and Johnson's political allegiance is apparent in their work's connection to the British equivalent of the West German terrorist group, Baader Meinhof – 'The Angry Brigade'. Crews suggests *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) by Johnson and *The Angry Brigade: A Documentary Novel* (1973) by Burns 'were immediate responses […] to the trial [of the Angry Brigade] and the way the accused were depicted in the press'.[79] The Angry Brigade claimed responsibility for a number of bomb attacks against the 'repressive Conservative government and consumerist capitalist society' in the early 1970s, with four of its members sentenced to ten years in prison in 1972.[80]

Burns's novel adopts the form of a '"collective autobiography"' and claims to have 'concealed the identities of those involved' in the Angry Brigade.[81] The novel's presentation of the Angry Brigade consists of transcriptions of interviews with six members of the group conducted by 'A.B.', which have been cut together.[82] One member of the group recalls how '[w]e were going to make a bridge between the underground and straight left, […] link the cultural and the practical', while another mentions 'we'd all read Marcuse'.[83] The interviewees's 'ever-mounting tension and frustration' at their inability, in N. H. Reeve's words, to 'escape the conditions of the social institutions [they] purport[…] to oppose'[84] rebounds on the group's construction; commenting on a group discussion, 'Ivor' suggests it is 'frightening

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[76] Calder, 'Exit Last Exit', p. 757.
[77] Johnson Archive, MS 89001/5/1/33: 1965-1973. The 'south american' urban guerrilla book could be a reference to the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1969) by Carlos Marighella, which would suggest the note was written between 1969 and 1971.
[78] Quoted in Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 405.
[79] Brian Crews, 'Writing Radical Protest: The Angry Brigade and Two English Novels', *Journal of European Studies*, 40:3 (September, 2010), 219-229, p. 220.
[80] Crews, 'Writing Radical Protest', p. 220.
[81] Alan Burns, *The Angry Brigade: A Documentary Novel* (London: Allison & Busby, 1973), p. 2.
[82] Burns, *Angry Brigade*, p. 2.
[83] Burns, *Angry Brigade*, p. 3, p. 38, p. 99.
[84] Reeve, 'Reflections on "Fictionality"', p. 121.

when whatever you say makes no difference, no impact, as if you've never said it'.[85] The attempt to form a collective movement mirrors how, as Reeve puts it, their '[v]iolent action, far from constituting a release, only aggravates their sense of helplessness and futility'[86]; after his objection to 'taking instructions' is quashed with the line, '"If you're told to do it, do it"', 'Dave' remembers how, 'I felt my breath amplified a thousand times, my speech totally broken, my words lost'.[87] Reeve suggests that the text's presentation of the group's 'failure to articulate a vision' makes the novel 'an unsettling and mysterious book', and emphasizes that the 'narrative is not empowered to offer interpolated judgement' on their actions.[88]

The text's emphasis on the different voices and 'attitudes of [its] speakers' was distorted by the novel's reception.[89] Burns rued the way that reviewer's considered the text as 'an attack […], satirizing [the group], depicting their petty squabbles, their male chauvinism, and so on'.[90] This distortion of Burns's attempt to provide 'subtle characterizations of people [he] did not see simply as heros or heroines, but with whom [he] had many sympathies'[91] is indicative of how his attempt 'to find a language that was accessible' backfired.[92] The moment seems to encapsulate how Burns's work's indirect compliance with the forms of representation supporting a postwar literary community came at the cost of how his experimental poetics used failure to explore the limits of collective forms of identification.

The reports of the International Literary Festival organized by John Calder in August 1969 provide an introduction to the final way this chapter considers how Burns's work was inhibited by its interactions with postwar English culture. Bill Webb remembers the festival for the moment in which 'the local CID made nervous enquiries about the possible arrival from California of a certain Professor Marcuse, perhaps fearing a neo-Marxist uprising of the Spa's ardent youth'.[93] It turned out that the festival drew attention for the nonappearance of Marcuse and the other speakers it had advertised as the conference was characterized, in Oliver Pritchett's words, by 'euphoria and high expectations followed by disappointment and gloom'.[94] In the midst of the conference's 'melodrama, drawing room comedy, and absurdity worthy of Ionesco', Pritchett mentions that Johnson 'called for a writer's cooperative and threw three darts

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[85] Burns, *Angry Brigade*, p. 122.
[86] Reeve, 'Reflections on "Fictionality"', p. 121.
[87] Burns, *Angry Brigade*, p. 178, p. 179.
[88] Reeve, 'Reflections on "Fictionality"', pp. 121-122, p. 122.
[89] Burns, *Angry Brigade*, p. 2.
[90] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 128.
[91] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 128.
[92] Burns, interviewed by Sugnet, p. 164.
[93] Webb, 'Calder', p. 64.
[94] Oliver Pritchett, 'Harrogate Festival: the writer tomorrow', *Guardian*, 11 August 1969, p. 7.

into the audience'.[95] Burns's part in the festival's theatrics is recounted by John Hall. During the closing words of the festival, 'a local dignitary […] made a point of singling out Alan Burns, and ask[ed] him, especially, among the politicizing poets, to remember the affairs of the spirit'.[96] Hall provides the following account of Burns's reaction:

> Mr Burns snatched the mike, and offered the assembled notaries an impromptu quotation from Artaud. The poem he chose was entitled "Shit to the Spirit". Charles Marowitz, also a fan of Artaud and a man clearly in sympathy with the kernel of Burns's argument strode across the stage and said: "I commission you to write a play."[97]

Charles Marowitz was a theatre director and critic who, with a grant from the Arts Council, helped establish the Open Space Theatre in 1968.[98] The theatre staged, in Jinnie Schiele's words, Marowitz's 'Shakespeare "cut-ups" or "collages"'[99], which aimed, as Marowitz put it, 'to test or challenge, revoke or destroy the intellectual foundation which makes a classic the formidable thing it has become'.[100] Marowitz's description of his version of *Hamlet* as an '"exercise in Burroughs-like cut-ups"' suggests that his aesthetics crossed over with Burns's.[101]

The play Burns devised with Marowitz for the Open Space Theatre, *Palach*, was intended to critique how, in his words, '"the media […] continuously bombard us with stimuli of every kind, with the result that before one event can be taken in and valued its place is quickly taken by something else"'.[102] For Burns, the way events are '"negated in ruthless fashion by the media"' was epitomized by its treatment of Jan Palach, a Czechoslovakian student, whose self-immolation in 1969 was part of a protest against the Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring.[103] The play sought to '"upset[…] the normal relationship between audience and players"'; Burns outlined to Kitchen how '"the audience is placed in the centre of the theatre with four or five acting areas around it, creating a sense of continuous, scattered activity throughout the

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[95] Pritchett, 'Harrogate Festival', p. 7.
[96] Hall, 'Novels from the Unconscious', p. 10.
[97] Hall, 'Novels from the Unconscious', p. 10.
[98] Jinnie Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages: Fringe Theatre at the Open Space and the Round House 1968-1983* (London: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005), p. 4.
[99] Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages*, p. 15.
[100] Charles Marowitz, *The Marowitz Shakespeare: Adaptations and Collages of* 'Hamlet', 'Macbeth', 'The Taming of the Shrew', 'Measure for Measure' *and* 'The Merchant of Venice' (London: Boyars, 1978), p. 24.
[101] Quoted in Hewison, *Too Much*, p. 91.
[102] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Surrealism and sculpture', p. 21.
[103] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Surrealism and sculpture', p. 21.

evening"'.[104] *Palach* is composed of a series of sequences in which '*two or more stages are used simultaneously*': '*ON STAGE 4: The* BOY *and* GIRL *together go through a simple repetitive mime of factory work, making appropriate sounds. ON STAGE 2:* MUM *and* DAD *converse in advertising slogans*'.[105] Schiele highlights that '[a]t no point in the production was there any attempt to show the physical act of martyrdom on stage'.[106] Instead the play cites the letter of Palach's group, which stated they were 'prepared to burn themselves in the literal meaning of the word, for freedom and democracy in Czechoslovakia' with the hope of 'arous[ing] the conscience of the nation'.[107] The words of Palach's group are read by 'BOY', whose attempts to relate to Palach's action, and the 'split between the public figure and this private person', come in and out of earshot throughout the play. 'BOY' contemplates '– the idea of being dead, being detached form life –' and how it might approximate 'an attempt, if not to silence, then to answer those voices', while 'PRIEST' projects advertising slogans and 'MUM' and 'DAD' recycle aphorisms and clichés.[108] As the play progresses 'BOY' '*grows aware of his own ineffectiveness*' as he '*leav*[es] *the chorus to continue without opposition*': '*The din resumes. The* BOY *fails to get through to any of the players; equally he fails to communicate with the audience. Resigned, he sits down among the audience and joins them in watching the spectacle*'.[109] Where, as we have seen, McEwan's calculated use narrative strategies in *Sweet Tooth* appears to temper formal and linguistic experimentation in order to reinforce a form of consensus, Burns's play offers a tenuous critique of conforming to apparent norms of the public; it accentuates how 'BOY', before he blends in with the audience '*watching the spectacle*', '*rushes about the theatre desperately approaching each player in turn, trying to communicate the words of Palach's letter, above the din*'.[110] The play may reflect how the risks Burns's work took in its address to others were liable to be neutralized by its participation in English culture; the play draws attention to the 'BOY's' '*fail*[ing]' attempts to address characters and the audience with the words of another, as if to call for a recognition of the desperation and vulnerability of radical forms of political protest.[111] Burns's texts thus hints at a relationship between radical modes of dissent and literary forms of experimentation by foregrounding how they can share a sense of failure. In the section that follows we will see how Burns's experimental poetics reinvents this failure to address an audience so as to impress a tension

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[104] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Surrealism and sculpture', p. 21.
[105] Alan Burns, 'Palach', in *Open Space Plays*, selected by Charles Marowitz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 197, p. 202.
[106] Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages*, p. 48.
[107] Burns, 'Palach', p. 226.
[108] Burns, 'Palach', p. 209, p. 217.
[109] Burns, 'Palach', p. 232, p. 240.
[110] Burns, 'Palach', p. 240.
[111] Burns, 'Palach', p. 240.

between the claims of the other and the limiting conventions of the public in postwar English culture.

Burns's Cut-Up Technique and Witold Gombrowicz's Dissolution of Form

The second half of this chapter suggests how we might interpret Burns's experimental poetics as dramatizing the tension between an exposure to the alterity of the other and their eclipse by the projection of seemingly harmonious notions of community. In the readings of Surrealist and innovative artists and writers that comprise his article 'Writing by chance', Burns intimates that his working method involves 'a constant alternation between the aware and the needed unknown', and that it welcomes 'non-rational perceptions […], unpredictable connections' only for 'successive drafts' to 'coast closer to rationality'.[112] Burns's aleatoric working method stems from (and cites) Surrealist artistic practices, such as Paul Éluard's claim that '"Images think for me"', and André Breton's contention that '"Not thought lead to word, but word explode into thought"'.[113] If Burns's working method revives the Surrealist impulse to, in Jeanette Baxter's words, 'subvert established understandings of the modern world as rational, ordered and homogenous', we can outline how Burns's aesthetics of failure and fragmentation challenged the public's absorption of the alterity of the other by turning to his engagement with Gombrowicz's texts.

Burns's 'cut-up review' of Gombrowicz's work appeared in the creative writing magazine of Morley College, *More*, in 1975.[114] The congruity of drawing on Burns's engagement with Gombrowicz's work to devise a way to read an ethical exposure to the other in his cut-up texts is emphasized by Ziarek's interpretation of Gombrowicz's work. Ziarek suggests that the 'sensationalism and obscurity' of Gombrowicz's texts stems from the 'linguistic, cultural, and political barriers [that] tended to conspire against him and separate his work from his audience'.[115] Gombrowicz's texts were, as Ziarek clarifies,

> written in Argentina […] where he could not at first even understand the language; published in Paris, where they were available only to the

[112] Burns, 'Writing by chance', pp. 11-12.
[113] Quoted in Burns, 'Writing by chance', p. 12.
[114] *More* was the product of the 'magazine workshop' offered at the London adult education college from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Burns ran the class in 1974 before his partner Carol took over the role and the editing of the magazine.
[115] Ziarek, 'Introduction', p. 2.

> narrow circle of the émigré community; and banned in his native Poland, where he was considered a dissident writer.[116]

In *The Rhetoric of Failure* Ziarek elaborates on how Gombrowicz's texts warn against an unquestioned promotion of dissidence, and expose the limits of the proclivity to construct communal or identity-based social movements. Ziarek's outline of how the 'aporetic structure of aesthetic form' in Gombrowicz's work points 'to the excess of alterity in the collective conditions of enunciation' will serve as a guideline for my reading of Burns's 'review', and how we can read the tension between an exposure to the other and a discursive community in his 'cut-up' novels.[117]

Under the subtitle 'Mind Body Criticism Lament', Burns's 'review' imitates the styles and concerns of Gombrowicz's writing through citations, collages and rewritings of his texts. The review opens in the following way:

> To begin with, my universe is devoid of God. In this universe men create one another. I see man as dependent on man: I see him in perpetual relationship of creation with others, penetrating "the others" who prompt his most personal feelings.[118]

Burns is drawn to how Gombrowicz's work has 'always tried to enhance that "Interhuman sphere"' through 'the dimensions of a creative Force – much higher than mere individual consciousness': 'it is between men that the Form which determines us – each one, as an individual – is born'.[119] The review touches upon, in Ziarek's view, the 'central concern of [Gombrowicz's] work': 'the imperative of Form'.[120] Ziarek stresses that it is easy to neutralize 'the stakes of Gombrowicz's aesthetics if we confuse his persistent preoccupation with form – or, rather, his obsessive dissolution of form – with the aestheticism of high modernism'.[121] Gombrowicz, in Ziarek's words, 'rigorously opposes aesthetic formalism' by 'parodying the

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[116] Ziarek, 'Introduction', p. 2.
[117] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 20, p. 212.
[118] Alan Burns, 'Gombrowicz: Mind Body Criticism Lament', *More*, 1 (Spring, 1975), 24-25, p. 24
[119] Burns, 'Gombrowicz', p. 24.
[120] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 203.
[121] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 203.

stance of high modernism with its "aseptic-aristocratic" view of the artist', and by criticizing 'the reduction of "the gigantic problem" of Form to an aesthetic category'.[122]

Ziarek sheds light on what she calls the 'signification of alterity' in Gombrowicz's work by placing his text's entwinement of the '"Interhuman Sphere"' and 'Form' 'in the context of Wittgenstein's "forms of life"', or 'the intersubjective and intra-linguistic constitution of meaning'.[123] Burns's review evokes 'forms of life' in its outline of the way Gombrowicz's texts 'rigorously oppose aesthetic formalism'[124]:

> Is not everyone an artist? Does mankind create art only when seated at a desk in front of a sheet of paper? Is not art continually being created in the course of everyday life? When a girl puts a rose in her hair, when we make a good joke in the course of an agreeable conversation, when we exchange confidences at dusk, is not that art?[125]

Gombrowicz refuses, in Ziarek's words, to 'appeal to an aesthetic synthesis of form and life in order to stabilize or reconcile the diverse effects of language games', as, one could argue, a 'public' might; 'form' and 'life' are 'caught in a contradiction', an 'antinomy', which 'Gombrowicz places at the very core of aesthetics'.[126] Gombrowicz articulates this contradiction in the following way: 'Here's another antinomy: he alone will know what Form is who never moves a step away from the full intensity of the whirlwind of life'.[127] Burns approaches the 'antimony' of 'forms of life' when he presents Gombrowicz's suggestion that 'you must take' a step whose 'possibilities are so unlimited and its consequences so devastating that it is only softy and afar that my lips shall mention it': 'Try to set yourself against form, try to shake free of it. Cease to identify yourself with that which defines you'.[128] Though 'it is between' persons that 'the Form which determines – each one, as an individual – is born', there is, according to Gombrowicz, an imperative 'to set yourself against, to try to shake free'.[129] Ziarek contends that it is 'the dissolution of form' in Gombrowicz's work that 'neither simply reproduc[es] nor

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[122] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 203, p. 204.
[123] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 204, p. 31.
[124] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 203.
[125] Burns, 'Gombrowicz', p. 24.
[126] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 204.
[127] Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, edited by Dominique de Roux, translated by Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder & Boyars, 1973), pp. 72-73.
[128] Burns, 'Gombrowicz', p. 24.
[129] Burns, 'Gombrowicz', p. 24.

repudiat[es] common forms of life'; rather the aporetic structure of form 'registers the breakdown of the intersubjective grammar in a "direct" encounter with the other'.[130]

