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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

# Carl Schmitt, Sovereignty, Modernism

by

Joseph Georges Owen



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ABSTRACT

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SCHOOL OF ENGLISH

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Carl Schmitt has recently become a popular figure in humanities scholarship. In this turn, contemporary culture has amplified Schmitt's insights about sovereignty, states of emergency and political decisions. His ideas have particularly disturbed and excited literary theorists, who use his writings as a methodological resource for approaching 21<sup>st</sup> century literary fiction. This type of critical work does not fully take into account Schmitt's own encounters with, and exercises in, literature, art and cultural criticism. Concomitantly, nor does it understand his relationship to the literary cultures of his time and the artistic context within which he wrote his major philosophical works. In Europe and America, Schmitt's life as a writer, stretching from the 1910s to the 1970s, is dominated by the aesthetic revolution of modernism. Using this framing, my thesis asks: Does Schmitt's concept of sovereignty—of 'he who decides on the exception'—transform understandings of modernism? If so, how does this transformation attend to genres, forms and styles in ways that answer questions about sovereignty? How is sovereignty depicted in modernist literature? In response, this thesis analyses three works by definitive authors of literary modernism: Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* (1939) and Samuel Beckett's "Ping" (1967). It argues that these fictions respond to questions of sovereignty through their deployment of various, ironic aesthetic and representational techniques. Woolf's mocking satire of melancholy ironizes sovereign authority as epoch-defining. Faulkner's genre-splicing, contrapuntal novel identifies failure as a contingent response to absolute sovereignty. Beckett's prose short explores the relationship between anticipation and the human search for sovereign representation. The methods I am exercising in this thesis speak within continuing and ever more complicated debates about sovereignty.

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# Academic Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: JOSEPH GEORGES OWEN

Title of thesis: Carl Schmitt, Sovereignty, Modernism

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

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. 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;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signature: JOSEPH G. OWEN

Date: 02/09/2022



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## CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction: Carl Schmitt, Modernist?

One day we were commanded to whitewash, from the ground to the topmost leaves, all of the trees in our training area. The corporal who relayed the order was nervous and apologetic.

Later an off-duty captain sauntered by and watched us, white splashed and totally weary, strung out among the freakish shapes we had created. He walked away swearing. I understood the principle (orders are orders), but I wondered:

Who decides?

—DONALD BARTHELME<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Overview

‘Who decides?’ is the question of sovereignty. Who, wonders the narrator in Donald Barthelme’s short story, “Me and Miss Mandible” (1964), is the supreme authority? Not the corporal who relays the order, nor the off-duty captain, nor the totalizing collective pronouns of *we* and *us*. Rather it is whoever ‘commanded’, a past source of agency, unknown and unknowable. All that can be comprehended is the decision itself, the power of which is in its pointlessness. To protect a tree from sunscald one only needs to whitewash the bottom of the trunk; to cover the topmost leaves is to obey authority, unconditionally and without purpose. The reader wonders as the narrator does: why has the basic training company been asked to complete this task? The deliberate mysteries of Barthelme’s story mean that we cannot know. The reader sees consequences of the decision: the debilitated condition of the cadets as they embrace patterns of obedience, exhaustion and tedium; the uncertain point of view of the corporal, who acts as the embarrassed proxy for the decision maker; and the perplexed reaction of the higher-ranking captain, unburdened by responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Barthelme, ‘Me and Miss Mandible’, in *Sixty Stories* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 17–28 (p. 19).

In the terms of its fiction, Barthelme's hierarchy of representation, containing multiple levels of perspective, affect and authority, endures under the ultimate sovereign, whoever 'commanded'. His nominal figures accept that this supreme authority is legitimate because of established rules, principles and forms, which provoke contingent subjectivities, sentiments and desires. These characters recognise that a space of sovereignty exists, without knowing its occupants. The narrator's reminiscence proposes the central question of this thesis, which has less to do with 'why does sovereignty exist?' and 'what are the effects of sovereignty?' and more to do with 'who is sovereign?' The reader, like the company, needs to be told (orders are orders), but who is really doing the telling, and why do they not reveal themselves in the telling? These questions solicit broader enquiries about literary fiction: How stable is the authorial sovereign? How are sovereign subjects and authorities depicted? Of what benefit is sovereignty as a literary concept? How do genres, forms and styles in modernism transform representations of sovereignty? To these questions, this thesis formulates a response.

### 1.1.1 Key terms

First, I need to outline several key operational terms that appear in this thesis. The question of 'who decides?' is directly addressed in the work of Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), a prominent Weimar legal and political thinker who became one of the leading jurists of the Third Reich. Schmitt is best known for his theory of sovereignty, most clearly articulated in *Political Theology* (1922). His famous formulation, '[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception', has several key components.<sup>2</sup> In it, the sovereign reveals himself by: i. making the genuine and pure decision, which amounts to a definite existential intervention; and ii. deciding what constitutes the exceptional case, which amounts to an extraordinary substantive moment. This two-part summary of its form and content provides the basic articulation of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. *Pure decision* is, for Schmitt, a political decision that is singular, absolute and final. It needs not discussion, agreement or ratification. Why? Because the pure decision concerns the *exception*, which is whatever the sovereign decides, usually during a period of chaos, but always in a political moment that

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 5.

requires extreme and transgressive resolution. In Schmitt's words, the sovereign reduces the state 'to the moment of the decision, to a pure decision not based on reason and discussion and not justifying itself, that is, to an absolute decision created out of nothingness'.<sup>3</sup> Concerns about temporality—before and after the decision—thus bear on Schmitt's conceptualization of the pure decision and the exception.

Schmitt was deeply influenced by early modern thought. Renaissance theorist, Jean Bodin (c.1530–96), defined sovereignty as the highest absolute and perpetual state authority in modern politics.<sup>4</sup> Schmitt, though, is more indebted to the state theory of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), for whom sovereignty is a question of representation,<sup>5</sup> which Schmitt transforms into one of revelation. From Hobbes, Schmitt crafts his key analogy for the decision on the exception, the *miracle*, which Tracy Strong notes as illustrating 'the occasion for and of the revelation of the true nature of sovereignty'.<sup>6</sup> Schmitt's use of the miracle to explain the exception exemplifies his brand of political theology: to make divine and unsurpassed the domain of politics and political decision-making. For Schmitt, the decision on what counts as—and therefore what to do about—the exception can occur during states of emergency, peril, siege, catastrophe, urgency, need, or crisis, at a time that requires suspension of the existing order to maintain structural order. The sovereign, in these instances, acts as the borderline; he<sup>7</sup> is both inside and outside of the law, deploying the extralegal exception against the routine accumulation of legal rules and norms. In the revelatory and extraordinary decision, he is made visible. We see through the haze of plurality and confusion; we see, finally, something, somebody, who decides. Crucially, for Schmitt, this decision 'emanates from nothingness',<sup>8</sup> which has a twofold meaning and relevance: i. the decision has no prior relationship with the norms and rules that comprised the previous legal order; and ii. the extraordinary, unanticipated quality of the decision holds such authority that the new order legitimately replaces the old order. *Nothingness* is that which generates the sovereign decision on the exception; it is

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<sup>3</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> See Jean Bodin, *The six books of a commonweale*, ed. by K. D. McRae (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). For analysis of Bodin's influence on Schmitt, see Peter Schröder, 'Carl Schmitt's Appropriation of the Early Modern European Tradition of Political Thought on the State and Interstate Relations', *History of Political Thought*, 33.2 (2012), 348–71.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Edwin Curley (Cambridge: Hackett, 1994). For an essay collection on their intellectual kinship, see *Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt: The Politics of Order and Myth*, ed. by Johan Tralau (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Tracy B. Strong, 'Foreword', in *Political Theology*, pp. vii–xxxv (p. xx).

<sup>7</sup> For Schmitt and the thinkers who influenced him, the sovereign is a man by default.

<sup>8</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 32.

therefore, in some sense, out of time, which bears on the temporalities confronted by modernist artists and writers.

This introduction establishes the value of bringing Schmitt into conversation with literary modernisms. *Modernism* describes the dominant innovations in aesthetics during the early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Modernisms—it was never a homogenous aesthetic credo—include a broad range of artistic and literary sensibilities that seek to position the abstract image and individual consciousness as the primary units of visual and written art. By foregrounding alternative lineal forms and ways of perception, modernists concerned themselves with the nature of authority across different domains of intellectual life: in the arts, in politics, and in the social world. Experimental styles, methods and attitudes constituted a challenge to established orders of literature, art and culture. My view is that Schmitt's formulation of sovereignty shares sensibilities with depictions of sovereignty in modernist aesthetics. This comparison is partly thematic: precariousness, spatiality, resistance and the breaking of binaries are defining literary themes of modernism, which responded to the shifting material conditions of its tumultuous present. It is also partly contextual: in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century, economies suffered collapse and empires faced precipitous decline. Considering this historical period, and using a law and literature methodology, this project deploys *sovereignty* as the central term to situate discussions about what counts as and what looks like legitimate political authority. This thesis contends that Schmitt brings original perspectives to a variety of modernist writers and texts, which are concerned with the nature of the individual sovereign subject and sovereign authority. Schmitt's idea of sovereignty helps to understand the significance and texture of sovereignty as a theme in modernism. His concerns about image-making further probe and illuminate several fictional narrative styles and representational strategies that are broadly considered as definitive of modernism.

Modernist texts offer new ways of reading Schmitt's concept of sovereignty, which can be sometimes treated as if it were a calcified and immutable truth. Across three main chapters, I interpret sovereignty as epochal, contingent, and anticipatory to apprehend, respectively, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* (1939), and Samuel Beckett's "Ping" (1967). This thesis seeks to show that literature, the literary domain and my chosen texts can usefully expand upon what lies latent within Schmitt's political theory. I argue that these fictions respond to questions of sovereignty

through the deployment of various aesthetic and representational techniques. Woolf's mocking satire of melancholy ironizes sovereign authority as epoch-defining. Faulkner's genre-splicing, contrapuntal novel identifies failure as a contingent response to absolute sovereignty. Beckett's prose short explores the relationship between anticipation and the human search for sovereign representation. By selecting a diverse selection of modernist prose forms, I offer contested sites of symbolic creation and a subterranean tropology of images. This thesis finds particularly that the imagery of the oak tree, human hands and whiteness collocates with established sovereign symbols and a sprawling set of associated metaphors and metonyms. I also consider motifs from European avant-gardes and Anglophone modernisms to formulate a literary conception of the modern sovereign subject, which disturbs and destabilizes traditional ideas of the sovereign as the supreme representative of state authority. A see-sawing tension between the self-possessed sovereign self and authoritative sovereign power reappears through the thesis.

Each of my chosen texts corresponds to different areas of Schmitt's thinking. Schmitt writes extensively on the nature of *symbol*, with his most concentrated analysis pertaining to Hobbes' *Leviathan*. As Schmitt puts it, '[i]n the long history of political theories, a history exceedingly rich in colourful images and symbols, icons and idols, paradigms and phantasms, emblems and allegories, [Hobbes'] leviathan is the strongest and most powerful image'.<sup>9</sup> But ultimately, even this image fails at the level political representation for Schmitt. This failure confirms Schmitt's distrust of vague symbolism as an effective tool for political order and encourages his appeal to *myth*. He understands 'the force of genuine, mythical images' as that which moves beyond symbols because this force establishes popular representative unity through its clarity and intensity.<sup>10</sup> Schmitt often distinguishes between what he views as concrete terms and corruptions. For him, the word *fable* is one term that has been malformed by the romantic attitude, but which has in fact a powerful political significance. He cites, for instance, 'the problem of aggression in the fable of the wolf and the lamb' to explain the 'condition of continual danger' that exists for political subjects.<sup>11</sup> For Schmitt, the use of animal fables to analogize human behaviour illustrates anthropological conceptions of political morality. Schmitt is also preoccupied

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan*, pp. 81–82

<sup>11</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 58–59.

with genre: his distinctive understanding of *tragedy* elevates the concept above the categories of performance, theatre and art, by virtue of its powerful connection to real life and real events. advances the possibility that truly tragic drama can cease being merely fiction and instead become a form of collective political communication. Lastly, the *katechon* is a biblical concept from St. Paul that Schmitt appropriates in suggestive and ambiguous ways. For him, the katechon is essentially a special symbol, which represents a dutiful resilience against the developments of the liberal and secular world. The katechon delays the always imminent crisis that Schmitt feared would destroy his conception of honest, authoritative politics. Delay is the source of the katechon's ambiguity: it prevents disaster through deferral.

The previous passage has outlined the key operational terms within the thesis, but how should I index and organise Schmitt's thought on images, genres and concepts—which draw him towards modernism—into an programmatic idea of aesthetics? Critics such as Peter Bürger have linked Schmitt's desire for the exception to 'an aestheticist Lebensphilosophie', which reveals modernist motifs of abruptness, suddenness, and departure in his thought.<sup>12</sup> Schmitt's use of the exception as a borderline concept is more complex than this view insinuates; it is not merely a cipher for what Karl Heinz Bohrer terms 'rupture, discontinuity, and shock'.<sup>13</sup> Schmitt's necessarily imprecise and undetailed exception challenges and responds to literary modernisms, which dispute creative intentions, reduce bodies, make uncertain spatial lineaments and render forlorn temporal semantics. Addressing these connections is a far from clear-cut endeavour because Schmitt's interactions with modernisms are generally indirect and ambiguous. Placing Schmitt amid modernisms that precede and follow his major philosophical works is thus a complicated task.

Modernisms and the avant-garde are not synonymous. In Peter Bürger's famous distinction, modernism denotes the latest stage in the formal evolution of artistic and literary styles, whereas the historical avant-garde provides a critique of and seeks the destruction of the very institution of art.<sup>14</sup> Although Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Bürger, 'Carl Schmitt oder die Fundierung der Politik auf Ästhetik', in *Zerstörung, Rettung des Mythos durch Licht*, ed. by Christa Bürger (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 170–76 (p. 173).

<sup>13</sup> See Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens: Die pessimistische Romantik und Ernst Jüngers Frühwerk* (Munich: Hanser, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

(translated into English in 1984) is an essential theoretical text, Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster, among others, have challenged his thesis and outlined its limitations.<sup>15</sup> Bürger's face-value understanding of shock and newness in the avant-garde mischaracterizes modernisms but it also mischaracterizes Schmitt; his analysis embraces the rhetorical dimension both of the avant-garde and of Schmitt's political theory. Bürger flattens the historical context from which these rhetorical relations emerge and ignores the complicity of the avant-garde in art's norms and institutions, just as he ignores the complicity of Schmitt's decision and exception in regimes of political order. Bürger's crude analogy invites more interrogation of modernism, of Schmitt, and of the relations between them.

So, to read my chosen texts and supply an intellectual framework for addressing Schmitt's relationship to modernism, I propose an alternative thematic nexus of melancholy, failure and anticipation. *Melancholy*, on Schmitt's terms, should be understood not only as a psychological component of individuals, but as the sovereign's apparent inability to address a series of political and legal crises. The melancholy approach taken by modernists, on the other hand, is not passive but a way of revealing the latent orders underpinning experimental artistic practice. As has been outlined, *failure*, in Schmitt's view, is a common problem for political authority: liberal-democratic states, he argues, often fail to represent (and make decisions on behalf of) their subjects. Modernist failure is generally a much more generative enterprise because it exalts the risk of literary experiment and creation. The final constituent theme—*anticipation*—is crucial for Schmitt insofar as his concept of sovereignty precludes its usefulness. The decision on the exception cannot be envisaged, which is how it acquires its unique force and legitimacy. Anticipatory modernisms, meanwhile, illustrate the crucial role of *temporality*, the idea through which writers and artists comprehend the not-quite-yet, by apprehending the present and transforming the past, and in doing so, articulating the social, political and cultural conditions of modernity. My chosen authors—Woolf, Faulkner and Beckett—are renowned for how they respond to questions of temporality, drawing on a diverse range of literary strategies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Benjamin Buchloh, 'Theorizing the Avant-Garde', *Art in America*, 72 (1984), 19–21; Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde', *October*, 70 (1994), 5–32.

<sup>16</sup> For separate essential readings on temporality in Woolf, Faulkner and Beckett, see Julia Briggs, "'This Moment I Stand On': Virginia Woolf and the Spaces in Time", in *Reading Virginia Woolf*, by Julia Briggs (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 125–40; George Thomas, 'Telling Time: Faulkner's Temporal Turn', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016), 277–300; Stanley Cavell, 'Ending the Waiting

Although it may appear to risk recapitulating the limitations of previous formula, such as the ‘rupture, discontinuity, and shock’ posed by Bohrer, my methodology aims to acknowledge a wider span of philosophical and humanities scholarship relevant to Schmitt, sovereignty and modernism. This thesis contends that Schmitt should be categorized as a modernist, insofar as his theory of sovereignty is the result of his cravings for: i. political reordering within social disorder; ii. formal decision over formless discussion; and iii. establishing clear representative images during chaotic cultural epochs. Schmitt’s aesthetic cravings, which he tactically disavows, inform his political concepts and methodologies. I argue these cravings are threefold: for reordering; for form; and for representation. Schmitt’s outward anxiety about the aesthetic and his deliberate insistence on the political contribute to modernist debates about the meaning, value and utility of art. Schmitt moves from being a literary thinker to a political thinker through his use of fictions, which can be productively read against a range of modernist authors. In these readings, and as demonstrated across the chapters, I show that Schmitt’s unyielding understanding of politics is brought into relief by the creative ironies of my chosen modernists and the ironies identified within my chosen texts. Problems arising from aesthetics can be brought into potentially political formulations, which offers new readings apprehended through the unique powers of literature. By practically situating Schmitt within his era, it is possible to make broader theoretical conclusions about the relationship between philosophy, law, art and literature, and argue for the essential connections between politics and aesthetics.

### 1.1.2 *Politics and aesthetics*

Understanding the relationship between politics and aesthetics in Schmitt’s work means mapping the relationship in his thought between modernity, crisis and order. Schmitt emphasizes these connections in his treatises on politics, society and culture. In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923) and *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations* (1929), Schmitt is a cultural pessimist towards parliamentary democracy, which he worries will drain meaningfulness from intellectual life through its embrace of liberal modernity, its tendency for neutralized discussion and its deference towards technology. For Schmitt,

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Game: A reading of Beckett’s Endgame’, in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, by Stanley Cavell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 107–50.



these conditions inevitably bring about malaise and stasis, which amount to a sort of crisis, because clear and restorative decision-making has been disabled. In his reading, parliamentary deliberations and technical-rational processes, increasingly essential to modern systems and values, fail to mitigate crises of political authority and representation. Liberal democracy is fundamentally a contradiction because political pluralism, which by its nature contains multiple and irreconcilable private interests, is not a basis for political unity and order. His most extended analysis of the Weimar Constitution appears in his celebrated opus, *Constitutional Theory* (1927), and in *Legality and Legitimacy* (1932), which emphasizes the democratic credentials of the president over that of the law.

Schmitt's negative assessment of modernity explains his emphasis on the exception, which disrupts the existing legal and political settlement, as well as the society and culture that underpins it, precipitating a new order of state sovereignty. His desire to base a theory of sovereignty on the decision and the exception, and to shape the political as the supreme domain of human action and intellectual life, is then expressed in part through his anxieties about aesthetics. His literary works locate the problem of sovereign authority; his major political works intend to fix the problem. Early literary writings, including "The Buribunks" (1918), consider questions of sovereignty using techniques of satire, irony and ridicule; his major political theses frame these questions through appeals to image, form and analogy. All these intellectual treatments draw upon aesthetic sensibilities; all seek to remedy the problem of modernity, as Schmitt sees it. By seeking to ground an unambiguous source of legal and political authority, Schmitt invokes the aesthetic connotations of transcendence and myth.

From his earliest writings, including his first book *Political Romanticism* (1919), Schmitt views fiction as a mode that creates and perpetuates groundless ideas of universal humanity and of the individual sovereign subject. For him, literary criticism is a tool for diagnosing the problems of law and politics, and his interrogation of motifs and images is arguably his most sustained diagnostic tool. The 1923 essay, "Roman Catholicism and Political Form", and the 1938 book on Hobbes' *Leviathan*, ruminate on vital aspects of political representation and symbolism. In the former, Schmitt proposes the Catholic Church as a type of institution that provides moral and political authority, particularly through its embodiment of *complexio oppositorum* [complex of opposites], a category of dialectics whereby two conditions coexist despite being in contradiction. This work shows

Schmitt's belief in the power of formal authority to instil political order. In the book on Hobbes, Schmitt identifies the difficulties of political representation through a disquisition on symbols. In his view, the lucid directness of the Leviathan has been compromised by its many interpretations; its ambiguous meaning renders it inadequate for the representative power and authority required by modern nation states. For Schmitt, modernity—of which Hobbes' image, and its interpretation, is emblematic—provides a crisis of representation.

In works that almost bracket the Weimar era, namely *Political Theology* (1922) and *The Concept of the Political* (1932), Schmitt makes significant efforts to distinguish aesthetic judgments from what he views as political requirements. These books contain Schmitt's most influential insights about sovereignty and the political domain. *Political Theology* formulates the definition of the sovereign as the decider on the exception; it also outlines some of Schmitt's key ideas on the state and on the nature of humanity. By attempting to define sovereignty through the decision and the exception, Schmitt attempts to address the political crisis and reinstitute the political order. To explain the nature of this political order, Schmitt later conceptualizes the political domain as one of necessarily physical conflict, the distinction 'between friend and enemy'.<sup>17</sup> This distinction privileges mutual enmity above cooperation as a political reality between states and political opponents. In Schmitt's view, the understanding that a clear friend/enemy logic defines the relationships of politics provides a basis for order and a resolution to crisis.

In his official capacity as a jurist, he wrote articles that defended the Nazi Party between 1933 and 1936. After the Reichstag Fire in 1933, President Hindenburg invoked Article 48 of the Constitution, allowing Hitler to use emergency decrees to bypass parliament. Hitler ordered the extrajudicial killings of internal enemies the following year to consolidate power. Schmitt legally justified Hitler's actions in an article entitled "The Führer Protects the Law" (1934), advocating extraordinary measures for the exceptional moment. The Night of the Long Knives embodies the most reprehensible practical illustration of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. For Schmitt, its legal rationale was predetermined by his theoretical precepts on the decision and the exception, as a basis for order. Schmitt was eventually seriously criticized within the Party but protected by

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<sup>17</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 26.