Gombowicz's contradictory dissolutions of 'form' question, in Ziarek's view, 'the subordination of otherness to social totality, or to "such abstractions as social class, state, nation, and race"'.[131] Ziarek's outline of how Gombrowicz's work's 'dissolution of form' articulates a 'conflict between the unpredictable encounters with others and the […] intersubjective grammar' of a community gives us a way to detect a similar tension in Burns's description of his 'cut-up' technique.[132] Reflecting on the working method of his early novels on the radio in 1983, Burns recalls how he tried to alleviate his fear that he was 'going to lose [his reader] after every sentence' by 'keep[ing] a terrific tension going'; he 'focused on the quality of the sentence, the quality of the language, the leap from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph, the leap from image to image'.[133] Burns's evocation of the 'leaps' between sentences, paragraphs, and images insinuate 'forms' or uses of language that uphold the cohesion of a public, as these 'leaps' are equated with a means of not 'los[ing]' his reader.[134] In contrast, Burns suggests that the 'nervous and very precarious process' of 'working in fragments' entails preserving a 'very tenuous line' to the 'unconscious, the instinctive', which at once makes and breaks the 'leaps' structuring his text's engagement with the conventions of a discursive community:

> one can't keep that line open for very long. There is a sort of nervous charge that supplies an image, a fragment of dialogue, a line or two, and then it seems to die, and you've got to stop, pause, and start again.[135]

Though Burns thematizes the 'nervous charge' that structures and withdraws from his work as the 'unconscious, the instinctive', the social uncertainties that, as we have seen, are entangled in his cut-up technique or 'disconnection' suggests that we could read the way this 'nervous charge' 'die[s]' as analogous to the 'dissolution of form' enacted by Gombrowicz's texts.[136] The 'death' of his text's 'nervous charge' suggests a 'disconnection' in the construction of a

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[130] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 205.
[131] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 212.
[132] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 213.
[133] 'Plot or Not'.
[134] 'Plot or Not'.
[135] 'Plot or Not'.
[136] 'Plot or Not'.

discursive community; the temporal discontinuity between the 'death' of the 'nervous charge and the 'pause' that marks its withdrawal suggests a disruption of the notion of discursive community based on continuity and reciprocity between speakers. We might parallel the temporal discontinuity animating Burns's working method, and which suggests a breakdown of the relation between subject and community, to Levinas's suggestion that 'my responsibility for others' is imposed '[d]espite me' through a 'gratuitous lapse' that marks the other's 'refusal of the present'.[137] In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas reiterates how the 'subject is for another' insofar as the 'loss of time is not the work of a subject': 'it is not possible that responsibility for another devolve from a *free* commitment, that is, a present; it exceeds every actual or represented present. […] [T]his refusal to be assembled into a representation, has its own way to concern me: the *lapse*'.[138] Levinas presents how obligation for another 'occurs' as this 'lapse' by suggesting that the relation to the other is a '[d]iachrony' and 'refusal of conjunction', which disturbs the constitution of subject and community by always already escaping their attempts to theamtize or recuperate it.[139] In my readings of *Europe After the Rain* and *Celebrations* I will outline how these texts enact a tension between discursive communities and the alterity of encounters with others through their repeated collapse of the 'leaps' or forms of representation, which attempt to harmonize voices and language use at the expense of the 'lapse' that points to having been called to respond to the other.

Dislocations of the Public in *Europe After the Rain* and *Celebrations*

Burns pieced together *Europe After the Rain* having chanced upon Max Ernst's painting (which provides the text's title and cover jacket), 'a journalist's report on life in Poland after the war', and a 'verbatim record of the Nuremberg trials'.[140] *Europe After the Rain* describes, as the critic in the *New Left Review* put it, 'an unnamed foreigner's search for an unnamed girl in an unspecified country of Europe devastated by a war which continues or perhaps has finished'.[141] When he was asked whether the 'namelessness' of *Europe After the Rain* was 'deliberate on [his] part', Burns queried the interviewer's use of the 'word deliberate': 'I feel the word is inappropriate, because it implies a degree of control I deliberately (!) eschew'.[142] Burns goes on to elaborate on the contradictory way *Europe After the Rain* aims to

[137] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 11.
[138] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 52, p. 51.
[139] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 11.
[140] Burns, 'Essay', p. 65.
[141] F., 'Europe After the Rain', p. 96.
[142] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 125.

> avoid any suggestion of an absolute, purportedly "accurate" statement as to what happened or where we are or what role a particular character plays in the novel. Look again, and – see it ain't so – the opposite may as well be true. As soon as the reader is beginning to feel secure in the world I've made for him, it "slips," he slithers; me too.[143]

Burns's work's paradoxical attempt to produce uncertainty is reflected by the struggles to describe *Europe After the Rain*; Angus Wilson's suggestion that the novel is an 'exploration of the psycho/political/life/language/thought/action or our age' echoes the *New Left Review*'s observation on the novel's 'unnameable' characteristics.[144] The text's disjoined clauses and pervasive epistemic instabilities evoke the difficulties that faced attempts to reconstruct country and community in the postwar era, while still stunned, as Burns put it, by 'brutality'.[145] The novel's continual break down of discursive communities that claim to rebuild the 'nameable' keeps the text from doing, as Burns feared, a '"murderous thing"' by making a '"novel out the concentration camps"'; the text's disconnections emphasize contradictions or 'slips' and 'slithers' that call attention to how the misrepresentation of communities and manipulations of cultural forms is complicit with the violent oppression of the alterity of the other.[146]

The novel opens with a woman, who is in the '"care"' of the narrator '"until she has contacted her family"', making an excursion across a river to an area in which a 'commander' appears to have overthrown the woman's 'father' from power.[147] The couple cross the 'deeply frayed planks' of a 'wooden' bridge as the 'modern bridge had been demolished': 'the permanent bridge, massive steel and concrete, was still half completed' (p. 7). The bridge, which is at once 'permanent' and 'half completed' (p. 7), could be the first figure of the text's disconnections, which, in Burns's words, sets up a 'contract' that allows it to 'slip in and out of the rational'; this 'contract' is 'iterated and reiterated (implicitly, by conduct) consistently throughout'.[148] On the other side of the bridge, the narrator notes how 'Girls stood in a circle singing a patriotic song', while the woman in his care 'would not join them' (p. 9). The woman's hesitation before participating in the communities and cultural practices that have

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[143] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 124.
[144] Wilson's description appears on the back cover of Alan Burns, *Babel* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1969).
[145] Burns, 'Essay', p. 65.
[146] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Surrealism and sculpture', p. 21.
[147] Alan Burns, *Europe After the Rain* (London: John Calder, 1965), p. 8. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.
[148] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 125

appeared in the wake of her father's rule comes in the light of the crimes her father committed against these people. Her father's war crimes are insinuated by the couple's visit to a makeshift orphanage. When the couple ask a 'boy' his name, they expose an irreparable flaw in the orphanage's attempt to reconstruct and 'writ[e] down' a 'history' (p. 10) for these children: 'No one knew his parents, they had disappeared, absolutely, he wasn't sure of his name, it had been signed away to someone else' (p. 11). In response to the narrator's questions 'about the boy', the woman says, '"I don't know whether I should tell you. It was done without my knowledge. These young people. If I had known I should not have allowed it"' (p. 11). Similarly, the woman's wavering position between the harm perpetrated under her family's rule and the new administration's tenuous cultural repair is reflected by her own inability to account for her past. The narrator's suggestion that the woman will come to learn a 'normal' way of 'life' (p. 15) is disrupted as we find out she was 'illiterate, completely untrained' (p. 20) and has difficulty clarifying whether other members of her family have died: '"I wish to know how many you were." "Five." "And how many left?" Silence' (p. 21).

After being separated from the woman, the narrator 'co-operate[s]' (p. 25) with the commander and troops that control the country, participating in the 'commander's' misrepresentation of community, and what his side call the 'presence of bandits' (p. 17). The commander informs the narrator of how

> "These bandits are becoming a problem. […] They have lost the habits of civilised life. These filthy people are driving us out of this decent town which we have made. They are a lower order of human beings, […] they are not willing to obey orders, so their decency is gone" (p. 54).

The commander's circulation of the view that the 'bandits' are '"a pest"' that '"attack farms"', '"kill animals"' and '"drink their blood"' (p. 39) is counteracted by their nonappearance. In their place, the narrator notes how 'people came to look at us, old people arrived in procession, women whose houses had been burned down, who had gone for months without food, […] faces dull purple, women blood-red tipped, men faded' (p. 26). The incongruity of the commander's denunciation of the 'bandits' for their lack of '"civic pride"' (p. 43) is amplified by the way that the desolate people 'brought us tea which was excellent' (p. 26). Indeed, the description of the 'bandits' comes to seem a fitting reflection of the commander's troops as the narrator reports how they 'went round systematically burning and blowing up buildings' (p. 26), 'held up a car and robbed the passengers, the driver had been taken out and shot' (p. 27). At one point the

narrator appears to succumb to the commander's violent oppression of people, as, in view of the robbing and execution, he suggests 'I had discovered the fun in such business' (p. 28). The narrator's inclination towards the commander's way of 'business' (p. 28) is disturbed by his encounter with a 'woman with brown hair' who welcomes him into a house 'in darkness' after 'the troops had gone':

> she couldn't sit still, leaning her face against mine she continued to tremble. She started to tell about the hanging, she tried to explain why she got the words twisted, but she could not. She held the light, the words got lost. I waited. Her thin face, she lived in the dark (p. 27).

Where the commander's troops literally and metaphorically light up the world by burning buildings and illuminating others of the ways of 'bandits', the woman at once 'h[o]ld[s] the light' on the horror she has witnessed but 'live[s] in the dark' (p. 27). The tension between the woman at once 'h[o]ld[ing] the light' on violence she has seen and 'liv[ing] in the dark' (p. 27) is emphasized by the text's disjointed syntax. The woman's words, 'twisted' and then 'lost', jars the commander's claim to represent and rule the country as it upsets the misrepresentation of the people as a malevolent social body of 'bandits' with narrator's proximity to the woman's 'trembl[ing]' (p. 27) body, as if insinuating an ethical exposure to the other.

The narrator's status, which could be that of 'a foreigner' (p. 35) 'who ha[s] been sent to study documents' (p. 30) or one among other 'envoys' (p. 76) 'reporting interviews' (p. 75), allows him to move between the two sides of the conflict. Consequently, we see how a similar process of domination to that of the commander's resurfaces through the party of the woman's father. '[H]er father's name' comes to 'disturb[…] the country' (p. 52) through the process of re-education witnessed by the narrator. The father ushers the narrator into, what he calls, '"the schoolroom"' (p. 31), and the narrator watches as the father's son 'teach[es] arithmetic to a class of about fifty older men' only to realize that the lesson 'seemed to consist mostly of history' (p. 32). The father's pedagogy is distributed through the 'propaganda speeches' the son is 'required' to broadcast; the speeches claim that '"our leader will revolutionize the country, restoring it to its former high position among the nations"' and impress that the father is '"[a] perfect gentleman"' whose '"charming wife, clever son and pretty daughter complete the family group"' (p. 74). The narrator sees through the father's attempt to reclaim his purchase on the people through the projection of a faultless family group as he notes that 'rules, dress, system of life, were those of the army' (p. 34). Nevertheless the father's 'system of life' (p. 34) and promotion of a '"complete […] family group"' (p. 74) seems to leave the narrator and the son

speechless; the son is said to be 'incapable of writing, he had never written a single word, he "spouted" what others composed' (p. 73), and at a 'luncheon' hosted by the father, the narrator, a 'guest of honour', reports how 'I could not speak. I attempted without the aid of grammar' (p. 81). These collapses in an ability to write and speak are enacted through the narrator's numb tone and disjointed notes, which subtly undo the father's spurious reconstruction of the nation through the family by impressing how utter devastation has left tears and gaps in his ability to report events: 'I could not find out, men and women were falling, soldiers caught disease, the schools were turned into hospital, thousands died' (p. 81).

The novel closes with the narrator and the woman's 'attempt to escape' (p. 101) the skewed cultures and systems of power constructed by the warring sides of the 'father' and the 'commander'. Though their journey is presented as one of no return – 'I would be carrying dynamite if a shot should strike my back' (p. 101) – the narrator and the woman are aware that 'in the end liberty would again lead to capture' (p. 102); a reminder of the rule of the state they have left behind emerges as 'men approached' who, even though '[t]hey could not understand our language', 'checked our papers' (p. 102). Before their inevitable return, the couple disrupt how the 'outside was closing in on us' (p. 104): 'I felt a vibration between us, we communicated, and though we no longer overlapped, a space was formed, enclosed' (p. 103). The narrator's claim to a 'we' is disturbed by the discontinuous relation in which he and the woman do not coincide and 'overlap' (p. 103). Their relationship, which may have fleetingly registered a discord between the claims of a communal 'we' and the other's alterity, is defused once they have been drawn back home; a 'state doctor' orders the 'child [to] be removed or the mother would die' (p. 118). Where neither the narrator nor the doctor 'wanted to tell' the woman about her child, their fears are countered by the way 'She knew' (p. 118). The collapse of the narrator and the woman's attempt to find a way to depart from the emergence of communities underwriting the reestablishment of the 'father's' control over the nation is announced at the end of the text, as the woman seems to acquiesce with the view that her father is '"a man, a man whom a woman could desire for a husband"' (p. 128).

Though *Celebrations* echoes *Europe After the Rain* by presenting, in David Madden's words, 'a family chronicle […] punctuated by surreal interruptions of the placid or predictable', it supplants the numbness of Burns's second novel with a highly energized and ironic tone.[149] Burns suggests that *Celebrations*'s 'leaps between images are greater, the juxtapositions bolder, the risks crazier' than in *Europe After the Rain*.[150] Equally, *Celebrations*'s representation of

[149] David W. Madden, 'Alan Burns: An Introduction', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 17:2 (Summer, 1997), 108-121, p. 112.
[150] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 127.

dominant public spheres, such as the church, the courts, the press and big business, are more distinct than the amorphous factions that remould the nation in Burns's previous novel.[151] *Celebrations* focuses on the unravelling of a family through the struggles to control a 'factory', offering a cutting parody of how, as Burns put it, 'late capitalism […] needs educated, skilled even imaginative workers to produce sophisticated competitive products. Yet, those workers must not get ideas above their station'.[152] In his review of the novel, Johnson points out that the factory is 'particularised, made specific down to close detail, to trivia even; but we never know where it is, its capital structure, or the extent of its buildings or operations'.[153] 'Delaying until the last minute any notion of what the book was about', Burns composed the book by 'assembl[ing] a series of heavy public rituals: marriages, funerals, wakes, steadily growing grander until they tipped over into absurdity'.[154] The text's repeated undoing of distorted publics could reflect how Burns's work articulates an anxiety about the eclipse and reification of social relations in a burgeoning consumer culture. Since the 'public rituals' act, in Burns's words, 'as substitutes for personal relating'[155], we might consider the text's charged parataxis to disrupt its presentation of the commercial exploitation of public discourses by, as Anne Duchene put it, 'continually making copious precise detail lurch over and melt into contradiction', as if to preserve the equivocal disturbance of the approach of the other.[156]

Johnson's review provides an overview of the characters and plot of, in his words, the novel's 'hackneyed dynastic theme':

> *Celebrations* has four main characters: Williams, an industrialist, Michael and Phillip his sons, and Jacqueline, wife in turn to each son and mistress of the father. The action consists of a struggle for power to run the factory: Phillip dies after a shopfloor accident for which Michael seems responsible, Williams declines into Lear-like disrespect, senility, neglect and madness, and the survivor of the four is ironically the one least interested in power.[157]

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[151] Reeve, 'Reflections on "Fictionality"', p. 116, p. 117.
[152] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 142.
[153] B. S. Johnson, 'Originalities', *New Statesman*, 17 November 1967, pp. 684-685, p. 684.
[154] Burns, 'Essay', p. 66.
[155] Burns, 'Essay', p. 67.
[156] Anne Duchene, 'Insubstantial fictions', *Guardian*, 29 September 1967, p. 7.
[157] Johnson, 'Originalities', p. 694.

The opening sentence of *Celebrations* establishes the tone of Williams's precarious company: 'Certain accidents had culminated in the wash-out of the year'.[158] The 'accidents' that have troubled the factory stem from how Williams had 'lost his nerve': 'the loss in reputation cost thousands, it was all over. The photographers took pictures' (p. 6). In the wake of his company's crisis in reputation, Williams is 'aware not of his technological achievement but of his need for a show of confidence in his calculations' (p. 6); a 'metal pylon' with 'a flag at the top' [...] is planted' in the 'factory forecourt', and has a 'new piece added every day' to 'help combat nervous strain' (p. 7). Williams's factory is one in which 'sweat [is] an anachronism' as 'production was becoming no more than a branch of mathematical sciences', and 'morale' is considered 'a substance with a practical use, it was tracked and weighed and reduced to a mark on a graph' (p. 7). The company's shaky construction of its 'confidence' (p. 6), which all but outweighs what it produces, pervades and characterizes Williams and his workers; Williams is 'a gambler waiting for something to snap, for success or failure, it was a matter of routine' (p. 5), while at weekends his workers spend 'their time playing with the slot-machines they had built in their spare time' (p. 6). If '[c]ertain accidents' (p. 5) are perceived to be at the root of their slump in business, Williams's factory is obsessed with developing 'calculations', languages and working routines capable of anticipating the accidents that might make or break its 'show of confidence' (p. 6). It is this attempt to contain the unpredictable that Burns's parataxis subverts, and thus calls attention to the alterity of the other all but eclipsed by the factory's shaping of the public.

The text presents the factory's edgy atmosphere through, in Sugnet's words, a 'poetry of disjuncture' in which a comma acts 'not [as] a simple connector, but [as] a wormhole between unrelated universes', and characters are 'contradictory bundles of textual references'.[159] The shaky tone of Williams's factory shapes the relationship between his sons; we see Michael and Phillip 'standing by, fiddling with the wiring inside a home-made slot-machine' (p. 6). When Phillip is perceived to have 'bent his head' at his brother's mocking question, '"Does he work here?"', Michael is convinced that Phillip's weak 'attitude demanded paralysis, a blow on the back of the neck' but restrains himself in case he exacerbates how his brother has putatively jeopardized the company's confidence: 'the move would have taken up too much time, dislocated work schedules' (p.10). The moment in which Phillip's 'accident' occurs sends a shockwave through the factory, as if there has been a sudden setback in its routines:

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[158] Alan Burns, *Celebrations* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1967), p. 5. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.
[159] Sugnet, 'Burns's Aleatoric *Celebrations*', p. 197, p. 196, p. 198.

> Phillip's strained eyes moved slowly and read a word, he looked beyond his brother, the workshop seemed longer than a train, dark, more dramatic. He wanted to dream peacefully, for hours, before it became too cold. He tried to speak, his throat caught on a note. The workshop startled, conversation ceased with a click. From the floor, the menace of a lunatic. (p. 12)

Though Phillip's dissonant 'note' perforates the factory's 'conversation' and draws attention to a 'look of help', Michael 'would not chance getting involved by kneeling down' to aid his brother, and other workers also refuse 'to take the slightest risk of losing a day's pay by being called away' (p. 13). Having let his cry fall into silence, the factory absorbs Phillip's unpredictable appeal and re-establishes its working routine through its doctor, who calculates the odds of the accident at '"a hundred to one"' and recommends '"A few glasses of sherry will restore [Phillip's] confidence"' (p. 15). Ironically, it is only at the point that Phillip's sees 'no sense in delay[ing]' how the 'air held death lined up and waiting' that he fleetingly restores his 'confidence': 'Phillip pulled back his sleeve to look at his watch, he did it well, with confidence, his eyes on the other. His wife's mouth an absent guest. "Nothing but bad dreams." Whatever he was made of fell to pieces' (p. 17). That there is no response to Phillip in his last vulnerable moments in hospital insinuates the first of a series of a silences that, as we shall see, increasingly disrupt the company's attempts to sustain its confidence through public ceremonies.

In order to uphold the way its workers are '[s]ealed off by routine' and to 'help[…] to sustain morale' (p. 13), the 'factory management' try to alleviate the shock of Phillip's death through his 'funeral arrangements': 'Morale demanded that they be magnificent' (p. 18). Similarly, the company seeks to reconstruct 'morale' through its manipulation of the inquest into Phillip's death, and its circulation of the claim that it is '"reduce[ing] hazards"' (pp. 18-19). Williams makes sure that the 'inquest was [...] conducted by one of those institutions under managerial control' and subjects the event to the 'meticulous supervision' of 'lawyers':

> The two judges resembled each other and all lawyers resembled them, they were dressed alike, without charm, no love on their faces which showed two black curves on the head, imitation eyebrows, a nose and lips, apparently a face, which could be studied (p. 22).

The text's presentation of a seemingly seamless and identical legal collective, who advise, '"In a strange country, be prepared for surprises"' (p. 23), accentuates how the construction of a public body is entwined with the attempt to diminish the disturbing and unpredictable condition of having been called to respond to and for the other. Where Phillip's widow, Jacqueline, complies with the factory's orchestration of the inquest and its attempt to rebuild its public discourse by 'sp[eaking] perfectly, a flute learning the alphabet, no letter forgotten' (p. 23), Michael's occupation of the stand unsettles the court: 'the young man's voice altered, it was noted the way it changed. "His voice tends to fall"' (p. 25). We might consider the way Michael's voice is 'altered' and then 'lost' (p. 25) during the inquest to indicate that the echo of Phillip's throat getting 'caught on a note' (p. 12) continues to haunt the company's attempts to overcome the disturbance his accident has caused to their public. Indeed, the disjunction between Phillip's 'note' (p. 12) and the way the lawyers at once admit and pacify its reiteration in Michael's intonation by having it 'noted' (p. 25) is re-enacted in the words between Michael and Williams that follow the inquest. Williams warns Michael that the tremor in his voice '"was your last blunder"' only for Michael's response to straightaway subvert Williams's attempt to defend against future 'blunders' as he repeats Phillip's last faltering attempt to sustain his confidence: 'Michael pulled back his sleeve to look at is watch, he did it well, with confidence, his eyes on the other. "Never mind, nothing but bad dreams"' (p. 26). The moment impresses that the family's efforts to sustain public confidence in the factory cannot escape the '"bad dreams"' (p. 26) of those that have already broken the routines and language that sustain it; the disturbing iteration of Phillip's death insinuates how the public spheres of the court and church propping up the business are always already exposed to the unpredictable address of the other.

That the public rituals of the funeral and inquest have been ineffective in their attempt to restore the factory's confidence is evident in the text's suggestion that the 'interminable feud continued. The worm of guilt produced a stifled silence' (p. 30). The next 'stifled silence' that continues the disintegration in the factory's confidence emerges as Williams's authority gives way to Michael and Jacqueline's marriage. The text hints at Williams's demise through its representation of the fringes of Jacqueline and Michael's wedding and the celebrations that follow it. The force of the wedding's address to the public is emphasized by the way the cathedral's 'roof shook' as the 'priest intoned and the choir sang': 'the building trembled and the stain glass shone onto the stone floors and the unseen waves of sun made the ancient slates vibrate as thoughtful faces broke against the floor' (p. 59). The jarring image of 'thoughtful faces br[eaking] against the floor' (p. 59) is suspended and all but eclipsed by the way that Williams, Jacqueline and Michael perform their roles at the event. During the ceremony Williams 'slip[s] in' to 'flourish the ring' and 'faultlessly execute[s] the necessary bow' (p. 60). Similarly, Jacqueline 'pray[s] for the first time in her life: it was significant, a great event' (p.

62), while Michael 'kne[els] by the flat-topped block for offerings to the deity' (p. 61). The resurgence in the company's confidence is, however, put in jeopardy by Williams at the end of the ceremony: 'he crawled round in a circle, lay still on the stone floor' (p. 62). Recalling the image of the 'faces [that] broke against the [cathedral] floor' (p. 59), Williams's 'tear-smeared face' and 'bruised lips and eyes' are hidden from the 'congregation' and forgotten thanks to 'Michael's brilliant gesture with the cross' (p. 62).

The silence into which Williams falls resigns the fading notes of his dissidence, and the faint insinuation of Phillips's accident that they might recall, to the lower levels of the factory. The wedding's reconstruction of the family's morale means it is 'Michael's name [that is] justly celebrated' (pp. 71-72), while the 'old man became a memory, a name without distinction' (p. 72). At the same time that the 'firm's name was changed' (p. 78), 'a growing rebellion was observed in Williams with the result that he is transferred from 'the executive to the clerical department' (p. 79). The final disruptive note of Williams's attempt to 'keep his name alive' (p. 72) emerges through the way '[h]is mind diagnosed a burst of sound' only for the 'clerk['s]' questions to muffle him: '"Who said that? Was it you? Are you mad?" Gagged by the other's voice, Williams's eyes blinked in his head: "Hard to say, no, I don't think so" a small dry voice, not his own, "I might have been in error"' (p. 82). The loss of his voice anticipates how his dying plea to be prescribed 'pills to kill his will to struggle for remnants of his life' (p. 84) goes unanswered; Jacqueline 'did not respond, sat as if she could not hear him' (p. 90). Williams's death comes as a 'fatal accident, the marks on the roads where the wheels would come off' (p. 95), as though admitting the breakdown of the routine that his family business tries, fails and fails again to ward off, and inserting another iteration of a call to respond to those persons caught up in the company's accidents.

The novel culminates its amplification of a disjunction between an exposure to the other and the reconstruction of public confidence through a final ceremony, which leads to the collapse of its remaining characters. With 'the body of the father [...] in the quiet house […], the physical family disappearing' (p. 96), Michael and Jacqueline struggle to deal with the public's speculation after Williams's death. Michael tries to counteract how the 'public pressure of malicious gossip increased' (p. 98) by telling 'reporters that during the war he could never remember being frightened when his father was there. "And this remained with me, it is part of my life, my daily routine"' (p. 102). However, the invocation of more 'routines' to restore the factory's show of confidence and subdue the press or 'the shout of life' is more troubling than healing as '[n]either Michael nor Jacqueline slept without mentally marching the ordained miles of the funeral route' (p. 102). After Williams's funeral, Michael and Jacqueline are presented on the point of collapse; Michael 'want[s] comfort' from Jacqueline but, in an echo of Williams's fall at their wedding, he finds 'her on the floor, in the effort to speak she lost consciousness' (p.

106). Though Michael plants 'a new hedge' with 'heavy-duty mesh' to defend 'against invaders' (p. 107) and the pressure of the 'crowds [that] collected like mosquitoes' (p. 102), the 'ice in his shaking glass betrayed him'; the construction of a way to cover his frayed nerves with a semblance of confidence cannot protect him from his sudden and incongruous death: 'Life was still surprisingly good when Michael collapsed in a London street. He lingered for an hour' (pp. 111-112). The death prompts Jacqueline's 'breakdown of confidence' (p. 113) as she faces the insurmountable task of answering for a 'great silence-scape' (p. 115), which might denote the appeals of others that have repeatedly returned to disturb the factory's working routines, with 'none of those tongue-twisting words' (p. 116) that propped up its confidence in public.

Burns's repeated dissolution of manipulations and exploitations of the public in *Celebrations* is indicative of how his work, as Madden puts it, demands that 'readers look unflinchingly at the ways that individuals are destroyed to satisfy greed, competition, and authoritarian control'.[160] Paradoxically, the force of its parody of capitalist forms of control can make what Madden describes as Burns's text's plea 'for an implicit alternative' seem all the more elusive.[161] Indeed, the ethical significance of failure in Burns's experimental texts subtly insinuates itself through the collapse of forms of power; an approach to other seems to be the text's 'implicit alternative', but tracing it depends upon attending to the disconnections that pervade, as Burns put it, his work's 'network of recurrent images': '[his use of disconnection enacts] not a mechanical, exact repetition [of images], but a near-miss, a variation close enough to give the reader that satisfying sense of recognition, […] so that a discernible world slowly emerges, mapped out, always with surprises'.[162] Though his novels might be read as merely proffering brazen and vacuous parodies of institutions and forms of authority, the 'near-misses' and disconnections of Burns's parataxis also impress how his texts seem to constantly admit a nervousness and sense of failure. The implicit vulnerability of his cut-up texts reiterates the ethical significance of his work; where it may, as Burns put it, '"sound pathetic"' to '"want to leave [the world] a little bit better"', his texts shows how the adoption of collective and individual forms of identification are always to some extent inadequate, and thereby enables an approach to the other.

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[160] Madden, 'Alan Burns', p. 120.
[161] Madden, 'Alan Burns', p. 120.
[162] Burns, interviewed by Madden, p. 129.

In conclusion to the chapter, it is perhaps worth reiterating Sugnet's points that Burns 'has always been uncompromisingly political and uncompromisingly avant-garde at the same time', and that '[l]ong before Foucault's *Discipline and Punish,* [he] saw how institutions organized themselves around forms of language, discourses, and he was trying to subvert them'.[163] Yet Burns's uncompromising experimental poetics and radical politics derives some of its unsettling impact from the subtle detail that 'the work demonstrates [it] at the sentence level' rather than relying on an authorial injunction.[164] Even when Burns does assert that, 'I feel it is impossible to understand the world without looking at it to some extent through marxist spectacles', he qualifies and questions his own position by underlining that 'I can't call myself a marxist because I don't live, work or fight that way'.[165] These nervous hesitations that characterize Burns and his work are, I have argued, amplified in his fiction so as to demand that we rethink notions of community and the public in such a way as to try to acknowledge a non-appropriative relation to the other.

One of the risks of Burns attempt to formulate a richer, more fragile and contradictory notion of the relationship between alterity and cultural community is that its rhetoric of failure is mistaken for a withdrawal from social concerns. McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* may perpetuate this misrecognition of an aesthetics of failure through one of the fictions embedded in its narrative, authored by Tom Haley. '*From the Somerset Levels*' comes close to summarizing *Europe After the Rain*:

> [Tom's short novel] described a journey a man makes with his nine-year-old daughter across a ruined landscape of burned-out villages and small towns, [...] where the locals consider themselves lucky to be invited to a celebration dinner [...]. All that functions, though barely, is government itself. [...] On their way to stand in line outside a government office, father and daughter cross the plain at dawn, passing over *vegetables, rotten and trodden down, cardboard boxes, flattened into beds, the remains of fires* […].[166]

[163] Sugnet, 'Burns's Aleatoric *Celebrations*', p. 194, pp. 194-195.
[164] Sugnet, 'Burns's Aleatoric *Celebrations*', p. 194.
[165] Alan Burns, interviewed by Charles Sugnet, in *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods*, ed. by Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London: Allison and Busby, 1981), pp. 161-168, p. 167.
[166] McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 194.

Serena suggests that the text reflects 'an easy nihilism' 'inherited from Samuel Beckett [...] in which the human condition was a man lying alone at the end of things'; she asserts that this nihilism 'knows nothing of the difficulties of public administration in a democracy'.[167] Though *Sweet Tooth*'s subtle and understated irony subverts its apparent dismissal of postwar experimental fiction, the tenuous surrealist link between Burns and McEwan hints that the text may owe more to the Burns's work than is acknowledged by its metafictional twist; McEwan's novel affirms that Burns's work continues to haunt and question the formation of a national literary culture, even as its careful deployment of experimental narrative strategies risks perpetuating the conditions for the public's misrecognition of his fiction.

[167] McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 196.

5. ‘Trailed Through Minds of Her Time’: Disorientations of the Public in Ann Quin’s Experimental Fiction

Introduction

A portrait of a seemingly forgotten innovator of postwar literature, Ann Quin, appears in Robert Creeley’s ‘Mabel: A Story’[1]:

> HEARSAY. M’s determination at times to be singular, so proposes a sadly endless consequence of herself shall be trailed through minds of her time like roses. She wants to count, and does, as she puts it, count. She is a large, rather sturdy young woman. She does not particularly enjoy this aspect of herself except that it carries her through, so to speak. She can be, variously, the expected demure young lady, or else the bar-stool swinging drunk broad. It doesn’t really seem to matter that much to her.[2]

‘M’, whose singularity leaves a ‘sadly endless consequence of herself’ haunting the ‘minds of her time’, deviates from Mabel, who is reduced to a ‘thing’ through the lens of ‘*Ma belle*’.[3] The tear between a haunting and then reified identity evokes how readings of Quin’s texts have accentuated her disappearance by emphasising their literary innovations, or tried to recuperate her presence by identifying her writing with her person. Loraine Morley suggests that Quin’s work ‘testifies’ to ‘a vision which would perpetually challenge her to abandon herself […] to ever-new textual and sexual explorations’.[4] In contrast, Philip Stevick contends that ‘the representation of consciousness’ in Quin’s fiction is ‘different from that of anyone else’ because it emanated from ‘her own troubled mind’.[5] These readings echo Quin’s anxieties about her work, which she articulates in her letters to Creeley. The comparison Quin draws between the

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[1] Francis Booth drew attention to this in his overview of Quin’s work in *Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1940-1980* (lulu.com, 2012).
[2] Robert Creeley, *Mabel: A Story, and Other Prose* (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), p. 119.
[3] Creeley, *Mabel*, p. 125.
[4] Loraine Morley, ‘The Love Affair(s) of Ann Quin’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 5:2 (1999), 127-141, p. 128.
[5] Philip Stevick, ‘Voices in the Head: Style and Consciousness in the Fiction of Ann Quin’, in *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction*, ed. by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 231-239, p. 232.

figure of the title of her second novel, *Three* (1966), and its central character – a missing person known only as 'S' – hints at how her experimental texts refuse to reduce social relationships to an object of knowledge: 'I visualize a large number 3 on the cover. Rather like these curves, like an S that can be continued, but never joined up, like a broken chain'.[6] However, Quin found that her text's sensitivity to the interpersonal was at odds with the public persona attached to her work; she told Creeley, 'I wish I could be elusive like Beckett'.[7] Quin's attempt to find a way to write for a public without thematising her work's exposure to others seems to have increased the risk of it coming to nothing. Though her texts caught the attention of European and American readers in the 1960s, and were recognized through various awards and grants, she worked as a waitress in a Notting Hill café in 1972.[8] The year after she was found drowned off the coast of her birthplace, Brighton.