Hermann Goering.<sup>18</sup> Post-war confessional texts such as *Ex Captivitate Salus* (1950), which Schmitt qualitatively distinguished as serious reflections, offer self-exculpatory musings. Schmitt was not prosecuted for Nazi crimes, but he refused to undergo de-Nazification by the Allies, claiming that he never truly believed in the Nazi project and that he was unwilling to disown his life's work.<sup>19</sup>

Schmitt returned to literary forms after his public affiliation with National Socialism. He crafted a fable of history, *Land and Sea* (1942), and produced arcane dialogues on power and space that demonstrate fresh creative approaches to his perennial intellectual concerns. Schmitt's *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950) merged these various rhetorical styles into a mounted defence of European civilization, his subsequent attempt to articulate a novel vision of international order for the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Schmitt's self-aggrandizing and prolix writing eventually came full circle. Translating psychological categories into delineated legal and political forms, Schmitt had written his 1910 university doctoral thesis in criminal law on types of guilt, before returning to the theme of the taboo in his most significant literary criticism, *Hamlet or Hecuba* (1956). This work culminated in a life of thought preoccupied by aesthetic considerations, which he used to understand the relationship between modernity, crisis and order across several eras, including the *Kaiserreich*, Weimar, Nazism and post-war Germany. Throughout his career, Schmitt never loses sight of the aesthetic aspects of the literary, even though he often misreads the authors and texts that intrigue, baffle and stimulate him.

Schmitt both embraces and rejects the aesthetic domain in his political theory, which inspires a broader inspection of aesthetics in his thought. Because of Schmitt's embroilment with National Socialism, I turn to his critical contemporary, Walter Benjamin, who contends that 'Fascism leads logically to an aestheticization of political life'.<sup>20</sup> Benjamin's work illuminates my perspective on the political and the aesthetic in Schmitt's thought. Nevertheless, interrogating Schmitt's aesthetic sensibilities should not begin and end with this postulation: Schmitt was a Nazi → Nazism was aesthetic →

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<sup>18</sup> See Tracy B. Strong, 'Foreword: Carl Schmitt and Thomas Hobbes: Myth and Politics', in Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. xviii–xxvi.

<sup>19</sup> For legal analysis of the circumstances of Schmitt's non-prosecution, see Edwin Bikundo, 'Carl Schmitt as a Subject and Object of International Criminal Law: Ethical Judgment in Extremis', *International Criminal Law Review*, 16.2 (2016), 216–36.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, p. 36.

Schmitt's thought is therefore aesthetic. Principles of his Wilhelmine, Weimar and post-war thinking must be considered. I therefore trace later in this introduction the relationship between modernity, crisis and order in Schmitt through several avant-garde approaches.

Schmitt elaborates on the sovereign decision through form and analogy. He cannot create a political concept without turning to the language of rendering and line drawing. For him, sovereignty is 'a borderline concept [...] pertaining to the outermost sphere'.<sup>21</sup> By this statement, I understand that the sovereign decides on the limits and borders of the law, and that this decision takes place at the highest point (or outermost sphere) of life and of politics, superseding every non-sovereign arrangement beneath it, which includes the law. At the outermost sphere and in the most extreme circumstance: there and then, the superior exception explains the inferior rule. In lineal language, rules and norms constitute the excess of faintly illustrated lines, symptomatic of parliamentary liberalism, which the firmly inscribed borderline supersedes. Schmitt's absolutist rendering of the line establishes the moment of sovereignty as a moment without friction. Sovereign decision overwhelms un-sovereign indecision. Rules, norms, and the usual order, which in everyday life possess their own internal contingencies and frictions, offer no resistance. His theory of sovereignty pursues a frictionless and transcendent action, by way of an abrasive and aesthetic abstraction. The border causes friction: to outline his conceptual style, he uses Immanuel Kant's term *Grenzbegriff*, which suggests the limit or boundary inherent to human sense experience. In doing so, Schmitt tries to establish a mutually comprehensible idea to articulate his theory of sovereignty. As Tracy Strong notes, this limit or boundary 'looks in two directions, marking the line between that which is subject to law—where sovereignty reigns—and that which is not—potentially the space of the exception'.<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, Schmitt's borderline concept exposes frictionless sovereignty as an oxymoron because the frictionless exception overwhelms that which is subject to law. It erases all other lines—over which sovereignty reigns—through its inscription of the hard line. The borderline also exposes frictionless sovereignty as a redundancy because it represents a desirable ideal—potentially the space of the exception—as an anticipated and unattainable imaginary. These apparent contradictions arise because norms predicate the existence of the exception, so the aesthetic preference for the exception must incorporate

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<sup>21</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Strong, 'Foreword', in *Political Theology*, p. xxi.

the general ubiquity of norms. One cannot exist without the other. The sovereign decision should be thus understood as both a spatial and temporal intervention. Definite but impermanent, omniscient but imperceptible, it cannot be anticipated before its appearance. It has no past but the torpor it explodes, no future but the memory of its decisive moment. For Schmitt, the borderline, which locates the exact place and moment of friction, produces the frictionless decision.

George Kateb writes persuasively on the frictions between aestheticism and morality within Schmitt's concept of the political. Kateb argues that to advocate senseless fighting in an abstract agon is to tend towards an aestheticized understanding of politics. Schmitt does not view war, dictatorship and territorial expansion as necessarily aesthetic, but his reluctant cravings for form, line and analogy in his theory of sovereignty map onto Kateb's tripartite classification of aesthetic politics:

A. a craving for form, shape, shapeliness, definition, or definiteness; a craving for coherence or unity; a craving for purity or consistency; a craving for discernible identity and ease of identification; a craving for pattern; a craving for clarification or sharp boundaries and stark contrasts; a craving for dualism or bipolarity;

B. a craving for style, for stylization; a craving for decorum, for *comme il faut*; a craving for suitability, for "fit"; a craving for appropriate appearances;

C. a craving for striking surfaces, for color or colorfulness; a craving for novelty.<sup>23</sup>

Sets A and B suggest Schmitt's aesthetic methodology. Cravings produce the concept of the sovereign decision, which inspires the novelty of the exception, illustrated in set C. Critically reading these aesthetic sensibilities as a product of cravings is important because of Schmitt's complicated insistence on the aesthetic as both a dangerous domain of intellectual life and as a trivial mode of perception. This point is worth noting because his polemical strategy of disavowal subordinates the aesthetic to the political domain.

Schmitt's anxiety about aesthetics is a form of expression for a range of concerns. Aesthetics, understood as the study of basic human cravings for immediate forms, intersects uneasily with politics, understood as the systems and structures that regulate and legitimize these cravings.<sup>24</sup> My view is that Schmitt's legal judgements deceptively cloak his aesthetic judgements. Both types of judgement deploy immediate forms and images,

<sup>23</sup> George Kateb, 'Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility', *Political Theory*, 28.1 (2000), 5–37. (p. 14).

<sup>24</sup> My use of the term 'cravings' to indicate Schmitt's aesthetic approach to politics is drawn from Kateb.

and Schmitt conflates these categories in service of his philosophical arguments. Crucially, his rhetorical insistence on emphasizing political and legal matters is an essential aspect of his aesthetic judgement. Schmitt insists on the seriousness of the political domain, counterposed with the frivolous pleasures of arts and entertainment. The state ‘demand[s] seriously of human beings that they kill others and be prepared to die themselves’, he writes.<sup>25</sup> Leo Strauss argues that Schmitt’s focus on the importance of the political domain is ‘ultimately nothing other than the affirmation of the moral’.<sup>26</sup> I expand on this insight by suggesting that Schmitt is also inadvertently affirming the aesthetic. His methodological ruse tries to efface the aesthetic, but in doing so draws attention to its integral role in the apparently serious political domain, as well as in the theatre of parliamentary politics.

Schmitt thus understands the space of aesthetics in two fundamental ways: it is the domain that opposes the political; and it is one of many domains, which, with enough internal intensity, becomes the political and ceases to be aesthetic. The first understanding is a binary; the second is a paradigm, which at its conclusion has the political subsume the aesthetic domain. I think to argue that the political domain can include aesthetic sensibilities is not to trivialize it but to suggest a more persuasive thesis of reality. Schmitt acknowledges the aesthetic distinction as that between ‘beautiful and ugly’, but this is not the highest possible distinction, which is that between friend and enemy.<sup>27</sup> This distinction constitutes the political and supersedes all other domains; it does not incorporate but overwhelms its aesthetic counterpart.

Schmitt thus understands the power of imagery, figuration, symbolism and mythmaking as that which both articulates and confronts articulations of political ideas. He sidesteps this apparent paradox through appeals to intensity.<sup>28</sup> In his thinking, there is no such thing as mere images, analogies, symbols, or myths, at least when each gathers enough potency to be understood politically. In this insistence, he seems most fully to be exceeding a language of description, moving instead to prescription, and in that move, there is an aesthetic force and engagement. Likewise, his rhetorical skill is not necessarily

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<sup>25</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Leo Strauss, ‘Notes on The Concept of the Political’, in *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 97–122 (pp. 116–17).

<sup>27</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> See Kam Shapiro, ‘Decision, Myth, and Intensity’, in *Sovereign Nations, Carnal States* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 97–134; Kam Shapiro, *Carl Schmitt and the Intensification of Politics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

deceptive, just as creativity and persuasion are not certain components of false elocution. Müller states that Schmitt's language was used 'to persuade and even to mobilize—its aesthetic quality was essential, not accidental'.<sup>29</sup> These powers of persuasion, which translate into cravings, indicate aesthetic sensibilities in his theory of sovereignty and concept of the political. The appeal to aesthetics is naturally one that tends to fascism, although this thesis argues for a more thorough engagement with the relationship between politics and aesthetics that implicates Schmitt and my chosen modernist authors.

### 1.1.3 Introduction outline

I have divided the rest of this introductory chapter into three main parts. Section 1.2 provides a short overview of Schmitt's life that integrates biographical literature with his early cultural engagements, much of which is drawn from his diaries. English-language biographies, of which there were many during the early 2000s, allude to his social parasitism and desire to keep artistic company but offer scant interrogation of his aesthetic and ideological affinities in the period.<sup>30</sup> I subsequently situate Schmitt and his developing thought within the artistic and literary modernisms of the 1910s and 1920s, considering his early literary criticism and cultural life against a series of avant-garde and political attitudes. Groupings as diverse as Dada, Surrealism, Realism, Cubism, Expressionism and Futurism offer models to describe, explain and interrogate his ideas, although it is difficult to ignore that his explicit conversations with modernisms are linked most decisively to his friendships and acquaintances. I finally consider the relationship between fascism and art along with Schmitt's membership of the Nazi Party. Any reappraisal of Schmitt requires sustained focus on his literary influences and political affiliations. This part of the introduction analyses the impact of early modernisms on Schmitt's ideas, when he was turning his attentions more firmly towards conceptualizing the exception, political order and the decision. Bringing Schmitt's early works and incipient thought into conversation with avant-garde figures, as well as reading him through art forms sceptical of their own

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<sup>29</sup> Müller, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> See Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 2000); Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* (London: Yale University Press, 2003); Ellen Kennedy, *Constitutional Failure: Carl Schmitt in Weimar* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Reinhard Mehring, *Carl Schmitt: A Biography*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

value and of art's broader usefulness—Dada, for example, was sometimes labelled *anti-art*—is one way to address his literary and aesthetic sensibilities.