Where Morley claims, in a reading of Quin's final novel, that just as 'language was to fail Quin, so surely was culture to fail her too', this chapter suggests that an examination of failure in Quin's experimental texts provides a way to rethink her work's haunting relationship to the public.[9] I trace the losses registered by Quin's work by considering how its neglect is symptomatic of the double exclusion that Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs suggest characterizes experimental women's writing: an exclusion determined, on the one hand, by a 'legacy of modernism' as shaped by 'male critics' and, on the other, a putatively representative 'feminist criticism'.[10] If Creeley's 'Mabel' dramatizes the skewed gendering of modernist subjectivity, which has eclipsed women innovators by reducing them to marginal textual figures ('M') or by objectifying them ('*Ma belle*'), Quin's work bears the tensions of these forms of gender oppression and attempts to alter them through her innovative textual practices. We can shed light on the gendering of postwar experimental writing by considering Quin's relationship to Creeley and other American poets, such as Robert Sward. Quin's letters to these poets highlight the gender disparities that attended the increased public visibility of certain experimental poets in American and British cultures in the 1960s. At the same time, Quin's work points towards the omissions through which, in Morley's words, 'the feminist eye/I'

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[6] Stanford, Stanford University Libraries, Robert Creeley Papers, 1950-1997 M0662, letter 23/2/65. Date of letters are Quin to Creeley unless otherwise stated.
[7] Creeley Papers, 31/1/66.
[8] See Brocard Sewell, 'Ann Quin: In Memory', in *Like Black Swans: Some People and Themes* (Padstow, 1982), pp. 182-192, pp. 187-188.
[9] Morley, 'Love Affair(s)', p. 127.
[10] Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English', in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 3-51, p. 6.

emerged in Britain in the 1970s.[11] While evading the notice of the second wave of feminism that emerged in postwar Britain, Quin's texts were partially retrieved by the resurgence of an interest in experimental women's writing prompted by the introduction of key texts of 'French feminism' to an Anglo-American audience. Following Felski's analysis of the tension between '"instrumental" and "aesthetic" theories of the text' in feminist literary studies, I draw on the concept of the public to examine how Quin's texts register their exclusion from the nascent feminist movement.[12] The first part of this chapter draws on Warner's theory of the public to sketch how Quin's work's stammering interactions with beginnings of the second wave of feminism and poets permeating mainstream culture sensitized it to the silencing and erasure of others.

The chapter goes on to suggest a way to reread Quin's apparent failure to coincide with postwar public spheres in order to explore, as Ziarek puts it, 'the tenuous possibility of women's aesthetic innovation in relation to unbearable historical losses and damages inflicted by [...] sexist violence'.[13] If the outline of Quin's failure to concur with different discursive communities of the postwar literary scene registers forms of marginalization to which it and others were subjected, then the stutters that articulate these moments may also provide a way to follow how a rhetoric of failure in Quin's experimental texts responds to and respects the alterity of those persons. My rereading of failure in Quin's experimental texts takes its lead from her engagement with existential writers, such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. I argue that the rhetoric of failure in Quin's work insinuates a subtle disorientation of the gendering of public and private spaces, accentuating a disjunction between her work's thematization by discursive communities and its sensitivity to the alterity of social relationships.[14] Readings of Quin's *Three* and *Passages* (1969) aim to recover and respect the losses articulated by her work, while proposing how we might consider failure in Quin's work to prepare the way for, in Ziarek's words, a 'reinvention of modernism' attentive to the alterity of the other.

Quin and the Public

Considering texts that shed light on Quin's emergence in the postwar literary scene through Warner's theory will allow us to map how the themes and rhetoric of her work made it liable to be overlooked by the beginnings of the second wave of the women's movement and the literary mainstream.

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[11] Morley, 'Love Affair(s)', p. 138.
[12] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 3.
[13] Ewa Ziarek, *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 2.
[14] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 7.

Six years before her first novel *Berg* (1964) was published, Quin suggested to her friend Paddy Kitchen that it 'was a sad day when the seed entered the wrong ovum and I was conceived a girl' as 'people take more notice of a male writer no matter what blarney he gushes forth'.[15] For Quin, a 'woman' writer 'misses the boat out to sea', whereas, although 'a lot of men do [this too]', 'they are given the opportunity of drowning in the ocean and not in a mere river'.[16] Quin notes that the public space for women writers is confined to the relative domesticity of a 'river' (in comparison to men's vast 'ocean'), and thereby anticipates what Felski describes as the 'emergence of a second wave of feminism in the late 1960s' and 'women's literature' as a 'cultural phenomenon', which enabled 'women's explicit self-identification as an oppressed group'.[17] Yet, Quin's acknowledgement that both men and women can 'miss the boat out to sea' and 'drown' draws attention to how the construction of seemingly representative literary categories risks obscuring the losses and exclusions that underlie their formation. In *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (1989) Friedman and Fuchs, for example, sought to redress how such an oversight had shadowed the formation of feminist literary studies; they suggested that the 'neglect of women innovators', such as Quin, may be not only the result of 'a legacy of modernism as interpreted through its male critics' but also the effect of 'a legacy of the last decades of feminist criticism, which has hunted subtexts and muted texts to uncover a feminine discourse while overlooking the texts by women experimentalists'.[18] A limitation of Friedman and Fuchs's attempt to retrieve and formulate a '"feminine" textual practice' is that it inverts the exclusions to which experimental women's writing had been subjected; it promotes, in Felski's words, a 'dualistic schema in which the subversive "literariness" of certain high culture texts is contrasted to more popular works'.[19] In contrast, Felski proposes that the concept of public sphere might develop the insights of textual and reflectionist feminist literary theories; for Felksi, the notion of the public sphere offers a way to 'account for the levels of *mediation* between literary and social domains': 'the model of a public sphere draws attention to the communicative networks, social institutions, and political and economic structures through which ideologies are produced and disseminated'.[20]

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[15] Quoted in Paddy Kitchen, 'Catherine Wheel: Recollections of Ann Quin', *London Magazine*, 19:3 (1979), 50-57, p. 54.
[16] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Catherine Wheel', p. 54.
[17] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 1.
[18] Friedman and Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities', p. 6.
[19] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 4.
[20] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 8.

Quin presented her apprehensions about her work's participation in the postwar public sphere in an article for *London Magazine* from 1966, which sketched the years leading up to her first novel *Berg*:

> The proofs [of *Berg*] finally arrived, I couldn't open them, and spent the whole day vomiting from anxiety and depression. Eventually the galleys lay all over my room. The dream had been realized, but reading what I had written seemed someone else's dream. A kind of involuntary commitment. And like Camus I became aware that: "There is in me an anarchy, a frightful disorder. Creating costs me a thousand deaths, for it involves an order and my whole being rebels against order. But without I should die scattered".[21]

Quin's description of her fear before reading her writing mirrors the faltering attempt to take to the stage that had made her decide to 'be a writer. A poet'; at an audition for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Quin 'began, froze, asked to start again, but was struck dumb, and rushed out, silently screaming down Gower Street'.[22] The stutters that upset Quin's attempts to read and perform may reflect the pressures exerted on her work by the social and cultural forces shaping the postwar public. Warner's theory suggests ways in which we might explore these pressures through the tension between Quin's wavering efforts to read or perform her work and her recognition of her novel as 'someone else's dream'.[23] Warner suggests that the 'contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of all publics' emanate from how a public 'concretize[s] the world in which discourse circulates' while, at the same time, it 'puts at risk the concrete world that is its given condition of possibility' and 'the security of its positive, given audience' by 'promis[ing] to address anybody'.[24] Quin's anxiety that her work's indefinite address to others might be ossified into a positive identity is suggested by the way she presents reading the galleys of *Berg*; it involves their haphazard dispersal around her room, as if the text were refusing attempts (including her own) to delimit the social concerns of her work. Alternatively, the acknowledgment of *Berg* as 'someone else's dream'[25] recognizes that her text has to partially submit to its distortion by the pressures of a public (such as, in Warner's words, 'the organization of media, ideologies of reading, institutions of circulation') in order to avoid

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[21] Ann Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', *London Magazine*, July 1966, 63-68, p. 68.
[22] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 68.
[23] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 68.
[24] Warner, *Publics*, p. 113, p. 108, p. 113.
[25] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 68.

going unnoticed.[26] In the section that follows I outline the ways in which Quin's work stuttered and risked falling silent through its diffident and, at times, dissonant participation in the characterization of the beginnings of the second wave of feminism and mainstream culture.

Even as Quin's article indicates that her text's reception entailed a distortion of its exposure to other persons, the description of her work as an 'involuntary commitment' underlines how it is knotted up in a relation to others that resists its reification as a public object.[27] Quin's citation of Camus evokes an address to those persons who escape being characterized through a public, as the very act of address is presented as murderous; her work's assimilation to '"an order"' or characterization of others is implicated in '"a thousand deaths"'.[28] Moreover, the disjunction between her text's exposure to the '"anarchy"' of '"a thousand deaths"' and its imposition of '"an order"' implies that her work's characterization of its addressee can only fail them; rather than constructing a world for its addressees, her text is returned to the way their '"anarchy"' and '"deaths"' trail behind its '"order"'.[29] A parallel is offered by Ziarek's comparison 'between Derrida's interpretation of the absolute absence of the recipient [in the social field of communication] and the Levinasian articulation of the irreducible diachrony revealed in the encounter between the other and the same'.[30] Ziarek elucidates how Derrida 'interpret[s] the evidence of failure as a condition of a response to the other' by displacing the other from the 'position of a recipient of the message' with, following Levinas, a 'radicalization of absence in the process of communication'.[31] This radical absence emphasizes, in Ziarek's words, 'not only the asymmetry between the self and the other but also the fact that they do not belong to the same temporality'.[32] In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas reiterates how the 'anarchy' of the relation to the other 'is not disorder as opposed to order', as '[d]isorder is but another order' 'falling under' the 'recuperable' order of consciousness'; 'what is essential' in the ethical relation to the other 'is a refusal to be tamed or domesticated by a theme' as the other is '[i]ncommensurable with the present, unassemblable in it, it is always "already in the past" behind which the present delays'.[33] In the second half of this chapter I examine how Quin's experimental poetics is orientated towards the '"anarchy"' and '"death"' of others through a reading of her engagement with Sartre's work, and the rhetoric of failure deployed in her work.

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[26] Warner, *Publics*, p. 14.
[27] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 68.
[28] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 68.
[29] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 68.
[30] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, pp. 101-102.
[31] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p.102.
[32] Ziarek, *Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 102.
[33] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 101, p. 102, p. 100.

Speechless in Public

Nell Dunn's *Talking to Women* (1965) sheds light on Quin's relationship to the beginnings of the second wave of feminism in postwar Britain. Dunn's book consists of a collection of interviews with nine women (including Quin and Kitchen), who, Dunn suggests, share the view that 'women's life should not solely be the struggle to make men happy but more than that a progress towards the development of one's own body and soul'.[34] The text reflects the way, as Warner puts it, the 'contemporary women's movement' emerged by 'giving public relevance to the most private matters'.[35] Reviewing the work in the *Observer*, Katharine Whitehorn considered these women's call for 'complete sexual freedom' to have 'enormous appeal' as they seemed 'like characters in a novel'.[36] Dunn encouraged Quin to contribute to the book's anticipation of the women's movement, and how it would publicize, in Warner's words, 'marital rape, spousal abuse, divorce, prostitution, and abortion rights'[37], by asking the following questions towards the end of the interview: 'But what made you decide not to have a child?', 'But did you regret it after having had an abortion?', 'Do you think that abortion can permanently scar?'.[38] In view of Dunn's questions and Quin's acknowledgement that women are only 'just realising the possibilities that they have, because they've been so much the slaves of men', we can see how Quin helped to articulate the concerns and possibilities of the feminist movement in Britain.[39]

What is lost in aligning Quin's work with the re-emergence of feminism in postwar Britain is the way her treatment of gender and freedom differ from those proposed by Dunn:

> Nell. Do you think that women are very different from men?
> Ann. I think women are very different in many ways. Men are always trying to assert themselves, a certain vanity, and women are not so conscious of trying to assert themselves, they're much more adaptable – they like playing a role that a man will throw upon them, they have many roles, there's a lot of the chameleon in women.
> Nell. Which do you like being with the best?
> Ann. Both.

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[34] Nell Dunn, 'Preface', in *Talking to Women*, ed. by Nell Dunn (London: Pan Books, 1965), p. 9.
[35] Warner, *Publics*, p. 31, p. 32.
[36] Katharine Whitehorn, 'Woman to woman', *Observer*, 21 November 1965, p. 26.
[37] Warner, *Publics*, p. 32, p. 33.
[38] Ann Quin, interviewed by Nell Dunn, in *Talking to Women*, ed. by Nell Dunn (London: Pan Books, 1965), pp. 108-129, p. 126, p. 127.
[39] Quin, *Talking to Women*, p. 115.

> […]
> Nell. I do find that sometimes, even talking to you this afternoon, I feel a sort of envy for your freedom, this freedom of having a place and having time and space.
> Ann. But is it freedom?[40]

Quin resists complying with the polarization of genders implicit in Dunn's second question, and the idea that her situation is 'free', by insinuating that both men and women 'assert themselves' through 'roles', and by questioning the extent to which one can equate the performance of a gendered identity with 'freedom'.[41] Moreover, Quin refuses to affirm her position as a woman to retaliate against the gender subordination she experienced when, for example, 'meeting publishers who look[ed] at my legs and not my manuscript'.[42] In her description of the 'difficulty' of 'being a writer and a woman', Quin is attentive to how the very assertion of a female identity may aggravate the gender subordination it sought to redress:

> lots of men are very unsure of me and they are liable to sort of put me down and treat me from a physical angle which gets me very frustrated and I then try to assert myself and hate myself at the same time for having to do this and I hate the man.[43]

Quin suggests that 'where men and women go wrong is clinging and identifying so much all the time',[44] and, consequently, avoids problematically mirroring the way, as Felski points out, 'women's assignment to a distinctive "feminine" sphere has been a major cause of their marginalization and disempowerment'.[45] Yet, faced with Dunn's postulation of a liberating identity for women, Quin's diffident move towards a post-identity investigation of gender and social relations verges on silence. Quin claims that 'if one doesn't identify oneself with another person then you have a much fuller experience', but struggles to find a way to articulate her critique of gender having moved away from the language of identity: 'verbally we can't really

[40] Quin, *Talking to Women*, p. 115, p. 128.
[41] Quin, *Talking to Women*, p. 115, p. 128.
[42] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Catherine Wheel', p. 57.
[43] Quin, *Talking to Women*, pp. 115-116.
[44] Quin, *Talking to Women*, p. 109.
[45] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 11.

communicate', 'the greatest communication I ever have with certain people is almost a sort of unspoken recognition'.[46]

Quin's stuttering deviation from the beginnings of the feminist public projected by Dunn could have been partly prompted by the difference between their literary styles. Dunn's collection of short stories, *Up the Junction* (1963), had concurred with the postwar literary scene's focus on, as Quin derisively put it in 1958, 'SEX' and 'ANGRY YOUNG MEN', and might have helped reinforce *Talking to Women*'s representation of women liberated from patriarchal society.[47] Quin's concerns about her relationship to prominent features of mainstream literary culture were amplified by her Harkness and D. H. Lawrence fellowships. These awards allowed Quin to work and travel in the US between the summers of 1965 and 1967, and temporarily insulated her work from the mainstream, while heightening anxieties concerning its reception. If Quin's interview with Dunn is indicative of how her work's critique of gender was at risk of being reduced to a silence shadowing the emergence of the women's movement, then her relationship to mainstream US and UK cultures exacerbated her work's failure to harmonize with a recognizable audience.