Section 1.3 identifies Schmitt's position within scholarship, interrogating his placing under the umbrella term of 'reactionary modernism' and finessing the relationship between aesthetics and politics in his thought, with reference to scholarly literature. This assessment is important given that he is wary and in denial of the aesthetic domain in his major philosophical works. Next, I form an overview of his Schmitt in recent humanities scholarship and outline his ideas about symbol and representation, which make him so attractive to humanities scholars. Finally, I focus on Schmitt's influence in literary scholarship, in particular. Section 1.2 and Section 1.3 lay the foundations of my methodology. Section 1.4 outlines my literary approach and the logic that determines the three main chapters.

## **1.2 Schmitt and the Avant-Gardes**

### *1.2.1 Schmitt's cultural life*

Schmitt grew up as Enlightenment certainties were diminishing across Europe. The intellectual assumptions of the industrial epoch—the epistemologies of science and metaphysics, and the collective belief in rationality and progress, which had once formed the bulwark of imperial Germany—were under renewed challenge. The reign of Emperor Wilhelm II (1888–1918) coincided with Schmitt's birth and formative years, before his sovereign rule abruptly ended, when an embattled nation suffered severe financial damage and faced the ignominy of post-war reparations. The pitiless fallout of World War I, the first total war in human history, had combined with the ravages of the 1918 flu pandemic to defeat Germany's leaders and its citizens. For the country to recover and prosper, a new state was needed, one closely aligned with the victorious European democracies.

So, from 1919 to 1933, the doctrine of political liberalism and technological expansion offered the ideological framework for the fledgling Weimar Republic. Some scholars have narrowly characterized Schmitt as a beacon of anti-liberal thought during this period,



acting as one of Weimar's most hardened and resolute critics.<sup>31</sup> His polemical attitude towards liberalism has been presented as a psychological obsession, developed from a broadly intransigent and antagonistic mindset. This characterization is accurate insofar as Schmitt saw the burgeoning practice of parliamentary liberalism, in both Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, as one of interminable and limitless discussion. But he had serious concerns about the contradictions between liberalism and democracy.

For Schmitt, the Second Reich's strange, tense hybrid of autocratic and popular rule, followed by the incipient parliamentary democracy of the interwar period, deformed and sullied the pure sovereign decision—which should be singular, absolute, final—through the eternal stream of amendments, diktats, regulations, rules, and norms. His critique can be understood in theoretical terms. In their most abstract form, liberal political processes can be understood as the excess of lines, the multiplicities of which accumulate to produce an image beyond politically effective action and distinction. The sovereign restores meaningful political identity through a single, firm inscription. Schmitt's critique of liberalism is thus predicated on the elimination of lines; this trope features throughout his work, starting in his early cultural analyses.

Schmitt's reverence for the sovereign decision within the political domain is born out of a historical moment in Germany.<sup>32</sup> There were twenty separate coalitions during Weimar, with the longest period of government lasting two years. Germany was suffering from hyperinflation and the residual effects of the Great Depression. Schmitt's anxiety about the open-ended deliberations of parliament is a product of this political landscape. Schmitt deems the contemporary theory of law as both a 'deteriorated [...] normativism' and a 'degenerate decisionism', which produces 'a formless mixture, unsuitable for any

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<sup>31</sup> See Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 37–60; Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2016), pp. 47–76.

<sup>32</sup> For useful historical and cultural overviews of Germany within the context of Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Roy Pascal, *From Naturalism to Expressionism: German Literature and Society, 1880–1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973); Ronald Taylor, *Literature and Society in Germany, 1918–1945* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980); John Willett, *The Weimar Years: A Culture Cut Short* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987); Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995); Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider As Insider* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001); Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, trans. by P. S. Falla and R. J. Park, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2005); Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945*, trans. by David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017); Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2018).

structure'.<sup>33</sup> This situation culminated in what he deemed to be political failure. Schmitt supported clear legal forms and wanted the German state to modify putatively liberal texts such as the Versailles Treaty and the Weimar Constitution to allow for decisive political action. According to him, degenerate compromises must be sacrificed for pure decisions—singular, absolute, final—that cut through legal formlessness and decomposition, producing new demarcations and delineations.

Schmitt had a peculiar upbringing. As Jan-Werner Müller summarises it, the young Catholic boy 'grew up in the Sauerland region, a Protestant pocket in the largely Catholic Rhineland, which in turn was situated on the margins of an Empire whose public culture remained dominated by Protestantism and Prussianism'.<sup>34</sup> This disorientating geography, a religious and territorial Russian doll, moulded his identity and worldview. In the small, provincial town of Plettenberg, he was accustomed to religious isolation and difference, engulfed in a local community that favoured Protestant order and authority.<sup>35</sup> In Germany, the effects of the outbreak of World War I on both metropolitan and rural life symbolized the transient and illusory nature of this order. Nonetheless, Schmitt was not immune to the more attractive elements of the Wilhelmine era. He was attuned to, if not always celebratory about, the cultural ferment of early-20<sup>th</sup> century modernity, a period during which artistic invention tried to keep pace with significant social and economic change. Schmitt's younger years overlapped with the explosion of the artistic avant-garde across Europe. His entire life covers 'this age of classical cultural modernity' that begins at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>36</sup> Because of his legal studies, juridical placements and military service, Schmitt lived in several cities across imperial Germany. Berlin and Munich became the 'central places in his life' and he was broadly 'attracted by big cities'.<sup>37</sup> He was a precocious rural child thrown into the possibility and mania of metropolitan living.

Schmitt's early writings reveal he was both fascinated and repulsed Germany's cities. His obvious intrigue in the urban setting is married to an anxiety of outsidership. Of his early life in Berlin, he saw himself as:

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<sup>33</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Müller, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> Schmitt's upbringing recalls the events of Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* (2009). For a reading of the film that invokes Schmitt, see Martin Blumenthal-Barby, 'The Surveillant Gaze: Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*', *October*, 147 (2014), 95–116 (p. 102).

<sup>36</sup> Mehring, p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Mehring, p. 9.

An obscure young man of modest origins [...] part neither of the governing elite nor of an opposition movement [...] that meant that, standing wholly in the dark, I looked from the darkness into a brightly lit room [...] the strong repulsion which I experienced left me no comfort with my role. The feeling of sadness which filled me, increased my distance and evoked distrust and alienation in others.<sup>38</sup>

Steadfastly provincial, Schmitt often deployed darkness as a motif to articulate his urban limbo. Berlin, at the time, was ‘not only North-German-Protestant but, at least in the popular imagination, in some way Jewish as well’.<sup>39</sup> Schmitt always considered himself somewhat apart from ‘the fin-de-siècle world of Berlin’s elites’.<sup>40</sup> The diverse demographics, combined with a fear-fuelled antisemitism and anti-elitism, acutely affected Schmitt’s perception of the capital.

The cultural life in Munich no less antagonised Schmitt, who did not identify with the ‘aestheticized bellicosity’ of the poets occupying the city’s Left Bank during the war years.<sup>41</sup> In the 1910s, he was neither warmonger nor jingoist and remained sceptical of the heroic and literary value of *Fronterlebnis* [front experience], a poetic genre, popularized by his friend, Ernst Jünger, in works such as *Storm of Steel* (1920), which romanticized masculine camaraderie and conflict in battle.<sup>42</sup> Berlin had acted as the ‘veritable antithesis of the world in which he had grown up’.<sup>43</sup> Munich, on the other hand, offered a patriotic and politically conventional poetic milieu. But in both cities, Schmitt encountered metropolitan worlds founded on incoherence and contradiction. His response was one of confusion. He was ambivalent and anxious about the complex societies of the city.

In the Weimar years, which Mehring calls Schmitt’s ‘erotic state of exception’, Schmitt pursued his life-long fascination with Don Juan, whose literary motif he traced ‘from Mozart to Grabbe’s tragi-comical adaptation of the theme’, through to Henry de Montherlant’s tetralogy *The Young Girls* (1936–39).<sup>44</sup> As Mehring states, sex work was central to cultural depictions of urban life in Germany, citing novels by Stefan Zweig, Heinrich Mann, and Erich Kästner in which ‘the prostitute becomes the allegorical figure for the whole city’, identifying Alfred Döblin’s novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) and Expressionist painters such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix and

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<sup>38</sup> Schmitt, quoted in Müller, pp. 17–18.

<sup>39</sup> Müller, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> Balakrishnan, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Balakrishnan, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> See Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. by Michael Hoffmann (London: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Balakrishnan, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Mehring, pp. 210–11.

George Grosz, who ‘present[ed] the milieu in garish colours’.<sup>45</sup> Schmitt was moved by Josef von Sternberg’s erotically charged film *The Blue Angel* (1930), identifying with the professorial protagonist Immanuel Rath.<sup>46</sup> Schmitt’s prurient, misogynistic and conflicted attitudes towards women are evident in many of his diary entries, and the role of women in artistic depictions greatly troubled him.<sup>47</sup>

This concern extended to the developments in contemporary cinema that caught Schmitt’s attention.<sup>48</sup> He saw Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) more than ten times in six months, sometimes in the company of sex workers.<sup>49</sup> In the film, Dreyer depicts Joan’s Passion—her short, final period of pain and sacrifice—during which she undergoes a procedural game of ensnarement and deception. As the film’s opening card puts it, she is subject to a virulent ‘band of blind theologians and skilled jurists’.<sup>50</sup> In efforts to appease their English masters, the overeducated set demand that Joan admits her heresy against the Church. Dreyer lights the actor, Renée Jeanne Falconetti, who plays Joan, without make-up, so that her face appears stark and distinguished. Against her, aging men grandstand and postulate, nose hair flaring, chins doubling and redoubling, heads dotted with warts and pious scalps. They constitute the carnival of grotesques. Their interrogations form Joan’s suffering and endurance until death.

In the chapel, where much of Joan’s preliminary trial takes place, false logic is the enemy of the defendant. As used by the clerics, deductive reasoning functions as conniving wordplay. Their tools of endless discussion intend to debilitate her. Their tactics of staccato deliberation seek to deceive her. Prosecutorial feints conflate theology with law, and law with politics. These aspects result in a remarkable amount of talk for a silent film. Crucial dialogue appears in the intertitles, but the viewer develops assumptions about the trial through the actors’ overt manners and expression. The civilized pretence of the captors masks the ever-present threat: to spit, shout down, admonish. To their devious

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Bendersky, ‘Schmitt’s Diaries’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. by Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 117–46 (p. 130).

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Scholars tentatively link Schmitt’s political thought to cinematic aesthetics, see Tyrus Miller, *Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), pp. 139–60; Jeff Griffin, ‘The State of Exception in Film: Cloverfield and 24’, *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, 18.6 (2009), 75–104; Matthew Holtmeier, ‘The Modern Political Cinema: From Third Cinema to Contemporary Networked Biopolitics’, *Film-Philosophy*, 20 (2016), 303–23.

<sup>49</sup> Mehring, pp. 210–11.

<sup>50</sup> *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, dir. by Carl Theodor Dreyer (Société Générale des Films, 1928). Antonin Artaud, avant-garde dramatist and proponent of ‘the theatre of cruelty’, features as a monk.

challenges, Joan is the exception. She stands outside the accumulation of theological precedents. Her innocent responses function as paragons of pure articulation, which touch upon the sublime. For Schmitt, the jurors, through their chattering and deception, are emblematic of all that is wrong with politics; and Joan, through her honest and miraculous representative authority, is all that is right.

According to his diaries, Schmitt is deeply impressed by this work of ‘cinematic art’. Circumstantially, the film reflected his difficult divorce, which the Catholic Church had initially refused him. It also had at its centre a figure of liberation who embodied many of his core political principles: an agent of sovereign exception able to transcend the vague, meaningless gestures of parliamentary performance. For him, the capacity to decide one’s fate supplants the ability to discuss it. He further identified in St Joan, canonised in 1920, the archetype of an effective national myth:

St Joan led her people out of a desperate military situation. [...] Almost any sentence from the mouth of this saint is an answer that any nation may give itself. When this saint answered the question of whether she wanted to claim that God hated the English, saying that she did not know whether that was the case, but she knew that the English had to leave France, she thereby gave an answer that every people must give their oppressors and exploiters.<sup>51</sup>

Schmitt characterizes Joan through both Dreyer’s disjunctive presentation of the trial process, itself based on the 1431 court transcripts, and Falconetti’s dramatic interpretation, which artfully combines expressions of sullen bemusement and unanticipated clarity. Not only does Joan outwit the snare of state affiliation, complicated by the traitorous clerics’ subservience to English crown, she additionally reveals the pompous prurience of her adversaries. Joan functions as Schmitt’s secularized God, as a potent avatar for political mythmaking. The director’s rendition clearly affected Schmitt, who may have interpreted its commitment to subjective experience as that which most closely evokes the Passion. For him, the miracle in theology corresponds with the exception in politics. In art, the miracle is reproduced through Dreyer and Falconetti’s experiential vision.

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<sup>51</sup> Schmitt, quoted in Mehring, p. 228.



Figure 1: *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, dir. by Carl Theodor Dreyer (Société Générale des Films, 1928)

Schmitt's attitude to the diary form and emerging styles of cinema also influenced his youthful satire of bureaucracy, "The Buribunks" (1918), which I will return to in my fourth chapter. Schmitt found in both media that discontinuity could be a way to interrogate truth, personality and anthropology. The critic, Friedrich Kittler, included a lengthy, translated extract of "The Buribunks" in his book, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999).<sup>52</sup> Within Kittler's broad theoretical stance, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young describes 'discontinuity' as:

[...] a forceful, at times polemical emphasis on ruptures, breaks and caesuras designed to obliterate any attempt to infuse history with gradualist, progressive, teleological or dialectical notions. History is not smooth; it doesn't lead out of the cave of early illusions into the mature blaze of enlightenment; it does not exhibit any growing intelligibility; and it cannot be reduced to a fanciful relay of revolutionary subjects.<sup>53</sup>

Understood in these terms, discontinuity is crucial to Schmitt's treatment of history in "The Buribunks". The narrator dismisses the limited efforts of Leporello, Don Juan's servant, who lacks the ambition and ability to document his master's life in precise detail

<sup>52</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 231.

<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Nicholas Gane, 'Friedrich Kittler: An Introduction', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23.7–8 (2006), 5–16 (p. 10).

and perfect continuity. Leporello makes errors and omissions, possessing neither a methodological framework nor an obvious strategy, because he has no interest in his subject or in the demographic factors of his subject. He fails to write about Don Juan in context, offering few references to statistics, politics, law, economy or society. He lacks the tools and motivation for extended scientific enquiry and remains bereft of the chronic self-awareness required to project his own life onto the documentation of his subject. Schmitt ironically portrays the narrator's dismissiveness towards Leporello as a blind belief in the relentless meaning of historical record.<sup>54</sup> Schmitt's assessment of this complacency is central to his understanding of the question of sovereignty, which he thought should transcend obsessive collective administration and individual self-absorption.

Acutely aware of cultivating his legacy, Schmitt kept diaries to crudely preserve his reputation. Jakob Norberg has written persuasively on Schmitt's tactical use of the diary form, traced from "The Buribunks" through to his broader post-war criticism of individual egoism and endless cultural conversation.<sup>55</sup> In "The Buribunks", Schmitt imagines an 'obligatory collective diary', which Buribunks keep 'for every second of his or her existence'.<sup>56</sup> As a literary device to represent the totalizing and oppressive force of modern technology, the diary is a crude symbol. Schmitt ironically describes its twofold importance: i. to immediately identify 'the respective circumstances of interest with regard to each individual' and to locate 'the smallest errors';<sup>57</sup> and ii. to provide a disquieting textual resource for recording 'the dreams of a certain class of Buribunks during their puberty', using materials 'compiled in no time at all with the help of the card catalogues'.<sup>58</sup> This sinister, endless documentation is not only in service of self-obsession but constitutes a broader society of observation, surveillance and control. Schmitt sees this type of state machine as a source of fear for its inhabitants, and which does not possess the vital energy

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<sup>54</sup> Carl Schmitt, 'The Buribunks. An essay on the philosophy of history', trans. by Gert Reifarth and Laura Petersen, *Griffith Law Review*, 28.2 (2019), 99–112 (pp. 102–04).

<sup>55</sup> Jakob Norberg, 'Day-to-Day Politics: Carl Schmitt on the Diary', *Telos*, 157 (2011), 21–42; Jakob Norberg, 'Conversations and Interrogations: Carl Schmitt', in *Sociability and Its Enemies: German Political Theory After 1945* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), pp. 57–80.

<sup>56</sup> Schmitt, 'The Buribunks', p. 108.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

to invigorate social life, instead facilitating a dehumanized society and, in Jeff Wallace's formulation of a key modernist concern, 'the demise of the integrated humanist self'.<sup>59</sup>

Schmitt's eclectic interests in literature and wider culture also provided the vehicle for his emerging legal and political concerns. His enthusiasm for the arts developed at university, where he originally wanted to study philology and took a course on Hellenistic culture, before taking up law. His friend Franz Kluxen, an avant-garde art collector, introduced him to the German cultural touchpoints of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Schmitt favoured the music of Richard Wagner, undoubtedly influenced by Kluxen's essay-length treatment of the composer, and he, too, wrote a short essay for an in-house publication on Wagner's theory of madness. Schmitt returned intermittently to him throughout the decade, drawing a reciprocal relationship between the composer and his friend, the poet Theodor Däubler, who cultivated in Schmitt his first aesthetic axiom: 'that the language of poetry [...] brings about the unity of word and sound in the most concentrated and dense fashion'.<sup>60</sup> Schmitt also wrote a small piece on Friedrich Schiller's philosophical study on aesthetics. Kluxen exposed Schmitt to the foremost German Romantics and he became 'acquainted with bourgeois wealth and the artistic avant-garde'.<sup>61</sup> He attended the 1912 Sonderbund modernist exhibition in Cologne with Däubler, his collaborator, Fritz Eisler, and the art dealer, Albert Kollman.

Schmitt's fascination with avant-garde art continued into his post-war exile in Plettenberg, where he hung in his home paintings by Emil Nolde, Werner Gilles, Ernst Wilhelm Nay, and Werner Heldt.<sup>62</sup> One painting, Nay's *Der Diamant* (1933), depicts a hand holding a single leaf in its palm, framed by two naked tree branches, contained within a diamond and painted onto a black canvas.<sup>63</sup> Nay later became associated with the European-wide Expressionist group known as 'CoBrA'. Karel Appel, who was among their number, 'committed to the trio of the child, the insane and the primitive, took the snake as its totem, and painted beasts worthy of Kafka', according to Hal Foster, who argues that Appel and the group exploited 'a political opening to the creaturely as a potent

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<sup>59</sup> Jeff Wallace, *Beginning Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Mehring, p. 37.

<sup>61</sup> Balakrishnan, p. 6

<sup>62</sup> Christian Linder, 'Carl Schmitt in Plettenberg', in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, pp. 147–68 (p. 150).

<sup>63</sup> Ernst Wilhelm Nay, *Der Diamant*, 1933, oil on canvas, 70 × 57 cm, Private collection.



sign of the post-war crisis in symbolic order and political authority alike'.<sup>64</sup> Considering the paintings he owned and saw, and what we know of his early engagements with art, Schmitt appears at least intrigued by the relationship between the opening in political authority and the crises developing in forms of representation.



Figure 2: Ernst Wilhelm Nay, *Der Diamant*, 1933, oil on canvas, 70 × 57 cm, Private collection.

Schmitt drew analogies between the professional practices of art and law in his final years. Schmitt appears alive to the complexity and political potency of modernist compositions within the prevailing artistic order, as it is rearticulated to counter decomposition within the legal and political order. Reflecting on his experience of the cultural transition to modernism, he wrote in 1979:

For quite a long time, modern painting had been effectively practicing the autonomy and independence of color. But the freed color, which had been tamed by such outstanding modern artists as Emil Nolde, Wassily Kandinsky, or E.W. Nay, on canvas within the frames of paintings, would stop being an independent value in legal practice and in public administration.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Hal Foster, 'I am the decider', *London Review of Books*, 17 March 2011, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n06/hal-foster/i-am-the-decider>> [accessed 17 May 2021].

<sup>65</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Tyranny of Values*, trans. and ed. by Simona Draghici (Washington, DC: Plutarch Press, 1996), p. 13.

Schmitt, ‘the watcher’, is attuned, as Derrida puts it, ‘to the fragility and “deconstructible” precariousness of structures, borders and axioms that he wished to protect, restore and “conserve” at all costs’.<sup>66</sup> Schmitt wishes to invigorate contours of political representation, which may have meant acquiring modernist sensibilities to reshape and preserve the abiding cultural age.

Schmitt developed a strong friendship with Theodor Däubler, whose patronage may have lent him credence with other artists. Däubler was a known figure in Berlin’s literary and artistic community, which included Hannah Höch, Otto Dix and Heinrich Maria Davringhausen.<sup>67</sup> Höch included Däubler’s head, pasted backwards onto a baby’s body, in one of her most famous photomontages.<sup>68</sup> Dix rendered him as a large figure placed onto a quasi-mythological backdrop with Corinthian columns.<sup>69</sup> Davringhausen, an itinerant New Objectivity artist,<sup>70</sup> painted another inflated Däubler presiding over a colourful landscape, representing the perceived totality and universal tonal power of his writing.<sup>71</sup> In this depiction, Däubler is a prophet who unifies his poetic themes and portents: the sun, the moon, the stars and comets float around his imposing physique and oceans, mountains and islands provide the wide backdrop. This fantastical psychological portrait, predicated on the inner turmoil of the artist, indicates the cosmology and mystic symbolism of Däubler’s poem, “The Northern Lights”.<sup>72</sup> For all the surrounding patronage and portrait-sitting, it is difficult to precisely value Däubler’s inclusion within Schmitt scholarship. For a relatively minor poet, Däubler has a possibly inflated influence in cultural studies of Schmitt. While Däubler’s poetry was a source of intellectual comfort and nourishment, Schmitt did not limit his literary and artistic tastes to a narrowly defined German form of Expressionism. Schmitt’s relationship to critics, creators and the wider cultural milieu in Germany has been variously characterized in scholarship.

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<sup>66</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), p. 107.

<sup>67</sup> Theodor Däubler, ‘Expressionism’, in *Der neue Standpunkt* (Dresden: Hellerauer Verlag, 1916), p. 179.

<sup>68</sup> Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, 1919, collage of pasted papers, 114 × 90 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

<sup>69</sup> Otto Dix, *Portrait of the Poet Theodor Däubler*, 1927, tempera on wood, 150 × 100 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

<sup>70</sup> For a broad overview of the movement, see *Neue Sachlichkeit and German Realism of the Twenties* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978).