Quin's conflicting and ambiguous relationship to the mainstream is presented in in her correspondence with the poets Robert Creeley and Robert Sward; these letters chart how her work was drawn towards, and wavered before, the rising cultural status of writers on English and American poetry circuits. Quin's funded fellowships in the US stemmed from her relationship with Creeley, whom she met in 1964 during the London leg of his European reading tour. With the news of her successful fellowship applications, Quin could not believe she had 'been so damned lucky', and stressed to Creeley that he had 'helped in more ways than one'.[48] The awarding of fellowships alleviated Quin's fear that 'being a woman might [have] be[en] held against' her applications, as it simultaneously confirmed her suspicion that her success may have been partly due to the way 'so very few women' apply.[49]

At first Quin's time in US and her relationship with Creeley seemed to be constructive for her work. Having mentioned that she was 'running out of reading material', Creeley appears to have provided Quin with Virginia Woolf's diary, which, in her words, 'came across beautifully, a lot of her dealing with form reminds me of my own concerns', and William Carlos Williams's poems: '[he] has such a movement in his writing, such a vivid sense of light and shade tinged

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[46] Quin, *Talking to Women*, p. 109, p. 111.
[47] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Catherine Wheel', p. 54.
[48] Creeley Papers, 9/2/65.
[49] Creeley Papers, 9/2/65.

with humour'.[50] Furthermore, Quin said that she could already hear Creeley's comments on the manuscript of *Three* that she had brought to the US – '"Bogged down by plot – too many metaphors" etc. etc!' – and forwarded him newspaper articles on the International Poetry Incarnation at the Albert Hall in June 1965. However, Quin discovered that she was subjected to 'worse snobbery, worse bullyboys, worse neurosis' in the 'vulture culture'[51] of the US, as she felt the effects of Creeley's celebrity, in Ekbert Faas's words, 'rapidly spreading throughout North America as well as major European countries'.[52] The pressures of Creeley's rising cultural persona came to light at the 1965 Berkley Poetry Conference, where Quin said it was 'difficult to accept [Creeley] reading poems, that seemed to me so very personal, in public. […] I needed a glance of reassurance, a word of recognition, I did not, could not find it'.[53] After the Berkley reading, Quin thought she had been 'rejected' having 'found myself so often speechless, […] seeing myself as some awkward dumb female clinging to female irrationality, and then by some twist feeling so bloody vulnerable'.[54] If, as Faas suggests, this was a moment in Creeley's career when 'he and his friends' emphasized to publishers that they 'were becoming a cultural empire'[55], Quin tried to draw attention to those persons his focus on a public persona silenced: 'You are always concerned in wanting one to understand you, HEAR you. Please try and understand what I am SAYING'.[56] In 'Mabel', 'M' might be presented through 'HEARSAY' because of the way she calls attention to the critical point when hearing one public voice risks subduing the vulnerability of what is said or cannot be said by the other that they have rendered speechless.[57] Though Quin and Creeley's correspondence continued intermittently until the month of her death, for Quin it seemed that she 'came and went in an image now that seems most hateful to me'[58] as she watched Creeley 'hung up, frantic, fighting against the "show business" aspect of himself being the POET yet not doing anything about it'.[59]

Despite her anxieties about Creeley's apparent envelopment by his celebrity, Quin's work also showed signs of deferring to the 'show business' world that had silenced her. The personal and literary relationship Quin formed with the poet Robert Sward in January 1966 highlights

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[50] Creeley Papers, 5/6/65, 14/6/65.
[51] Creeley Papers, 3/2/66.
[52] Ekbert Faas, *Robert Creeley: A Biography* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 299
[53] Creeley Papers, 14/9/65.
[54] Creeley Papers, 14/9/65.
[55] Faas, *Robert Creeley*, p. 242, p. 299.
[56] Creeley Papers, 14/9/65.
[57] Creeley, *Mabel*, p. 119.
[58] Creeley Papers, 14/9/65.
[59] Washington University Libraries: Olin Library, Robert Sward Papers, MSS110, Quin to Sward, letter, 17/8/66. Date of letters are Quin to Sward unless otherwise stated.

how her work ambivalently acquiesced with and opposed mainstream US culture. In her letters to Sward, the allure of US literary culture is evident in Quin's hope to get short stories published in magazines such as 'Esquire, Harpers, [and] Evergreen' as 'they pa[id] more' than in 'workhouse' England.[60] Similarly, Quin made tentative steps towards emulating Creeley and Sward (who also made a living through performances of his work) by participating in local poetry readings around Creeley's home in New Mexico. Quin tells Sward of how she went to meet the poet 'John Logan, he in motel room, about fifteen poets, wd. be poets turned up, I the only ah female! We did some reading; I read bits out of new work very badly, was v. nervous, read much too quickly'.[61] Quin's response to her attempt to participate as a lone woman in an improvised and male-dominated environment reflects how the gendering of local readings and poetry circles disturbed her work's relationship to a wider audience: 'I really couldn't read in public, I'd be so damned nervous, coughing over every line'.[62] For Quin, her reading's equivocal subversion of the gendering of the gathering of poets seems to have given way to the pressures of situation and intensified her concerns about her work's characterization by a public.

Though Quin had been wary of the 'dreadful/consuming selfishness of artists' in this 'huge supermarket country', her work and relationship with Sward came to be focused through a form of countercultural resistance ambivalently entangled with the mainstream, namely recreational drugs.[63] In view of how her writing was now 'v. far removed from the novel', Quin asked Calder and Boyars 'not to put "a novel" under the title page' of her next work'.[64] Quin defended the new direction of her writing by emphasizing to Sward that she was 'taking th[e]se kind of "flights" before "going up"'; her use of drugs had merely made '"the flow" stronger'.[65] The products of these 'flights' were Quin and Sward's collaborative cut-up text, 'Living in the Present'[66], and Quin's short, fragmented text, 'Triptics', which won *Ambit*'s 'Drugs and Creative Writing Competition' in 1968.[67] Despite the Arts Council withdrawing the twenty five pound prize it had promised the magazine for its competition, Quin accepted the accolade while 'emphasiz[ing]' that, 'although I have never written under the influence of Pot, Peyote, Acid, Hash etc., I am absolutely certain that having taken these, especially Peyote and LSD, they did actually open out a much wider possibility for my writing'.[68] The tone and themes of these texts

[60] Sward Papers, 31/6/66.
[61] Sward Papers, 10/7/66.
[62] Sward Papers, 4/10/66.
[63] Sward Papers, 7/2/67, 17/10/66.
[64] Sward Papers, 21/9/66.
[65] Sward Papers, 21/9/66.
[66] Ann Quin and Robert Sward, 'Living in the Present', *Ambit*, 34 (1968), 20-21.
[67] Ann Quin, 'Tripticks', *Ambit*, 35 (1968), 9-16.
[68] *Ambit*, 35 (1968), p. 35.

crystalized in Quin's final novel, *Tripticks* (1972), which pre-empts, in Kathleen Wheeler's words, '[Kathy] Acker's pop art tone'.[69] Morley contends that, in *Tripticks*, the 'constructive possibilities of language pursued in [Quin's] previous work are lost to an alien and alienating discourse almost sadistic in its relentless subjugation of the writing subject'[70]; the text closes with the lines, 'I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had tempted to persuade me to their systems'.[71] Quin's final work embodied the contradiction that the counterculture's 'anti-materialist idealism' and its, in Hewison's words, turn 'towards "inner space"', was not only a 'reaction against' but enabled by 'the very materialism and hedonism promoted by the official culture'.[72] Quin came to acknowledge how her work had been caught up in the counterculture's contradictory dependence on the mainstream in a letter to Creeley from 1973; she considered *Tripticks* her 'worst book' because of the way it presented 'a caricature […] of myself'.[73]

In the letters that relate Quin's return to Brighton in July 1967 there are signs of how her relationship to Sward would break down as their conflicting reliance on and denunciation of the mainstream intensified. Quin remarked on the '[t]errible films on T.V. of the riots in New Jersey, Detroit', and how she found them 'painful to watch', even as she celebrated Allen Ginsberg's appearance on television and his promise to respond to '"these troubled times"' by 'turn[ing] everyone on with LSD'.[74] Similarly, just as Quin considered the bills 'passed for legal homosexuality' and 'abortion reform' in the UK, she signed a contract with a director who wanted to adapt her first novel to film, and 'make Berg queer'.[75] The script, prepared by the photographer of *Blow-Up* (1966), was 'better than [Quin] thought possible: a "pot psychedelic" scene brought into it: on the beach! Mother dies by putting head in gas oven. Son stabs father at the end'.[76] These tensions in Quin's relationship to mainstream culture were brought into relief when, after her split with Sward in the autumn of 1968, she realized that she had been 'spoilt' with her fellowships and, as she told Creeley, 'desperately need[ed] some money'.[77] A short-term fix lay in the '[p]ossibility of getting another Arts Council grant'; her friend, Burns, had

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[69] Kathleen M. Wheeler, 'Constructions of Identity in Post-1970 Experimental Fiction' in *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in England since 1970*, ed. by Rod Mengham (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 15-31, p. 24.
[70] Morley, 'Love Affair(s)', p. 136.
[71] Ann Quin, *Tripticks* (IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), p. 192.
[72] Hewison, *Too much*, p. 149.
[73] Creeley Papers, 10/2/1973.
[74] Sward Papers, 17/7/67.
[75] Sward Papers, 25/6/67.
[76] Sward Papers, 31/7/67.
[77] Creeley Papers, 28/5/69.

'got £2000 recently!'.[78] In the meantime Quin joined the group of experimental writers, which gathered around Burns and his partner Carol; both were close friends of Quin. Alan Burns's account of Quin's reading at 'Writers Reading's' inaugural event intimates that the pressures that had been building since Creeley's performance at Berkley, and accentuated by Quin's faltering attempts to appear in and react to US culture with Sward, had reached a critical point:

> she came onto stage and she just sat and looked at people, she wouldn't say a goddam word! She just stared, she either implied or she actually stated that we sort of "think-communicate", we can communicate more in silence than with someone actually putting words across.[79]

The silence of Quin's reading suggests how her work capitulated beneath the weight of its interactions with the mainstreams of US and UK culture. Yet, the reading's ambiguity simultaneously evokes how addressing those persons similarly silenced by dominant discursive publics might entail trying to find a way to articulate the 'unspoken recognition' between people that Quin had mentioned to Dunn.[80] Quin's explorations of tacit forms of communication included reading divination and funerary texts, such as *I Ching* and the *Book of the Dead*, with Sward and others. She also had a penchant for telepathy, which was easily derided in public; in a profile from 1972 John Hall notes that 'Miss Quin happens to be able to read people's minds'.[81] That Quin sought for a literary form that might approach and respect what stays unspoken is evident in how she advocated, in a letter to Sward, 'W.C.W's [William Carlos Williams] comment [that] "the space between phrases is no less significant than the phrases in linguistic movement"'.[82]

Shortly after the reading, and in a fragile mental state, Quin blew the thousand pound Arts Council grant she had been awarded in 1969 on a trip across Scandinavia. In a letter to Creeley from March 1970 Quin described the repercussions of taking apart the grant in three months:

> I ended up in Sweden after a crazy flight from London via Dublin, Copenhagen, Oslo and finally ended up nearly frozen, weeping,

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[78] Creeley Papers, 28/5/69.
[79] Quoted in Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 405.
[80] Quin, *Talking to Women*, p. 111.
[81] John Hall, 'Landscape with three-cornered dances', *Guardian*, April 29 1972, p. 8.
[82] Sward Papers, 2/3/66.

> unable to speak, near a canal in Stockholm. I got caught up in some occult underground movement, and then also a political movement which involved the Russians and the Chinese following me; of course none of the psychiatrists believe what I tell them, they all think I'm suffering from persecution mania and that half the threatening signs I saw were just in mind.[83]

Quin was writing to Creeley from 'Baillie Ward', Atkinson Morley's Hospital London, having been hospitalized in Sweden for five weeks and given 'Electric shock treatment'.[84] Quin's hospitalization would recur in November of the following year after she ran into more financial problems. On this occasion Quin was held, as she put it to Creeley, 'under section 25 [of the Mental Health Act] (whatever that is – something like Catch 22 I guess!)' in Springfield Hospital, Tooting:

> I was caught stealing a Vicar's blanket – yeah for real whether or not he was a real vicar God knows! Getting the threads together inside my head a difficult adventure & one that I continually confront head on then a retreat then back again.[85]

The psychological concerns of Quin's letter reflect a key theme of her work, and emphasize that the crises she suffered in the early 1970s were not merely the effect of the gender inequities and the pressures of US and UK cultures. A reading of Quin's first novel *Berg* may allow us to appreciate the complexity of how she was, in Kitchen's words, 'so often searching inwards'[86], and the way her texts ask us to acknowledge, as Wheeler puts it, 'how we cope (or fail to cope) with life and make it meaningful through values'.[87]

Berg

Berg anticipates and reflects how Quin's work would come to shadow the nascent feminist movement in postwar Britain and try to explode the ambivalent and often unstable relationship between modernist textual practices and notions of masculinity. Dulan Barber, the editor who

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[83] Creeley Papers, 2/3/70.
[84] Creeley Papers, 2/3/70.
[85] Sward Papers, Quin to Creeley, letter 9/12/71.
[86] Kitchen, 'Catherine Wheel', p. 56.
[87] Wheeler, 'Constructions of Identity', p. 25.

read the manuscript of *Berg*, points out that the novel's one line prologue announces its 'uncompromising, ferocious Oedipal statement'[88]:

> A MAN called Berg, who changed his name to Greb,
> came to a seaside town intending to kill his father. . . .[89]

For Barber, '[w]hat follows is embroidery. It is as though that declaration of intent has been shouted into one of those tunnels [...] that return one's voice amplified and reverberating with unexpected echoes'.[90] The novel presents Alistair Berg ('alias Greb' (p. 56)), his father, Nathaniel and the person for whom he left Berg's mother, Judith, in Calder's words, 'weav[ing] around each other in a situation where sex and violence are always present'.[91] In addition, Edith, the mother Berg has left behind, haunts the text with a voice that is at once comforting and chilling: 'There you see that's your father who left us both, you'll have to do a lot to overcome him Aly before I die' (p. 46). Quin closes the novel with uncertainty surrounding Berg/Greb's usurpation of his father by playing on how her protagonist mistakes his father's body for the latter's beloved ventriloquist's dummy. Consequently, Quin leaves, as Morley highlights, 'her protagonist trapped' in the 'nebulous hinterland between patriarchal subjectivity and sexual identity, on the one hand, and the abject state of maternal engulfment on the other': 'the impossible choice between a violent, violating language not his own, and silence'.[92]

Ventriloquism in Quin's text acts to expose how the construction of male subjectivity is inseparable from the violent oppression of others; Berg's assumption of the role of Greb, whose misogyny reduces Judith to 'a display dummy […], the one that's left in the window at the end of a sale' (p. 145), rebounds on him, and exposes the fabrication of his self as the claims of others become impossible to ignore. Though Quin's unravelling of the male subject resonates with second-wave feminism's criticism of patriarchy, the text refuses to inscribe, in Morley's words, 'the space which the deconstruction of the Oedipal narrative opens up with a new ("authentically feminist") narrative'.[93] We can consider Quin's refusal to supplement her critique of patriarchy with a feminist counter-narrative as symptomatic of how *Berg* simultaneously ventriloquizes and extends feminist modernist literary practices. Attempts to

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[88] Dulan Barber, 'Afterword', in *Berg* (London: Quartet, 1977), pp. 169-77, pp. 169-170.
[89] Ann Quin, *Berg* (London: John Calder, 1964). Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.
[90] Barber, 'Afterword', pp. 169-170.
[91] Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 272.
[92] Morley, 'Love Affair(s)', p. 130.
[93] Morley, 'Love Affair(s)', p. 134.

describe *Berg*'s narrative and its style repeatedly invoke the metaphor of sewing; as we have seen, for Barber *Berg* emulates 'embroidery'[94]; Calder sees the text's characters 'weav[ing] around each other'[95]; and Giles Gordon suggests that Quin's novel 'deliberately fails to pin down an objective reality'.[96] These readings affirm the subtle and disturbing force of a rhetoric of threads, weaves and needles that mediates the text's Oedipal narrative, and which, as we shall see, situates Quin's text as a revival of modernism. Berg is torn between leaving his mother – the memory of the 'rusty pin at the edge' (p. 7) of his mother's brooch – and the eyes of his father, which are 'joined by a thread through the bridge of the nose', and also resemble 'rusty pin heads' (p. 13). The 'rusty pins' (p. 12) that shape Berg's view of his parents denote the affective traumas of his mother's struggle to survive in view of Nathaniel siphoning her money and 'jewellery': 'he's never had my sewing machine Aly, I would never part with that' (p. 103). If the 'pinheads' of the mother and father are woven into the text's fabric, then it is the figure of a moth that intimates at how Quin's revival of modernism, in Stevick's words, 'take[s] the self and others, one's voice, the voice of the nonself into areas not quite occupied before': 'Darkness, radio on. [...] A moth bumped against the wall, the door, the light. Berg's fingers strayed, lingered on the switch. The moth sizzled against the bulb, now wingless fell' (p. 4).[97] The 'death of the moth' evokes Virginia Woolf's essay of that title, and her experimental novel *The Waves* (1931), whose original title was *Moths*.[98] Quin affirms her work's debt to Woolf as she states that '*The Waves* made aware me aware of the possibilities of writing'.[99] Subtle recapitulations of the moth's incineration enact the breakdown in Berg's subjectivity. In his desperate attempt to flee the town with what he believes to be a dead body, Berg 'drift[s] into a chaos that can never be clarified' (p. 98):

> a harsh voice needled him, pinpricked his heart […]. From this whirlpool a shape formed, then a massive head appeared without eyes. [...] The face grew, the mouth opened, swallowing everything, nearer and nearer, […]. The sun exploded between his eyes (p. 99).