<sup>71</sup> Heinrich Maria Davringhausen, *The Poet Däubler*, 1917, oil on canvas, 181 × 160.3 cm, The George Economou Collection, Athens.

<sup>72</sup> See Harald Falck-Ytter, *Aurora: The Northern Lights in Mythology, History and Science* (Hudson, NY: Steiner Books, 1999), pp. 39–44.



Figure 3: Heinrich Maria Davringhausen, *The Poet Däubler*, 1917, oil on canvas, 181 × 160.3 cm, The George Economou Collection, Athens.

Schmitt's relationship with contemporary artists and writers is far from conclusive and it is possible to overstate the influence of the bohemian café culture on Schmitt's formative years. The scholarly literature has it most ways. 'Immersing himself in the artistic and intellectual climate of the cafés', Schmitt spent his time in the 'most intensely intellectual coffee houses', acting not as a visitor but as 'an *habitué*' of a dynamic bohemian environment.<sup>73</sup> That he existed in the same space and time as avant-garde circles does not mean he was active in the artistic milieu. Schmitt's disposition against aesthetic indulgence, his political peculiarities and his desultory Catholicism suggest a more complicated relationship with the outgoing and incoming artistic movements of the period. Scholarship reflects this ambiguity by fudging the terms, suggesting that Schmitt 'moved

<sup>73</sup> Trevor Stark, 'Complexio Oppositorum: Hugo Ball and Carl Schmitt', *October*, 146 (2013), 31–64 (p. 41); Müller, pp. 18–19; Balakrishnan, p. 16.

in Expressionist circles' but was 'never fully Bohemian'.<sup>74</sup> Gopal Balakrishnan defines Schmitt as 'a semi-Bohemian Catholic antimodernist'.<sup>75</sup> This biographical complication is partly resolved through Müller's suggestion that Schmitt led some form of 'double life as a jurist and Expressionist littérateur'.<sup>76</sup> As a significant figure within the general command, which lent him authority on juridical matters, Schmitt entered a fraught relationship with his artistic peers, in which 'the observation of certain circles of artists and authors became part of his official duties'. According to Müller, he became 'a sympathizer and at the same time a censor' who, with a degree of shame, 'looked into the innermost details of the correspondence within literary circles'.<sup>77</sup> His pseudo-bohemianism becomes his post-war melancholy modernism.<sup>78</sup>

Schmitt was not persuaded by an intellectual environment that appropriated Freudian psychoanalysis to diagnose the ills of the age, and nor did he think that the youth embodied, in Robert Wohl's words, the welcome 'agent of cultural renewal'.<sup>79</sup> Nonetheless, it seems inadequate to suggest that Schmitt was more interested in opportunistically attaching himself to great painters, writers and composers of the generation for social advancement, rather than for his personal intellectual and artistic development. This characterization reveals little of the nature of his cultural consumption during the period. As Wohl states, the German cohort of the widely cited generation of 1914 was the most likely to produce 'full-fledged social theories' in response to the innovations and problems of modernity.<sup>80</sup> It is possible to understand the allure for Schmitt of avant-garde works that combined such social theories, and to perceive his growing desire to counter bourgeois indulgence through and in response to these new media of intellectual expression.

Schmitt's post-war musings, some of which were published in *Ex Captivitate Salus* (1950), bear out his appreciation of the cultural avant-garde:

What the European impressionism of the nineteenth century, what Futurism, Cubism, and Expressionism had broken open from many chaotic starting points found its unexpected fulfilment in the German language. The German poem became a new wonder work of sound,

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<sup>74</sup> Stark, p. 41; Balakrishnan, p. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Balakrishnan, p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> Müller, p. 18.

<sup>77</sup> Mehring, pp. 67–68.

<sup>78</sup> Müller, pp. 116–32.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 48.

<sup>80</sup> Wohl, p. 3.

color, and thought. It became a score whose tonal and coloristic plenitude is continuously intoned, interpreted, and conducted by the reader and hearer.<sup>81</sup>

Schmitt's nationalist focus emphasizes the importance of both the audience and the performer in artistic practices, finding chaos and disorder in the uncoordinated movements and unclear leadership of the cultural moment. For Schmitt, the 'German poem' brings together the range of artistic modes, providing the convergence of performance and word, and valorizing the ideal of aesthetic fulfillment. Schmitt wanted the art of the period to offer a linear trajectory towards formal totality and ultimately productive representation.

From his youth through to his later life, Schmitt looked often to literature and art as well as to law and politics. His attraction to cultural forms that conveyed contemporary malaise was a type of indulgence, which explains why his variable attempts at literary criticism often search for what he wants to find, rather than discovering the contingencies wrung from artistic expression. Balakrishnan notes how Schmitt provides 'startling diagnoses of the post-war meltdown of the German state', and how both he and the cultural theorist, Georg Lukács, were 'drawn to religiously tinged aesthetic critiques of bourgeois society, stances they later violently disavowed at the onset of an age of war and revolution, but which persisted in the displaced form of totalizing solutions to the divisions of modern society'.<sup>82</sup> Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* (1914–15) grounds a Marxist critique of modernist aesthetics, but despite sharing his antibourgeois sentiments, Schmitt had little time for the insurgent socialist movements that achieved popular support and relative electoral success during the pre-war *Bürgerlichkeit* [bourgeois culture], which, for him, was a veritable cesspool of middle-class conceit.<sup>83</sup> In Schmitt's view, socialism was as lacking in vitality as the bourgeoisie it opposed. Nor was he enamoured with contemporary positivist legal philosophies, propagated by his juridical rival Hans Kelsen, who came to dominate discussions of German law in the 1920s. These varied intellectual traditions failed to resolve the problem of indeterminacy, one of the dominant concerns that influenced Schmitt's legal and political thought. This concern is partly why he deployed literary approaches to assess the vicissitudes of the period, as the following section demonstrates.

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<sup>81</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus: Experiences, 1945–47*, ed. by Andreas Kalyvas and Federico Finchelstein, trans. by Matthew Hannah (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017) p. 40.

<sup>82</sup> Gopal Balakrishnan, 'The Age of Identity?', *New Left Review*, 16 (2002), 130–42 (pp. 132–34).

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

### 1.2.2 Schmitt's literary criticism

Schmitt wrote a substantial amount of literary critical and creative work in his formative years. In “Silhouettes” (1913), “Theodor Däubler’s ‘The Northern Lights’” (1916), and “The Buribunks” (1918), he alternately parodied, eulogized, and satirized the cultural trends of the waning *Kaiserreich*. These articles were first published in regional journals, and, among other short pieces, evaluated the primacy of artists and aesthetics, considered contemporary avant-garde movements, and addressed what he saw as the insidious passivity of German intellectual society. “Silhouettes” contains playful references to Cubist ‘colour culture’; the study of Däubler functions as a paean to the sonic wonder of Expressionist poetry; and “The Buribunks” is sufficiently iconoclastic to be characterized as ‘nascent Dadaism’.<sup>84</sup> These incipient cultural concerns culminated in his first book, *Political Romanticism* (1919), in which he portrays the pernicious and indulgent Romantic attitude on political life. In it, he targeted the German Romantics of the eighteenth century, focusing on the literary critics Friedrich Schlegel and Adam Müller. Leaving alone contemporary bohemians and Expressionists, Schmitt mainly criticizes the Romantics because they figured the world, and necessarily the political world, as a work of art.<sup>85</sup>

In Schmitt’s thesis, the Romantic attitude and its consequent figuration thwarted the capacity for decision, upon which he placed ultimate value. Schmitt thought that because the Romantics had held positions of power within elites, their privileging of the artistic ego was even more dangerous, as it could influence the nominally pristine realm of political decision-making and legislative authority. His close focus on Romanticism indicates his ambivalence towards modernist literary and artistic forms. Schmitt nonetheless generally worried about the debilitating effects of any aesthetics on a politically meaningful life, which he thought could lead to a crucial distortion of language, and his theoretical ideas about aesthetics often appeared crafted in direct opposition to existing—and not only previous—artistic fashions. The following section focuses on Schmitt’s ambivalent

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<sup>84</sup> For a critical overview of Schmitt’s youthful prose, see Alexander Lambrow, ‘*Theogony ab ovo*: Carl Schmitt’s Early Literary Writings’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2019), pp. 94–145.

<sup>85</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. by Guy Oakes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 113, 125–27.

response towards contemporary modernisms, particularly those that sought remedies for the perceived cultural and political malaise.

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to Schmitt's literary engagements. The introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (2017) argues that 'it would be wrong to suggest that his interest in cultural thought was merely a phase'.<sup>86</sup> Ellen Kennedy claims that Schmitt's early works were 'important for the formulation of his political theory' and that stories, satires and reviews provided an experimental outlet for his 'culture critique and anti-liberal theory'. This literature depicted stale bourgeois values and liberal technological progress, ideas which, for Schmitt, defined the European milieu. Kennedy cites Kasmir Edschmid's locution that the foundational year of 1910 had produced a 'carousel of bourgeois feelings', which antagonized and influenced Schmitt's writing.<sup>87</sup>

While drawn to emblematic titular figures from classic literature, including Goethe's Faust, Cervantes' Don Quixote,<sup>88</sup> and the capriciously appropriated Don Juan, Schmitt was most enamoured with the works of Shakespeare, identifying with King Lear and obsessing over Othello, whom he contrasted with 'the faithful gypsy'.<sup>89</sup> Hamlet, though, formed the dramatic apotheosis for Schmitt's conception of sovereignty, and his book-length study on the tragic Dane provides an essential insight into his thought on aesthetics. For the Festschrift of his friend, the novelist, Ernst Jünger, in 1954, Schmitt bathetically described himself as 'a white raven that can be found on every blacklist'.<sup>90</sup> In his later years, such comparisons projected an image of noble defeat and tragic failure. By likening himself to towering literary figures, he sought to emphasize himself as a worldly and misjudged individual, unfairly cast from intellectual circles following his fall from grace. Given how

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<sup>86</sup> Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons, "'A Fanatic of Order in an Epoch of Confusing Turmoil": The Political, Legal, and Cultural Thought of Carl Schmitt', in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, pp. 3–70 (p. 38).

<sup>87</sup> Kennedy, pp. 43, 40.

<sup>88</sup> See Bécquer Seguí, 'Carl Schmitt's *Don Quixote*', *Critical Inquiry*, 48.4 (2022), 774–98.

<sup>89</sup> See 'Little Otto: Carl Schmitt and the Moor of Venice', in Andreas Höfele, *No Hamlets: German Shakespeare from Nietzsche to Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 160–91. For readings of law and aesthetics in Shakespeare, see Julia Reinhard Lupton, 'Creature Caliban', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51.1 (2000), 1–23; Anselm Haverkamp, 'Richard II, Bracton, and the End of Political Theology', *Law and Literature*, 16.3 (2004), 313–26; Christopher Pye, 'Against Schmitt: Law, Aesthetics, and Absolutism in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 108.1 (2009), 197–217; Daniel Juan Gil, 'The Life of the Condemned: The Autonomous Legal System and the Community of the Flesh in Measure for Measure', in *Shakespeare's Anti-Politics: Sovereign Power and the Life of the Flesh* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 42–67; Timothy A. Turner, 'Othello on the Rack', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 15.3 (2015), 102–36; Wojciech Engelking, 'Shakespeare as a method. Carl Schmitt's reading of *Othello* and *Hamlet*', *History of European Ideas*, 45.7 (2019), 1058–71.