Where the 'sun explod[ing] between his eyes' (p. 99) could be read as a reiteration of the moth's demise, the novel closes with Berg's attempts to tie up the loose ends of the chaotic and

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[94] Barber, 'Afterword', pp. 169-170.
[95] Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 272.
[96] Giles Gordon, 'Introduction', in *Berg* (IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), pp. vii-xiv, p. xi.
[97] Stevick, 'Voices in the Head', p. 239.
[98] See Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), p. 148.
[99] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 64.

damaging plot in which he has entangled Judith by buying her a 'glittering butterfly brooch' (p. 164). However, the fact that the brooch's 'pin is crooked' (p. 164) insinuates how the figures of failure articulated by the moth continue to gnaw away at Berg, having 'fallen into ways where no one in a conscious state would dare to tread; gone astray on a slender thread' (p. 99).

There are haunting echoes between Quin's novel and how, as we have seen, she saw her struggle to get 'the threads together inside my head [as] a difficult adventure […] that I continually confront head on then a retreat then back again'.[100] But, as I shall set out in greater detail in the following section, failure in *Berg*, and Quin's experimental texts more generally, complicates an autobiographical reading of her work by encumbering its reader with an acute awareness of, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's phrase, the '[m]ost intimate, yet least accessible alterity' – an alterity which 'offers up our so-called selves to ourselves'.[101] If failure in *Berg* evokes that most intimate and inaccessible alterity, it also helps to acknowledge the complexity of Quin's comments on her familial relations, and her representation of mental health problems. A theme that runs throughout Quin's texts is a sense of (misplaced) deficiency at having, as she put it, 'never known family life as such'.[102] Where the idea of lacking a family troubled Quin with, in her words, 'overwhelming depression', her fictions and fantasies seem to have been a fragile source of support.[103] In 1966 Quin recalls how she coped with her half-brother's death by seeing herself 'as Antigone', and tried to cover her parent's break-up by 'pretend[ing]' to be her father's 'lover'.[104] Quin's description of going to see 'a psychiatrist' is also shaded by pretence as it was matter of 'entertaining the horrified lady'.[105] In 'The Unmapped Country', an unfinished text published posthumously, Quin impresses how the very idea of 'coming to terms' with mental health problems may be insensitive to those who live with them. The difficulty Sandra, the text's protagonist, encounters in trying to adapt to the language of 'doctors', 'analysts', and the orders of her 'mothers and fathers' is reflected by the way she hesitates before re-entering the hospital:

> Yes I hear you all my mothers and fathers will you never stop? Stop.
>
> She made her way to Block C, but did not enter. Instead she walked the grounds and made paintings with her footprints in the snow. [...] Once she had understood the language of birds, now no

[100] Sward Papers, Quin to Creeley, letter 9/12/71.
[101] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 54-85, p. 55.
[102] Quoted in Sewell, 'Ann Quin', pp. 182-192, p. 183.
[103] Quoted in Sewell, 'Ann Quin', p. 183.
[104] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 64.
[105] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 68.

> longer, it took her all her time to understand her own language, and that of those who attempted communication. Once there had been the subterranean language with the underground forces. If speech at all then it was the spaces between words, and the echoes the words left, or what might be really meant under the surface. She knew, had known. No longer knew. Only remembered. In recollection, pictures, words, visions, thoughts, images built themselves into citadels, gigantic towers that toppled with the weight of it all.[106]

The references to 'the subterranean language', 'underground forces', and 'the spaces between words' recall Quin's orientation towards an 'unspoken recognition' between people: her attempt to approach and respect the vulnerability of her relations to others.[107] The text's presentation of a collapse of language suggests how fictions can be sensitive to and can enact moments in which discourses fail to console us, and thereby respect overwhelming feelings of familial and psychological problems that haunt the public and escape the discursive orders of institutions.[108]

The Death of the Moth

Where the previous sections have outlined how Quin's work was subject to, in Ziarek's words, 'the destructive muteness and the erasure of the "feminine"' in different contexts of the postwar public sphere, this part of the chapter expands on how the losses recorded by her work can be 'transformed into a process of writing, into a possibility of inventing new ways of speaking'.[109] It does this by reading failure in Quin's texts as a preservation of, following Levinas, a non-appropriative relation to the other. As was intimated earlier, Levinas's concern with respecting a relation to the alterity of other persons provides a way to interpret how Quin supports Camus's aversion to thematizing the '"anarchy"' of '"a thousand deaths"' through the imposition of '"an order"'.[110] If the '"anarchy"' '"in me"' to which Camus refers is read as the encumbrance of the '"deaths"' of others, then Levinas's work allows us to interpret the significance of this term in

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[106] Ann Quin, 'The Unmapped Country: An Unfinished Novel', in *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, ed. by Giles Gordon (London: Hutchinson, 1975), pp. 252-274, p. 257.
[107] Quin, 'Unmapped Country', p. 257.
[108] A similar sensitivity to the incommensurable might be needed to appreciate how Quin is quoted as saying, in a *Guardian* article from late in life, '"my vision of God was so much more purposeful than anything I could ever write"' (Hall, 'Landscape', p. 8). Quin's revelation is reiterated in her correspondence with Father Brocard Sewell from the same period: '"there is peace in my heart though it has been splintered many times at least I have no doubt now that there is a God of many faces, many facets, many visions, many signs"' (Quoted in Sewell, 'Ann Quin', p. 187).
[109] Ziarek, *Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 3.
[110] Quin, 'Leaving School-XI', p. 68.

an ethical sense: in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas describes his ethics, or the 'plot in which I am bound to others before being tied to my body', as 'the irreducible anarchy of responsibility for another'.[111] A Levinasian reading of the way Quin engages with French existentialism, namely Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, will suggest how her work articulates death as an interpersonal concern incommensurate with the characterization of a public.

Before Quin's work came to be identified with the 'nouveau romans' distributed by Calder and Boyars in the 1960s[112], a letter to Kitchen from 1958 illuminates how Quin was predisposed to the emergence of French writers in postwar culture:

> Have been studying Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, and came across the following which is something I have always thought about but not actually consciously or at least never been able to put into words: "The Believer when he realizes with terror that at the moment of death the chips are down, there remains not a card to play. Death reunites us with ourselves . . ." . . . In a way I feel like a leaf blown down, drifting, there seems nothing to catch on to, and any moment I will be swept up and lie rotting in the gutter – why this eternal wanting to escape from one thing or one place to another, I never seem happy to settle down anywhere for long – like a moth searching for the light and maybe when I touch the light it will burn me up.[113]

Sartre's claim that 'Death reunites us with ourselves' is symptomatic of, in David Hoy's words, his 'existentialist misreading of Heidegger', and how he grounds his theory of radical freedom in the idea that 'subjectivity [...] must be the point of philosophical departure'.[114] It is interesting that Quin should be drawn towards the analysis of death in *Being and Nothingness* as it is the point at which Sartre's assumption of an 'inner subjectivity that is isolated and alienated from others'[115] could be said to fail; Sartre suggests death is 'the triumph of the Other over me'.[116] Hoy elucidates how, for Sartre, the 'only way to prevent myself from being looked at [by the

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[111] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 76.
[112] Quin and Johnson's first meeting crossed over with Nathalie Sarraute's lecture at Better Books in 1964. See Heppenstall, *Master Eccentric*, p. 120.
[113] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Catherine Wheel', p. 53.
[114] David Couzens Hoy, 'Death', in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 280-287, p. 285.
[115] Hoy, 'Death', p. 286.
[116] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), p. 565.

other] and reduced to an object with no freedom is [...] to look back at the other and reduce it to an object'; when I die 'I lose the ability to look back, and thus my death makes me the future prey of the living'.[117] Sartre's text seems to have spoken to Quin's sensitivity to the threat of her work falling silent beneath the pressure of public discourses. Indeed, it is ironic that Sartre's work may have illuminated a form of discursive subjugation for Quin as its rise to prominence came close to subjecting her to it; reading Sartre made Quin question whether it was 'really worth' writing 'when there are such really brilliant writers abroad'.[118] The depiction of a restless deposition of herself after the extract from *Being and Nothingness* suggests how Quin attempted to reconceive the way people are rendered speechless in public as a moment in which other forms of expression are made possible. We may be able to clarify how Quin's second and third novels explore the possibility of an approach to the other, which, as we have seen, was tentatively figured through the reiterations of the moth in *Berg*, by turning to Levinas's thought.

Levinas's work provides a way to read the flight of Quin's moth as a welcoming of the other that repudiates how Sartre begrudges death as a loss of the subject's autonomy. In contrast to what Levinas calls Sartre's 'teleological project to unite and totalise the for-itself and the in-itself, the self and the other-than-self'[119], Levinas contends that the 'subjectivity of the subject' is a 'substitution for another', an 'unlimited responsibility' coming 'from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory"'.[120] Levinas sets out how the relationship to the other is an 'untotalisable diachrony' through the difference between his 'ethical analysis' and Heidegger's 'ontological analysis' of death: '[w]hereas for Heidegger death is *my* death, for [Levinas] it is the *other*'s death'.[121] In Levinas's thought, death is not, following Heidegger an 'event of freedom'; *Being and Time* suggests, according to Levinas, that '[t]emporality is [...] disclosed as an ecstatic being-towards-death which releases us from the present into an ultimate horizon of possibles'.[122] Conversely, Levinas argues that death is, as John Drabinski puts it, 'subjectivity dedicated to the death of the Other'.[123] If 'the face', in Levinas's words', 'is the other who asks me not to let him die alone', and before whom 'I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other'[124], Levinas's notion of subjectivity rests upon a response to the other that entails the 'defecting or defeat of the ego's identity', and which he describes as '[v]ulnerability,

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[117] Hoy, 'Death', p. 286.
[118] Quoted in Kitchen, 'Catherine Wheel', p. 55.
[119] Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', p. 183.
[120] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 15, p. 10.
[121] Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', p. 197, p. 191.
[122] Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', p. 191.
[123] John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 3.
[124] Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', p. 189.

exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form'.[125] The figures of failure through which Quin presents her moth – 'blown down, drifting', 'rotting' 'burn[ing]' – could be read as an acknowledgement of an ethical exposure to the other, which provides an implicit critique of the violent exclusion of otherness sustaining Sartre's notion of subjectivity and the constitution of public ways of speaking. This reading of the death of Quin's moth can be reinforced by comparing it to Beckett's formulation of failure and modern art. If the history of art is, to recall Beckett's words, 'the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of more authentic, […] relations between representer and representee, in a kind of tropism towards a light', the violent exclusion of otherness by the movement towards more complete ways of representing or illuminating the world is unravelled by the sense of failure that haunts this project; modern art is 'shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to'.[126] Quin's presentation of the moth's inexorable move towards 'the light' suggests a more direct (and consequently vulnerable) attempt to critique the obliteration of alterity by individual and collective forms of representation.

In my reading of Quin's second novel, *Three*, I will outline how death, and the rhetoric of failure attached to it, unravels the gender inequities of public and private spaces by insinuating an ethical exposure to the other. Where the rhetoric of failure in *Three* insinuates a subtle sense of disorientation into gendered spaces to expose the violent exclusion of the other, I examine how Quin extends feminist modernist literary practices in her next novel, *Passages*, to accentuate her work's critique of the violent eclipse of alterity.

Disorientations of the Public in *Three* and *Passages*

Set in a holiday home in a seaside town, *Three* focuses on a married couple, Ruth and Leonard, as they try (and fail) to come to terms with the apparent suicide of their friend, 'S'. Since S has no known relatives, Ruth and Leonard keep hold of the objects she has left behind – journals, clothes, audio spools – and read these against their own records of the days leading up to her death. On the one hand, events are presented through representations of Ruth and Leonard reading and listening; the text sets out S's tape recordings so that, as Johnson put it in his review of the novel, 'spaces approximate hesitations in speech', while a more 'straightforward narrative' is used for the characters's journals.[127] On the other, Ruth and Leonard's movements and conversations are relayed through a disjointed third-person narration which is interspersed

[125] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 15.
[126] Beckett and Duthuit, *Dialogues*, p. 125, pp. 124-125.
[127] B. S. Johnson, 'Experiment and espionage', *The Sunday Times*, 5 June 1966, p. 29.

with the characters's direct discourse. Brian Evenson highlights how *Three* centres on 'documents that claim to reveal the past' only for the reading of these objects to 'raise as many questions as they resolve, destabilizing Leonard and Ruth's sense of one another as well as their sense of S'.[128] For Evenson, the novel's destabilization of its representation of time and character relationships is interwoven with how *Three* projects 'a world that seems to be mimetic, but in which the real has in fact undergone a subtle disorientation'.[129] I will sketch how Quin's text's rhetoric of failure enacts a subtle disorientation of the representation of the world, which challenges the violent enforcement of gendered positions by intimating towards the exclusion of the alterity of the other.

Three opens with an interrupted reading of a newspaper:

> *A man fell to his death from a sixth-floor window of Peskett House,*
> *an office-block in Sellway Square today.*
> *He was a messenger employed by a soap manufacturing firm.*
>
> RUTH startled from the newspaper by Leonard framed in the doorway.
> Against the white-washed wall. A wicker arm-chair opposite the
> Japanese table. Screen. Sliding doors. Rush matting.[130]

Though the reference to the man's profession seems superfluous, his association with 'soap' (p. 1) suggests a subtle critique of the newspaper's claim to clean up the end of a person's life. Quin straightaway subverts the way the newspaper purports to offer a clear account of the man's death through the disjointed lines that follow; these fragments suggest that an understanding of the world is always incomplete and partial. The disruption of a stable sense of time and space encapsulates the uncertainties and anxieties that accompany Leonard and Ruth's attempt to read S's death: 'Ghastly way to choose. But Leon hers wasn't like that – I mean we can't be sure could so easily have been an accident the note just a melodramatic touch. [...] How–how will we ever be certain Leon how?' (pp. 1-2). Quin goes on to turn the privileging of certainty on its head by reiterating how reading S's texts accentuates an interruption in Leonard and Ruth's ability to place her. In one of her journals, S renders Leonard and Ruth's predisposition to

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[128] Brian Evenson, 'Introduction', in *Three* (IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), pp. vii-xiii, pp. ix-x.
[129] Evenson, 'Introduction', p. x.
[130] Ann Quin, *Three* (IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), p. 1. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.

certainty in terms of their '[n]arrow dimensions': 'They swing each other against walls that bounce them back into themselves' (p. 72). Conversely, S's texts are open to

> A place that becomes
> another place. Defeats time. Contradicts
> movements
> gives dimensions. (p. 101)

As we shall see, Leonard and Ruth's readings of S's texts disorientate the gendered identities propping up their sense of the world so as to expose how these fabrications silence others.

Quin represents gender subordination and sexual violence as an effect of the attempt to uphold a division between public and domestic spaces; *Three* dramatizes this tension through the differences between Leonard and Ruth's anxieties about cleaning. Leonard complains about 'bloody trespassers' who, despite knowing that his father's holiday home 'is private', 'still come' (p. 5) and 'trample on 'everything'; he spends 'whole weekends clearing up the mess they make' (p. 43). Similarly, in her journal, S reports how 'L continues a correspondence with the County Council, his father began, to bring into force a law that litter must not be thrown' (p. 54) on his property. Conversely, Ruth's cleaning is contained to the 'private' (p. 5) area delimited by Leonard's preservation of his father's holiday retreat. When Leonard spills a drink on the coffee table, Ruth exclaims, 'Oh look what you've done Leon – polished that this morning too' (p. 4) and restlessly reorders rooms: 'She straightened cushions, placed objects in different positions, replaced chairs' (p. 3). Quin highlights the violence of these constructions of gender – masculinity as public, femininity as private – through the suggestion that cleaning always involves friction. In response to Leonard spilling his dinner on the floor, Ruth remarks, 'Well if you think I'm going to wipe up your mess Leon really. He rubbed very slowly, while she stood over him' (p. 50). Likewise, Leonard's obsession with looking out for any trespassers on his property drowns out Ruth's request that he 'set the table' as he rubs at the steamed-up window:

> His lips moved across the window, head worked up and down, finger rubbed until a high pitched scream came. What are you doing – what are you doing behind there? She parted the curtains, stood back, hand covered mouth, then steepled against herself as he spun round, stared at her. (p. 47)

Though the friction between these constructions of gender is registered when Leonard reads in Ruth's journal that 'I have felt almost an intruder' in the 'home we have built up together' (p. 124), the force that divides their occupation of space escalates with their relationship disintegrating into horrific scenes of sexual violence:

> She tried bringing her legs together. His knees pressed them further apart, his hands planted either side of her arms. She dug her nails in until her fingers were covered in his blood. Going to fuck you fuck fuck you until . . . She screamed out as he went deeper in. [...] Her body limp, head alone moved, twisted, came up, sank back, her mouth open, but no scream came. (p. 128)

Where the inequity in their gendered positions leaves Ruth speechless and, in a precursor to this violence, rubbing the bathroom mirror until a 'clear expanse appeared' and 'furiously wip[ing] herself' (p. 45), so Leonard finds attempts to clean and repair the harm he has inflicted self-defeating: 'he touched, rubbed the dry blood away, but some more blood trickled across. He splashed with water, but still it flowed' (p. 130).

Three complicates its presentation of the patriarchal silencing of women through the figure of S, whose texts anticipate the breakdown in the couple's domesticity. The sexual violence emanating from the inequity between Leonard and Ruth's occupation of space is all the more desperate for the way it re-enacts the disparity in the gendered positions that broke S's family life. In contrast to how Leonard and Ruth's domestic space is 'Burglar-proofed' (p. 21) and spuriously 'gives security' (p. 124), S's tape recordings recall being 'Pursued/ by fantasies/ fears memory/ of that other place' and the way it fell into disrepair:

> Gradual removal of belongings. Not belonging.
> Men that came
> took
> the furniture away.
> Piano
> pictures
> glass chinaware (p. 29)

Pre-empting the violence between Ruth and Leonard, S recalls how 'In movements. From that other time. Senses reel upon themselves' (p. 33) as, having been made the target of her parent's failed relationship, S seems to blur her abuse with sexual fantasies as a way to bear the past:

> Black leather belt. I thought I
> told you to be back at seven. Bend over
> kneeling
> on stained sheets
> soft
> wet
> warm. The rain outside. A place.
> Possessed. Be possessed. To possess. The coming. Into waves.
> A shrunken moon. Between. Wet between
> two moons. But back to back. The inevitability.
> Mysterious stranger
> brother
> father
> lover. Lovers. (p. 37)

In view of the pain she suffered in that 'other time' (p. 33) and 'other place' (p. 29), S questions 'How begin to find a shape – to begin to begin again – turning the inside out: find one memory that will lie married next beside another' (p. 56). S's fractured memory stages the inability to know when or how she began 'to construct a moment ago or a space as between waking and dreaming', and, as a result, acknowledges that the 'space between is no less significant than the place occupied at the time' (p. 53). Quin emphasises the discontinuities of memory by presenting S's tape recordings through a disjointed typography, as if insinuating the incommensurability of events that refuse to be fixed or recalled. The stuttering recording and fragmented texts that evoke S's withdrawal from the Ruth and Leonard's lives subtly disrupt those moments in which gender subordination is violently enforced; the gravity of Ruth pleas, 'No Leon don't not now – not like this' (p. 78), and 'Not now not here Leon' (p. 126) emanates in part from the way that the couple's readings of S's texts confound the notion of a knowable 'here' and 'now' (p. 129) with 'another place' that 'Defeats time' and 'Contradicts movements' (p. 101). S's texts, whose gaps and blanks anticipate her death's incommensurability, could be said to disturb the construction of gendered positions, and the oppression emanating from their disparity.

Three restages how readings of S's text unravel gendered violence as Ruth and Leonard's mutual suspicion of each other is amplified by their faltering efforts to get to grips with S's tape recordings. While watching 'films of themselves' one evening, 'slides' suddenly appear 'upsidedown' and, once the picture is corrected, Leonard and Ruth find themselves watching 'A film of a girl in a bikini, she lay face down on sand. Who's that Leon? Sorry didn't mean to put it on reels got mixed up' (p. 84). Ruth asks Leonard whether S 'kn[e]w you were taking' the film, as she thinks it is '[s]trange how she never faces the camera always her head turned away' (p. 84). Ruth's anxieties about Leonard's relationship with S grow when she hears, rewinds, and plays back the following excerpt from S's tape: 'hotel room. Meals brought up. And not eating/ Avoiding/ the issue/ possibility. For the last time. Remembering only the first' (p. 118). However, faced with the way 'it's difficult to follow the way she says things' on tape, Ruth cannot confirm her misgiving that S 'was a little in love with' Leonard' and, like the misfiring projector, her attempts to present a clear picture of S stutter: 'Hell hell if only I knew–knew', 'What's the use–the use?' (p. 117). Ruth's inability to alleviate her worries as to 'who–who' (p. 116) S was involved with reaches its peak when she comes across one audio reel 'separate from the rest' in which Leonard, his voice 'sharp, clear', speaks of how, 'there was pleasure. Not unshared. I . . .' only for the sound to become 'muffled, then high-pitched' (p. 122). The act of rewinding the tape succeeds in breaking it: 'Twisted as she straightened by unwinding further, until a twisting mass lay in her lap, curled about itself in her hands' (p. 122). Where Ruth's search for an answer to the question 'who' flounders, it is matched by her misplaced assurance that, 'No no it would prove pointless' talking to Leonard about 'my suspicions' (p. 124). The despair of the couple's relationship is made acute by the stammering response that meets Leonard when he asks 'Ruth are you happy [...] are you worried about anything?': 'No–nothing' (p. 126). When Ruth's stutter is read alongside the numerous other stutters and figures of failure that interrupt the couple's fixation on knowing, we can see how Quin's text uses to failure critique couple's mutual mistrust by suggesting that what goes missing here is an acknowledgement of the alterity of the other.

Where failure in *Three* reiterates a subtle disruption of gender positions through the figure of S and her fractured texts, *Passages* amplifies *Three*'s challenge to the distinction between presence and absence, gendered spaces and the proximity of the other. That Quin intensified the risks and vulnerability of her experimental poetics in *Passages* is evident in her comments on the text in her letters to Sward and Creeley. On a visit to New York in November 1966 Quin made the 'unfortunate mistake'[131] of showing an editor at her US publishers, Scribner's, an early draft of *Passages*, in which a woman searches for her 'displaced/dead' brother with her

[131] Sward Papers, 23/11/66.

lover, 'a masculine reflection of herself, in search of himself'.[132] Writing to Sward, Quin complained about how the editor 'didn't have an inkling of wot I'm up to [...] saying things like: "but it hasn't any sustaining thing, no characterisation like in *Three*"'.[133] Quin responded to the editor's suggestion that '"the whole thing frankly Ann spells Experimental in caps"' by saying, '"well if it turns out a ghastly failure it really doesn't matter as it's something I've just got to do"'.[134] A year after the editor's comments, Quin elaborated on the significance of the text's admission of failure while describing her struggle to finish the book to Creeley:

> strange strange piece of writing, perhaps even I don't know what it all adds up to. [...] Actually exhausted myself in finishing the book, so much so that I had a kind of breakdown, when I lost my speech, [...] – all caused, I guess, thru not so much "overworking" but lower strata happenings: mainly that the book is about a woman in search of her brother; the pressure to finish the book by November was a kind of subconscious desire to meet the anniversary thing of my half brother's death – the loss of speech too I guess was a kind of projection of myself with Ian's death – the virus that hit his lungs.[135]

Quin's alignment of her writing with an approach to the death of another and the way it jeopardizes her speech could be read through Levinas suggestion that that 'the ascendancy of the other is exercised upon the same to the point of interrupting it, leaving it speechless'.[136] Through a reading of *Passages*'s rhetoric of failure we will see how the 'speechless' approach of the other provides a way to reread the losses highlighted by the text's evocation of violent and exploitative discourses.

The beginning of *Passages* indicates how Quin's work continued its move towards the other by representing death as an interpersonal concern:

> Not that I've dismissed the possibility my brother is dead. We have discussed what is possible, what is not. They say there's every chance. No chance at all. Over a thousand displaced persons in these parts,

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[132] Ann Quin, *Passages* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1969). Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.
[133] Sward Papers, 23/11/66.
[134] Sward Papers, 23/11/66.
[135] Creeley Papers, 23/11/67.
[136] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 101.

> perhaps more. So we move on. Towards. Away. Claiming another to take his place, as I place him in profile (p. 5).

The text adopts two narrative forms to follow the woman's search for her brother and her lover's search for himself; the first is, in Morley's words, a 'stream-of-body-consciousness', which is tentatively focalized through the woman and adopts a fractured first/third person narration to register impressions of the couple's movements; the second is an 'annotated journal incorporating references to pagan mythology', which predominantly focuses on the man and his work as an academic.[137] The text's rhetoric of failure is emphasized by the tear between the journal's anxiety over being '[m]ore and more unable to observe, determine the truth of things, share an experience' (p. 29) and the way the woman's impressionistic narrative accepts how 'pattern[s] formed, collected. Dislocated from moment to moment' (p. 26). The warped time and space presented by the tensions between the two forms unhinges the exploitative and gendered discourses that shape the couple's searches with the disturbance of having been approached by the other.

The man and the woman's searches take place across an unnamed Mediterranean country, whose 'political situation' is 'intolerable' (p. 35); they witness the effects of a conflict by 'stumbl[ing] over cripples in alleys, passage ways' (p. 12), and hear about an island where 'six men' were 'shot' (p. 21), their bodies never 'recovered' (p. 22). In order to get '[i]nformation' about the woman's brother, who 'might' have been detained as he 'belong[ed] to the Party' (p. 10), the couple 'exchange' their 'money, clothes, cigarettes, drink' with the 'older men' 'gambling' and 'talk[ing] of the political situation' (p. 7). The academic's journal registers the unease that accompanies the couple's implicit participation in the economic exploitation of others: 'Look of intense hatred on the interpreter's face when I gave him the money finally. The pleasure I felt! Unlike the complexities of guilt/anger gone through when confronted by beggars, whether I give them anything or not' (p. 46). The journal repeats how the woman's narrative presented them 'stumbl[ing] over cripples in passage ways, alleys', as the academic is haunted by 'grotesque shapes appearing, crawling towards me' only for the 'thought of knives thrown at my back' to betray the 'beggars' who 'held out their withered hands, plates' (p. 51). The discomfort the man experiences before the poverty of the people is intensified by how he exploits women involved in sexual labour. The man reports how he 'listened to some prostitute's life story', 'gave her some more money', and, as he 'rather fancied [her] daughter', 'derived much pleasure watching' the 'completely undressed girl' stand 'painfully in the middle

[137] Morley, 'Love Affair(s)', p. 122.

of the cluttered smelly room' (pp. 50-51). The sexual and economic exploitation entwined with the man and the woman's ability to buy their freedom of movement is made acute by the academic's record of a 'girl' who 'refused' his 'money', and 'pleaded for us to take her away from the island, from her brother, who I think made use of her' (p. 55).

The sexual relations between the man and the woman are permeated and troubled by the exploitation that their affluence allows them to observe and aggravate:

> His hands, their feet, moved forward, back again over her. The incinerators would come later. [...] In a downward movement her body stiffened, recognised the area between would be space enough. She heard the wind tear at steel. Guns, engines controlled the screams. Line of men against the wall, blindfolded, they fell forward, sideways back (p. 13).

The disquieting mingling of sex and violence reappears in an obscene form in the 'wild party' (p. 57) the couple attend, recalling the tensions of the countercultural turn in Quin's work. Having taken a 'pill' (p. 58) and 'felt so high', the man and the woman participate in sadomasochistic scenes; the journal reports how 'the most exciting part of all this was not so much my whipping the girl, but seeing her so abandoned, submissive and obviously getting more and more excited, roused under me, under the strokes I dealt' (p. 59). The couple's distorted re-enactment of the sexual and economic exploitation they witness illuminates how the erasure of others is sustained by fantasies of a harmony between people; the impressionistic section of the novel notes that man's '[s]mile spread as he became part of the motion he shaped' (p. 26), and as the '[s]ound of whip meeting flesh' merges with the music to form a 'rhythm', we see how 'she danced on the table, danced with her shadow' (p. 25).

However, even as the couple's actions seem to be complicit with the oppression of others, the woman's 'shadow' hints at a dislocation between the woman and the motions 'he shaped' (p. 25). At an earlier point in the text, we are presented with how the '[a]ngle of his body met the angles of her arms, legs. The shape of these shaped her moods' (p. 19). The woman's narrative presents a sensibility exposed to movements and sounds that 'shaped shapes from spaces I could not then see, feel' (p. 23), foregrounding a way to critique the shaping of bodies by the force of economic and gender pressures. In contrast to the journal's record of 'forc[ing] her body to dance under him', and its view of the woman's body as a 'surface of marble' that he 'cut[s] other shapes from' (p. 89), the other section of the text recalls someone during 'The night. Several nights before. Who forced himself into her, forced her body to move until she

cried out. Then no longer' (p. 70). The fragmented and impressionistic prose sections of *Passages* call attention to movements that are unforced as a means of disorientating how the force of one body can shape and silence another:

> Counterpoints, contradictions,
> improvisation in roles we assume. Shape
>
> of his body. Hair parted half way from the crown. A dark
> line spreading from the belly. Spine. At such times I nearly
> forget, call him by another name (p. 61).

The tear in the text suggests the interruption of a moment breaking with the 'shaping' of his body, and thereby supplies a way to draw attention to the appeal of those persons who are exploited to the point that they have

> No sense of who touched her,
> who she was stripped by, who woke her as soon as she tried
> to sleep.
>
> Who beat her with sticks, whips on the soles of her feet (p. 71).

The tensions between the forced and unforced shaping of bodies is also reflected by the divergence between the characteristics of the man and the woman's searches. When the academic journal switches into the third-person to present a '*Portrait of a Man in Search of Perfection*' (p. 49), we get an insight into the epistemic crisis afflicting the academic's search for a sense of self in view of his dissections of the country's culture:

> He writes a book, that turns out a great success. He travels, lectures,
> and goes to academic parties, flirts entertainingly with Professional
> wives/daughters. He marries again. He could be called "the successful
> man"; yet still he faces the mirror and says: Where did it all go
> wrong? (p. 49)

Moreover, the man is troubled by the 'need to follow' the woman and how she finds 'her own lucidity in fantasies, sometimes shared' (p. 29). In the woman's section of the narrative, we hear how the academic struggles to follow these fantasies, as, although 'he spoke of a death demon, said he had celebrated a divine madness', the man turns this transcendental language against the woman: 'I watched closely. At a distance. His eyes wide. I think that's your problem you know hoping to reach a state of divine madness, he shouted' (p. 66). The tenuous fantasies holding their relationship together collapse as the woman finds 'herself breathless, could not would not answer' (pp. 64-65) the man's questions, as he concentrates on 'his need to find some unambiguous truth' (p. 29). Though the man's fixation on knowledge threatens to render the women's fantasies speechless, the woman's narrative maintains he 'was after all a stranger, a foreigner. Someone she would prefer not to know' (p. 65). A similar reluctance to rationalize her relationship with the man recurs in the fears and fantasies that shape the woman's search for her brother:

> She sat up, did not recognise this face, changing, patterned with light and shade. Another person. Some other life. A time in her childhood. On a swing in some gardens, swinging into light through trees. Some happiness. Had it ever happened. It was happening now. Then terror, sensing it, knowing something was about to occur. A man her father. Brother. Some lover. (p. 75)

The 'terror' of the fantasy is reshaped when the woman returns to a deserted park with the negative of a photo of someone who looks like, and might be identified as her brother, as she is content to 'Move with the movements of the swing. Her own movements' (p. 82). The woman attempts to preserve a way to continue to answer for the time of her brother by tearing up the negative 'until black pieces fluttered down, around her, scattered with leaves under the swing', having let the man 'catch the train to another place. Some other life' (p. 82).