<sup>90</sup> Schmitt, quoted in Mehring, p. xv.

often he criticized the political implications of rampant egoism, it is more than ironic that Schmitt drew so often and heavily on literature to reiterate aggrandizing self-pity.

Kennedy writes provocatively about Schmitt's relationship to the Frankfurt School, and more broadly with the literature and theory of German Expressionism, but comprehensive analysis of his intercourse with early modernisms has not been undertaken.<sup>91</sup> There are select references. Reinhard Mehring's biography offers an overview of Schmitt's responses to literary modernism. Excavating significant granular detail from Schmitt's diaries, Mehring encourages a broadly psychological perspective on his work. In Mehring's analysis, Schmitt resists contemporary trends and adopts 'untimely' poets such as Däubler and Konrad Weiß, positioned against the rediscovery of Friedrich Hölderlin in lyric poetry.<sup>92</sup> Acknowledging writers such as Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke for their efforts at 'linguistic transformation', Schmitt sought to invent an alternative tragic literary history and to find in 'the German language [...] the pure wonder instrument of a new tonality'.<sup>93</sup> This statement illustrates Schmitt's desire for a comprehensive aesthetic credo to articulate the age, which he sought in poetry.

Surveying Schmitt's early literary works, Peter Uwe Hohendahl characterizes "Silhouettes", a series of unflattering portraits of cultural figures, as a 'clearly mean-spirited parody [that] anticipates the hostile avant-garde's classification of Mann as the eminently successful *Großschriftsteller*, who can combine popularity and aesthetic modernism'.<sup>94</sup> Co-written with Fritz Eisler and presented in blank verse, "Silhouettes" satirizes, among numerous social tendencies, the desire 'to fill the soulless man of the mechanistic age with certainty, [so] that the waves of culture are washing over us and that there is a time for everything'.<sup>95</sup> Some scholars have suggested that this work imitates a

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<sup>91</sup> See Ellen Kennedy, 'Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School', *Telos*, 71 (1987), 37–66; 'Carl Schmitt und Hugo Ball: Ein Beitrag zum Thema "Politischer Expressionismus"', *Zeitschrift Für Politik*, 35 (1988), 143–62; 'Politischer Expressionismus : die kulturkritischen und metaphysischen Ursprünge des Begriffs des Politischen von Carl Schmitt', in *Complexio Oppositorum: über Carl Schmitt*, ed. by Helmut Quaritsch (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1988), pp. 233–51.

<sup>92</sup> Mehring, pp. 34–35.

<sup>93</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 41.

<sup>94</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, 'Carl Schmitt's Literary Criticism', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature* (2017), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.173>>, (para. 6).

<sup>95</sup> Carl Schmitt, quoted in Ingeborg Villinger, *Carl Schmitts Kulturkritik der Moderne* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995), pp. 131–32. For the text itself, it was published under the pseudonym Johannes Negelinus, *Schattenrisse* (Leipzig: Skiamacheten, 1913). It came after Schmitt abandoned a project with Eisler called a *Schneckeroman*, which literally translates as 'snail novel'.



‘Joycean’ aesthetic.<sup>96</sup> For Hohendahl, the fact that Schmitt had common critical concerns with the so-called ‘left-leaning theoretical avant-garde’ did not mean he endorsed their solutions, because ‘his fundamental epistemological critique of Romanticism [...] comes across as too Catholic and too parochial’.<sup>97</sup> While this view is accurate, I think that Schmitt sought neither an imagined nostalgia nor an explicit return to an idealized cultural past but wanted to integrate new artistic expressions into a new social and political order.

Johannes Türk critically assesses the role of literature in Schmitt’s work, including his monograph on Däubler’s 1910 long poem, “The Northern Lights”, which appears in sharp contrast to the ‘shallow contemporary literature he ironizes in his “Silhouettes”’.<sup>98</sup> Däubler, rather, ‘establishes a poem in which doubt is overcome and a mechanistic time finds its counterbalance as the source of authority and inspiration for the legal scholar and public intellectual’.<sup>99</sup> Schmitt saw in Däubler’s poetry a comprehensive solution to the problems posed by the mechanistic age. For him, Däubler’s Expressionism does not impugn on the decisive sovereign or the sphere of the political, because the symbol of the northern lights is not primarily nostalgic because it acknowledges the irrevocable changes of modernity and delivers a new form of representation.

Contemporary modernisms criticized and participated in the cultural tumult. Schmitt was attuned to these developments; he critically appraised modernist writers. Although Schmitt did not explicitly evaluate novels from Thomas Mann, Robert Müsil, Alfred Döblin and Aldous Huxley, his reading of these writers clearly influenced his thought.<sup>100</sup> Published in a widely-read journal *SUMMA*, “The Buribunks” echoes the title of Mann’s novel, *Buddenbrooks* (1901), offering a pivot for discussing Müsil’s idiosyncratic literary

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<sup>96</sup> Christian J. Emden, ‘Review: The Brilliant Fascist? Carl Schmitt and the Limits of Liberalism’, *H-German* (2005), 1–7 (p. 3).

<sup>97</sup> Hohendahl, (para. 42). For more from Hohendahl, see *Perilous Futures: On Carl Schmitt’s Late Writings* (London: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>98</sup> Johannes Türk, ‘At the Limits of Rhetoric: Authority, Commonplace, and the Role of Literature in Carl Schmitt’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, pp. 751–75. Neither Schmitt’s study nor Däubler’s text have been fully translated into English. For a recent German-language edition of the latter, see Theodor Däubler, *Das Nordlicht: Florentiner Ausgabe* (Berlin: Hofenberg, 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Türk, p. 768.

<sup>100</sup> For Schmitt’s citation of Döblin’s *Tales of a Long Night* (1956) in discussion of Hamlet, see Höfele, p. 269. For more on Döblin and Schmitt, see Nicolas Thirion, ‘La révolution allemande, au miroir de la littérature et du droit. Autour d’Alfred Döblin et de Carl Schmitt’, *Bon-A-Tirer: Revue Littéraire en Ligne*, 157 (2012), 1–13; Joshua Smeltzer, ‘Technology, Law, and Annihilation: Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Utopianism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 81.1 (2020), 107–29.

preoccupations.<sup>101</sup> Trevor Stark usefully positions Schmitt's short-lived correspondence with Hugo Ball, the recovering Dadaist and penitent Catholic, during the 1920s.<sup>102</sup> For Schmitt, modernist writers and avant-gardes offered a variety of counterpoints: Mann provided the early antithesis, Müsil the critical contemporary, Däubler the subsequent resolution, and Ball the productive conflict. The following sections examines these conflicts between Schmitt and avant-gardes to establish their confluence with his thought.

### 1.2.3 *Surrealism, Dada and exceptions*

First, the embryonic stages of Surrealist theatre shared Schmitt's intellectual preoccupations. Generating shock and outrage, Alfred Jarry's play, *Ubu Roi* (1896), famously undermined traditional representations of the sovereign. The prophetic ancestor to many artists of the avant-garde, Jarry influenced the experimental drama of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, among others. The character of King Ubu (or Papa Turd), a parodic and combined rewriting of Macbeth, Hamlet and King Lear, is an obscene, scatological figure who uses his authority for self-preservation. As Hal Foster puts it, 'Ubu is both father and baby, both sovereign and beast; he represents the authoritarian leader as monster infant'.<sup>103</sup> King Ubu is flippant shorthand for topical political leaders, but the character also has basic affinities with a range of avant-garde depictions of sovereignty.

In fact, Jarry's aesthetics provide an ideological analogue for Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. For Nico Israel, Jarry's formulation of 'pataphysics, a metaphysical branch of philosophy concerned with the imaginary domain is 'turned not toward the universal, but toward the particular and, especially, the "accidental"'.<sup>104</sup> Jarry's epistemic provocations thus function as ways of understanding 'the laws that govern exceptions', which anticipates the 'rather less facetious approaches to the question of the exception'.<sup>105</sup> In this

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<sup>101</sup> See Galin Tihanov, 'Robert Musil in the Garden of Conservatism', in *A Companion to the Works of Robert Musil*, ed. by Philip Payne, Graham Bartram and Galin Tihanov (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), pp. 117–48; Alexander Lambrow, '14 December 1930: Robert Musil Meets Carl Schmitt', *The German Quarterly*, 90.3 (2017), 332–48.

<sup>102</sup> Stark, pp. 31–64.

<sup>103</sup> Hal Foster, 'Ubu Jarry', *London Review of Books*, 19 March 2020, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n06/hal-foster/at-the-morgan-library>> [accessed 14 July 2020].

<sup>104</sup> Nico Israel, *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 46.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

reading, Schmitt's exception appears as a serious re-rendering of the playful, fantastic philosophical exertions of the early avant-garde. Friedrich Balke goes as far as to suggest that Schmitt's sovereign 'functions on an ubu-esque basis'.<sup>106</sup> The capricious abuse of power common to Jarry's Ubu and Schmitt's decision-maker is necessarily modern, because 'it is no longer the old sun of sovereignty that diffuses its radiance of representation'.<sup>107</sup> The decline of clear, representative authority excited the avant-garde and determined Schmitt's ideological engagement with symbols and regimes of power.

The challenge Ubu poses to the problem of representation affected artists including Max Ernst, Dora Maar, and Joan Miró.<sup>108</sup> The absurd and ominous figure, spinning on a needle in the foreground of Ernst's painting, *Ubu Imperator* (1923), is dressed:

[...] in an earthen suit of armour. Next to him a sickle with an exceptionally long handle represents a sceptre or symbol of sovereignty, which he can use to intimidate or even behead his adversaries should it become necessary. A wild mane of hair finds its way through the armour and together with a green piece of cloth, forms the sole personal adornment of this corpulent monster whom we cannot actually see.<sup>109</sup>

For the representative authority to achieve legitimacy, it must be visible. Citizens bestow power on the sovereign so that they know where the power is located, that it can be found and, if necessary, undone. By being both monstrous and partly invisible, Ernst's *Ubu* instead fits Foster's criteria for the 'travesty of sovereignty'.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Friedrich Balke, "'The War Has Not Ended': Thomas Hobbes, Carl Schmitt, and the Paradoxes of Countersovereignty", in *Crediting God: Sovereignty and Religion in the Age of Global Capitalism*, ed. by Miguel E. Vatter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 179–89 (p. 183).

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> See Max Ernst, *Ubu Imperator*, 1923, oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris; Dora Maar, *Père Ubu*, 1936, gelatin silver print, 39.7 × 29.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Joan Miró, *Ubu Roi*, 1966, colour lithograph, 42.2 × 32.4 cm, <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/14911>> [accessed 19 August 2020].

<sup>109</sup> Ulrich Bischoff, *Max Ernst, 1891–1976: Beyond Painting*, trans. by Judith Harrison (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>110</sup> Foster, 'Ubu Jarry'.



Figure 4: Max Ernst, *Ubu Emperor*, 1923, oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris

The ghostly, ugly apparition is traumatically removed from its instrument of rule, the sickle, which symbolizes the monopoly on legitimate violence. The gap between its hands and the weapon indicates its unchecked interpretation of leadership. This image recalls Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, particularly Mama Turd's qualitative query, reserved for her power-deranged husband in the great hall of the palace: 'But really, Papa Turd, what kind of a king are you? You're murdering everybody'. Mama Turd ironically foreshadows the way Papa Turd seeks power, encouraging him to kill the reigning king, 'and as soon as he's dead, [...] grab his sceptre and crown'.<sup>111</sup> Ernst's depiction of a floating sceptre thus illustrates that any formal concentration of legitimate authority can function as a predisposition for tyranny.