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In conclusion to the chapter, it may be useful to reflect upon David Haworth's observation, in his review of *Passages*, that 'Quin is a pioneer, but no clear trail is made for the reader to follow

her'.[138] Haworth's response to Quin's experimental text is symptomatic of the assumption that a work of fiction should construct and sustain a reciprocal relationship with its reader, and thereby integrate itself into the conventions that constitute a literary culture. I have argued that Quin's work resists this assumption because of the violent exclusion of otherness entwined with attempts to shed light on and represent our relations to others. Consequently, her literary innovations escape our grasp, but they do so in order to try to protect and preserve the possibility of calling up something new, and burdening us with a responsibility for the other that already eludes us. There is an increasing sense of risk and fragility reading the intractable flight of Quin's experiments with the novel from *Berg* to *Passages*, and it inspires a crisis of address. Just as Rhoda in Woolf's *The Waves* despairs over the question of '[t]o whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body', reading Quin's text one is encumbered with the need to articulate its urgent and moving dissections of intimate personal relations, and the gross inequities of constructions of gender, without eclipsing their elusive alterity.[139] It may be that a reading of Quin's uncompromising aesthetic through the radical texts of Luce Irigaray might be able to expand on the readings of this chapter, which have left unexplored how an analysis of the representation of embodiment, and sexual difference could elaborate a more sensitive acknowledgement of an ethical proximity to the other in Quin's work.

A reading of Quin's work attentive to the body and sexual difference might help develop an always provisional and uncertain language through which to reconsider postwar experimental women's writing; how it seems to call for a mode of inquiry sensitive to a nonreciprocal relation to the other. Such work might provide another way to read how, in Creeley's words,

> She goes *out of it* from time to time, crashing in publicly afforded sanatoriums, being dragged back from Stockholm. Recovered, she wonders if she can handle acid again. Or is it too soon. One doctor, commenting, says that verbal therapy is useless. She is absolute. She wants something, someone, to change it.[140]

Though when we adopt the role of that 'someone' alluded to by Creeley, any response we give to Quin's work seems inadequate, it could be that an admission of inadequacy and failure in the

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[138] David Haworth, 'On the Roadwork', *New Statesman*, 21 March 1969, p. 416.
[139] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 35.
[140] Creeley, *Mabel*, p. 121.

assumption of that part may be crucial to respecting the significance of how her work insisted on trailing behind its time.

Conclusion: Postwar Experimental Fiction, Modernism and Postmodernism

This examination of failure in the experimental fiction of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin has implicitly charted the eclipse of modernism and the emergence of postmodernism in postwar British culture. The preceding chapters have explored how these authors's works accentuate a tension between their responsibility for others and their relationship to different discursive communities, which could tentatively be reframed as the transition between modernism and postmodernism; these fictions hover between modernism's exploration of the limits of subjectivity, and the postmodern emphasis on dispersed and heterogeneous discourses. In order to sketch how this thesis could be expanded so as to address these broader developments in postwar British culture, we can re-examine how the failure of 'Writers Reading', and the equivocal conflict between individuals and a group it reflects, plays out the tension between modernism and a postmodern mediation of complex and contestable discourses. This conclusion reflects on the significance of viewing these authors in the context of their failure as a group by outlining how their organization and legacy differs from what Raymond Williams interprets as the characteristics and contributions of the Bloomsbury circle. In 'The Bloomsbury Fraction', Williams notes that although the 'group, the movement, the circle, the tendency seem too marginal or too small or too ephemeral to require historical and social analysis', their importance lies 'in what their modes of achievement can tell us about the larger societies to which they stand in such uncertain relations'.[1] Williams's reading of Bloomsbury is useful for the way it maps the general significance of seemingly peripheral features of cultural groups; as we shall see, he suggests that the work of the Bloomsbury group pre-empted notions of the private and the public prevalent in postwar culture. Williams's analysis thus parallels, and offers an alternative perspective on, Esty's contention that certain modernists participated in the rise of an Anglocentric culture. Williams's essay will provide a guideline for this critical reflection on the significance of the failure of 'Writers Reading', and its continuities and discontinuities with English modernism's influence on postwar culture.

Williams's examination of the Bloomsbury group stresses the importance of the relationship between 'its specific internal formation' – 'the elements of friendship and relationship, through which they recognized and came to define themselves' – and 'its evident

[1] Raymond Williams, 'The Bloomsbury Fraction', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 148-169, p. 149.

general significance'.[2] In addition to representing 'a new *style*' of cultural production and discussion, Williams notes that the members of the Bloomsbury group were 'one of the advanced formations of their class': '[t]hey were a true *fraction* of the existing English upper class. They were at once against its dominant ideas and values and still willingly, in all immediate ways, part of it'.[3] Williams supplements his outline of these factors of the group's 'structure of feeling' with a notion that 'can be precisely represented by the phrase "social conscience"': '[n]othing more easily contradicts the received image of Bloomsbury as withdrawn and languid aesthetes than the remarkable record of political and organizational involvement, between the wars, by Leonard Woolf, by Keynes, but also by others, including Virginia Woolf'.[4] Indeed, Williams goes on to state that the 'true link term' between the 'small, rational, candid group' and its 'important political bearings' is the term '"conscience"', which he qualifies in the following way: '[i]t is a sense of individual obligation, ratified among civilized friends, which both governs immediate relationships and can be extended, without altering its own local base, to the widest "social concerns"'.[5] However, for Williams, Bloomsbury's 'social conscience' was limited by the circle's 'true organizing value', which, he suggests, also helps to explain why it 'denied its existence as a formal group': 'the unobstructed free expression of the civilised individual'.[6] In Williams's view, the works of different Bloomsbury members tried to counter 'poverty, sexual and racial discrimination, militarism and imperialism' by appealing to the 'value of the civilized *individual*, whose pluralisation, as more and more civilized individuals, was itself the only acceptable social direction'.[7] Consequently, Williams proposes that a significant legacy of the Bloomsbury group is that it affirmed the view that '[t]he social conscience, in the end, is to protect the private consciousness': '[i]n the very power of their demonstrations of a private sensibility that must be protected and extended by forms of public concern, they fashioned the effective forms of the contemporary ideological dissociation between "public" and "private" life'.[8] Though it is not the case that Bloomsbury 'caused' the emergence of 'a position which […] was to become a "civilised" norm', Williams claims its members 'were prominent and relatively coherent among its early representatives and agents'.[9]

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[2] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 152.
[3] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 154, p. 153, p. 156.
[4] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 155.
[5] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 156.
[6] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 164, p. 165.
[7] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 165.
[8] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 167, p. 168.
[9] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 168, p. 163.

There are evident problems with the suggestion that the impact of the heterogeneous works of Woolf, Keynes and others was restricted by its affiliation with 'a specific moment of liberal thought', and the 'philosophy of the sovereignty of the civilized individual'.[10] Yet, Williams's contention that the Bloomsbury group's 'social conscience' foreshadowed how the public came to be permeated by a notion of the 'civilized individual', even as the group's works appeared to reinforce a separation of private and public spheres, may help to stress the significance of failure in the work of 'Writers Reading', and elucidate why their address to an audience stuttered. In light of Williams's analysis, it is perhaps easier to note how a predisposition towards the autonomous individual subtly directed the Arts Council's notion of community; one could argue that the body's backing of, in Keynes's words, 'the work of the artist' as 'individual and free, undisciplined, unregimented, uncontrolled' implicitly set the terms for its rebuilding of 'community and of our common life'.[11] The Arts Council's endorsement of a notion of the autonomous individual suggests one way the body contributed to the unspoken and pervasive conventions of the postwar cultural community, and the conditions in which these experimental fiction's address to the public would stutter; the critique of the subject insinuated by these experimental fiction's rhetoric of failure was always already at odds with their immediate audience's implicit view of themselves as self-sufficient individuals.

At the same time the Art Council's subsidy of Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's work offered these authors a way to follow the Bloomsbury group, and break away as, in Williams's terms, a 'fraction' of their own social class. However, unlike Bloomsbury, the social classes from which the members of 'Writers Reading' emanated cannot be easily categorized as 'the existing upper class'.[12] Burns and Figes were born into affluent families only for their lives to be radically transformed by the Second World War, while Johnson's wartime evacuation and the losses that marked Quin's early life accentuated these authors's apprehensions about their relationship to their relatively impoverished backgrounds.[13] If the Bloomsbury circle was able to take for granted how it developed, in Williams's words, as '"a group of friends"' with the help of 'the highly specific social and cultural institution' of the University of Cambridge, a comment Quin made to Sward suggests 'Writers Reading's' lack of a similar social and cultural grounding:

> [in 1965] Cambridge University once asked if I'd do a talk so I took some notes down, got v. nervous about the whole thing, and

[10] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 165.
[11] Keynes, 'The Arts Council', p. 368, p. 370.
[12] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 156.
[13] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 156.

> fortunately, due to my publishers as "go-between" forgot about [the] date, forgot to inform me, so I missed it. And I decided there and then never again.[14]

Quin's anxieties at the thought of appearing before an audience at the University of Cambridge emphasizes the uncertainties that attended these writers's wavering social mobility. In Quin's case, her publisher Marion Boyars observes that Quin 'unjustifiably' felt 'that she lacked formal education'.[15] The year before she died, Quin enrolled at Hillcroft College, which was, in her words, 'specially for women over 25 without qualifications', and learnt, 'at long last', 'the difference between iambic and trochee in poetry': 'I somehow never had the time to explore them in a solitary struggle of reading and trying to earn a living'.[16] Quin's hints at the financial and educational concerns that troubled her attempt to live as an author in the sixties and early seventies indicates how postwar experimental writers were overloaded with uncertainties. Indeed, a disquieting parallel between the otherwise dissimilar groups of Bloomsbury and Writers Reading is what Williams identifies as 'a delay in higher education for women'; Quin's enrolment at Hillcroft College and the fact that she was due to start a course at the University of East Anglia in 1973 contrasts with how Burns had already held a post at the same institution or Johnson's Gregynof Arts Fewllowship.[17]

Differences in class, gender, and education appear to have propelled these writers's views of themselves as 'solitary' and, as a result, accentuated the difficulties of them fusing, like Bloomsbury, into a 'group of friends'. Though the members of 'Writers Reading' supported each other – Burns suggested to Quin that 'it might be worth trying for a degree in Eng. lit at East Anglia'[18] – their relationships seem to have been volatile and highly charged; one could recall Johnson's 'fury' at Quin's reading at their inaugural event, or cite Figes's reaction to Burns's suggestion that *Patriarchal Attitudes* illustrated how she '[did not] understand Marxism': 'the stupid bastard. How condescending can you be?'.[19] Indeed, Figes's comment that they 'were all huggermugger' seems a fitting description of the friction that emanated from the singularity of these authors; the differences between their backgrounds, each of which is marked by an acute sense of loss, and the divergent trajectories of their works may have meant

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[14] Sward Papers, 16/2/66.
[15] Marion Boyars, quoted in *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, ed. by Giles Gordon (London: Hutchinson, 1975), p. 251.
[16] Ann Quin, 'Second chance', *Guardian*, August 8 1973, p. 9.
[17] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 162.
[18] Quoted in Sewell, 'Ann Quin', p. 188.
[19] Figes, 'Authors' Lives'.

their relationships were too fractious for them to break away and recognize themselves as a 'fraction'.[20]

Nonetheless, even as the description of these writers as 'huggermugger' reflects their breakdown as a group, it evokes the sense of failure through which we can link them together; the word Figes draws upon can mean both disorderly and secret, and thereby evokes how the works of Burns, Johnson and Quin opened themselves to 'chance', 'chaos', and 'anarchy' in order to expose that subjectivity, or what can seem most secret, already rests upon a welcoming of the other. Paradoxically, the singularity of these authors, and the way it hindered their formation as a group, reinforces the case for analysing their works together, as it foregrounds how their works share a sense of failure. This paradox seems crucial for tracing the ethical dimension of their work and gauging its significance; it allows us to appreciate how their work resists being aligned with English modernism's apparent investment in the autonomy of the individual. Where the Bloomsbury group's underlying commitment to a notion of the individual may have pre-empted what would emerge, in Williams's view and 'if only in carefully diluted instances', as the '"civilised" norm' of postwar culture, 'Writers Reading's' recovery of innovative literary forms serves as a haunting reminder that modernism's legacy was more complex and contradictory than it appeared in public; the sense of failure in Burns, Figes, Johnson and Quin's texts intimates at how modernism returned in the postwar era and challenged the separation between public and private which its earlier proponents had seemingly anticipated.[21] One could argue that the work of 'Writers Reading' enacts a faint inversion of the process and effect Williams connects to Bloomsbury's 'social conscience'; instead of advancing a 'private sensibility that must be protected and extended by forms of public concern', failure in these authors's texts calls into question the autonomy of the individual or private consciousness silently embedded in the public by impressing the move towards the other already overlooked by the assumption of a free subject.[22]

If a rereading of the failure of this group of experimental fiction writers offers a way to reconsider modernism's influence on postwar culture, then the orientation to the other, which I have argued is entwined with their experimental fiction's rhetoric of failure, also appears to foreshadow the ethical turn of postmodernism. In her second book, *An Ethics of Dissensus*, Ziarek highlights that, although the postmodern 'emphasis on the historical constitution of subjectivity contests the notion of freedom as an unquestionable attribute of the autonomous self', 'freedom is still presupposed, implicitly or explicitly, in all postmodern discussions of

[20] Figes, 'Authors' Lives'.
[21] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 168.
[22] Williams, 'Bloomsbury Fraction', p. 168.

agency, resistance, and the transformation of the social forms of life'.[23] In contrast, the readings put forward in this thesis may help to begin to reassess how experimental texts that mediate and fall between modernism and postmodernism offer a crucial reflection upon developments in contemporary culture.[24] One way to expand on these authors's work's intersection with the beginnings of a postmodern culture might be to consider how they all worked in mediums other than the novel; this thesis has not offered detailed readings of their published and unpublished poetry, short stories, plays, radio plays and films. An examination of these authors's exploration of different mediums and cultural forms could shed light on their relationships to the demands and disorientating effects of postmodern culture; a reflection on the previous chapters highlights how these writers's focus on their fiction was pulled awry by the allure of films adaptations of their novels that came to nothing, and television appearances which at once offered to expand their audience and threatened to change its expectations, if not take it away.[25]

Filmed in October 1973, the month before his suicide, Johnson's idiosyncratic television documentary 'Fat Man on a Beach' could be said to reflect his works's perplexed response to an expanding and increasingly consumer-oriented culture. In the documentary's final shot, the camera pulls further away from Johnson as he, ominously, walks further into the sea. When Johnson disappears, the viewer cannot be sure whether it is the result of Johnson walking into the sea, which seems to signify a morbid assertion of his autonomy, or the camera's desertion of him, which might be read as a subtle sign of the arrival of the postmodern, and its decentring of the subject through cultural mediations. What enables a rereading of the way the moment hovers between the autonomous individual, and a premonition of the disorienting effects of the postmodern, is an abandoned book by Burns and the tenuous links it presents between himself, Johnson and Quin. In an unfinished biography of Johnson, which was provisionally titled 'Human Like the Rest of Us', Burns cites how the director of Johnson's documentary, Michael Bakewell, described 'Fat Man on a Beach's' final scene '"as a reenactment of Ann Quin's death"'.[26] The faltering thread between Burns's incomplete homage for Johnson, and Johnson's

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[23] Ziarek, *Ethics of Dissensus*, p. 2.

[24] It may be possible to explore and rethink the term experimental fiction so as to draw out the sense in which the word 'experiment' denotes the notion of a tentative and unsure attempt, whose uncertainty may already, and crucially, connote having been called to respond to the other.

[25] Though the obituary that appeared for Quin in *The Times* notes that '[a] film of *Berg* is to be made soon', the project seems to have petered out ('Ann Quin', *The Times*, 6 September 1973, p. 18). Similarly, Johnson, whose short film *You're Human Like the Rest of Them* won prizes at international film festivals, could not find the money to finance and shoot his screenplay of *Albert Angelo* (See Coe, *Fiery Elephant*, p. 307).

[26] Alan Burns, 'Two Chapters from a Book Provisionally Titled "Human Like the Rest of Us: A Life of B. S. Johnson"', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 17:2 (Summer 1997), 156-178, p. 166.

ambiguous tribute to Quin, perhaps reiterates how a sense of failure insinuates the ethical sensibility of, as Figes put it, this ‘huggermugger’ group.

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