Helmut Lethen locates Schmitt's concept of sovereignty in the cool persona of *Neue Sachlichkeit* [New Objectivity] literature,<sup>112</sup> which Jessica Burstein develops under the

<sup>111</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, trans. by Beverley Keith and G. Legman (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), pp. 33, 19.

<sup>112</sup> See Helmut Lethen, 'The Cool Persona in New Objectivity Literature; or Figures Devoured by the Shadows They Cast', in *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 101–86.

umbrella term of ‘cold modernism’.<sup>113</sup> For these writers and artists, social problems were tackled through satire and caricature rather than melancholic introspection. Otto Dix, a key figure in the movement, brought wounds to the fore in his paintings, integrating the broken flesh of veterans with the psychological insinuations of the traumatised self. His studies amount to a fractured reality wrung through the fresh memories of battle. The deceptive, caricatured perspectives spoke to a form of truth, the realism innate to conflict, which ironized the shortcomings of those in power. Grosz’s painting, *The Pillars of Society* (1926), identifies the failures of the judiciary, the army and the clergy as the collective absence of authority in the interwar years.<sup>114</sup> Däubler describes Grosz’s corrupt, polyvalent city as containing ‘untold elasticities’.<sup>115</sup> These are a few examples of how anti-bourgeois critique focused on portraying republicans as self-serving sovereigns.

Through photomontage, collage and caricature, Dadaists including John Heartfield, Hannah Höch and Grosz similarly targeted the apparently indecisive but dominant classes of Weimar. German politics suffered from various styles of mockery. Heartfield’s book design for the American writer Upton Sinclair’s *Die goldne Kette* (1927) has two layers: the foreground contains Grosz’s drawing of a cigar-sucking cultural gatekeeper; the background is a montage of exalted art images, including revered paintings by Rembrandt, Edgar Degas and Vincent Van Gogh.<sup>116</sup> The dust jacket combines satirical impulse with a desired archetype: the content, contemplative guardian of high culture; the lazy, satisfied glutton of preening indulgence; the bulbous man in the armchair.<sup>117</sup> For Grosz and Heartfield, this figure represents, in the language of Schmitt, a neutralized and depoliticized culture.<sup>118</sup> David Durst calls this ‘the image of bourgeois comfort and

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<sup>113</sup> See Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). See also that Burstein brands the tendency in Wyndham Lewis’s work towards destruction as ‘cold modernism’, in ‘Waspish Segments: Lewis, Prosthesis, Fascism’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 4.2 (1997), 139–64.

<sup>114</sup> George Grosz, *The Pillars of Society*, 1926, oil on canvas, 108 × 200 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

<sup>115</sup> Däubler, quoted in Kurt Beals, ‘Text and the City: George Grosz, Neue Jugend, and the Political Power of Popular Media’, *Dada/Surrealism*, 19 (2013), <<https://doi.org/10.17077/0084-9537.1280>> [accessed 18 May 2021].

<sup>116</sup> Published in English as *Mammonart: An Essay on Economic Interpretation* (1925), Upton Sinclair’s collection of essays satirizes revered writers and artists from a predominantly socialist perspective.

<sup>117</sup> John Heartfield, Book jacket of Upton Sinclair’s *Die goldne Kette*, 1927, Heartfield-Archiv in der Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

<sup>118</sup> See Carl Schmitt, ‘The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations’, trans. by John P. McCormick, in *The Concept of the Political*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 80–96.

immobility *par excellence*'.<sup>119</sup> Grosz's *Herr* has eyes shut and legs crossed, allowing the received wisdom of the academy and the superficial pleasures of the canon to take root. In Heartfield's rendering, the figure is transformed from one of business and politics into the embodiment of self-satisfied art curation and literary criticism. Heartfield and Grosz laugh at and denigrate an ideologically amorphous yet pictorially identifiable foe: the smug oaf in repose. Schmitt, too, uses archetypes for his enemies, namely excessive aesthetes and dithering liberals, to tell a story of Weimar's political deformity, decline and internal disintegration. Heartfield and Grosz disdain the man who slumps back, hands in pockets, politically passive and artistically immobile.



Figure 5: John Heartfield, Book jacket of Upton Sinclair's *Die goldne Kette*, 1927, Heartfield-Archiv in der Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

Elsewhere, Höch's *Heads of State* (1918–20) has the President Friedrich Ebert and the Defence Minister Gustav Noske standing in their trunks, with the sheepish stances brought into relief by a background of parasols, assorted flowers and butterflies.<sup>120</sup> To feminize

<sup>119</sup> David C. Durst, *Weimar Modernism: Philosophy, Politics, and Culture in Germany 1918-1933* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), p. 49.

<sup>120</sup> Hannah Höch, *Heads of State, 1918–20*, collage photomontage, 16.2 × 23.3 cm, Collection of IFA, Stuttgart.

these ostensibly macho social democrats was to reveal their parliamentary meekness. As newspaper photographs, the pair were laughable; as placed onto iron-on embroidery, they were pathetic, a warped double of impotence. Durst suggests that these works constitute a ‘critique of contemplation’, which Schmitt characterizes as the culture of ‘political romanticism’ and ‘subjectified occasionalism’.<sup>121</sup> Art reveals that politics fail to surmount either the vertiginous height of the romantic ego or the sonorous swamp of endless chatter.

Sabine Kriebel argues that at the core of Dada aesthetic strategy is ‘the enemy body, dismembered and reconfigured through comic hyperbole [and] designed to evoke politically destructive mirth in the viewer’.<sup>122</sup> In this instance, the enemy is one that absorbs aesthetic oppositions. Schmitt theorizes the friend/enemy distinction as one that ‘denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation. It can exist theoretically and practically, without having simultaneously to draw upon all those moral, aesthetic, economic, or other distinctions’.<sup>123</sup> Although diverse, Schmitt, Höch, Grosz and Heartfield’s political and aesthetic methodologies construct a similar archetypal enemy figure. These constructions visualize a debased Weimar culture and parody an age that often looked inward.

Of all the avant-gardes, Ball maintained the most considered correspondence with Schmitt. Sianne Ngai argues that Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* and Ball’s *Cabaret Voltaire* performances are emblematic of ‘zaniness’, which defines the ‘politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and labouring’. The zany mode is ‘[i]ntensely affective and physical, [because] it is an aesthetic of action in the presence of an audience that bridges popular and avant-garde practice’.<sup>124</sup> Schmitt had concerns about the deliberate confusion of intellectual domains, which Ball, in his ‘zaniness’, regularly embodied through his aesthetic stance. Lethen has nonetheless written suggestively on their shared interest in the aural qualities of language, noted in Schmitt’s diaries and drawn from Ball’s sound poems.<sup>125</sup> In a public reading of “Karawane”, Ball famously dressed in a cylindrical cardboard costume as part of “The

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<sup>121</sup> Durst, pp. 33–72; Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, p. 159.

<sup>122</sup> Sabine T. Kriebel, *Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield* (London: University of California Press, 2014), p. 178.

<sup>123</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of The Political*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>124</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 182.

<sup>125</sup> Lethen, pp. 181–84.



Magic Bishop episode”.



Figure 6: Unknown photographer, Publicity postcard of *Hugo Ball*, 1916, Kunsthhaus, Zurich

In Schmitt’s assessment, Ball’s critique of *Political Theology* was highly perceptive.<sup>126</sup> This judgement indicates their sometimes symbiotic relationship. Ball and Schmitt treated with scepticism the practice of art, because, in part, both saw it as redundant after World War I. In the aftermath of the conflict, Stark characterizes their intellectual exchange as a return to political order and Catholic representation:

[...] in his unique interpretation of Schmitt’s political theology, Ball believed that he had found a theory of representation that would unify his political, aesthetic, and metaphysical convictions, one that would supersede and realize the Dadaist dialectic of irrational revolt against a rationalistic age.<sup>127</sup>

Schmitt shared Ball’s diagnosis but not necessarily his prescriptions for a mournful,

<sup>126</sup> See Hugo Ball, ‘Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology’, trans. by Matthew Vollgraff, *October*, 146 (2013), 65–92; Matthew Vollgraff, ‘Afterword: Hugo Ball’s Theology’, *October*, 146 (2013), 93–96.

<sup>127</sup> Stark, p. 34.



secularized world, in which higher values become meagre technical, hyper-rational categories of understanding. Schmitt characterized their era ‘as the capitalistic, mechanistic, relativistic age, as the age of transport, of organization’, which had produced in populations ‘[a] general substitution and forgery of values [that] dominated their souls’.<sup>128</sup>

According to Stark, these concerns about the technological deadening of society makes Schmitt sound like ‘a repentant Dadaist’.<sup>129</sup> Much of Dada worked against the idea of the individual, sovereign subject, as illustrated through the co-authoring of texts, the deliberate suppression of individual authorship and name-games, as well as through the prevalence of generally collective practices and performances. Schmitt resembles Ball insofar as both critiqued bourgeois society and worried art had become a site of endless deferrals without meaning and utility. Both sought a new mode of representation and access to the potentiality of myth. But Schmitt was—anachronistically—suspicious of the performance artist who ‘sociologically avails himself of certain functions of the priest, often in a comically deformed manner, and turns a stream of emotions that belong to the priest onto the genius of his own private person’.<sup>130</sup> Ball, extravagant manifesto proponent, blending politics and aesthetics, could also have been a recipient of Schmitt’s ire, and perhaps would have been had Ball not publicly admired him. Stark concludes that Ball’s attraction to Schmitt articulates ‘the perennial avant-garde slogan of the “end of art” [which] paradoxically led to the aestheticization of politics and the figuration of authority’.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, various strands of Dada displayed contradictory attitudes to politics: some, like Ball’s, privileged antagonism towards the conventional order; others valued the centrality of the imagination and selfhood. Weimar history ultimately saw Ball disappointed in the aesthetic revolution, once emblemized by his role within Zurich Dada, and in the 1920s, he found temporary solace in Schmitt’s political theology.

At times, avant-garde art yearned for the return to order. But avant-gardes also anticipated the rise of authoritarianism in their art practices. For instance, Foster describes Ball’s ‘principal predicament as not an oppressive presence of law but [...] an apparent

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<sup>128</sup> Carl Schmitt, quoted and translated in Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction Between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*, trans. by Marcus Brainard (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1998), pp. 2–3.

<sup>129</sup> Stark, p. 63.

<sup>130</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, p. 18.

<sup>131</sup> Stark, p. 64.

absence of the same, that is, a state of emergency or even of exception'. Foster, with obvious debt to Schmitt, concludes by stating that '[t]his is the dilemma that Dada faced: how to create, how to exist, in a state of emergency in which the rule of law is suspended, as it was in many European nations during and after World War I'.<sup>132</sup> In this example, the state of exception is not only replicated in contemporaneous art, but constitutes the set of political and legal conditions within which art is created.

Early-20<sup>th</sup> century Europe is thus littered with states of exception. Avant-gardes wrote within and responded to these states in which they lived. For Sascha Bru, these responses took several forms, both artistic and political. Bru, channelling Schmitt, notes a 'homology between experimentation in avant-garde literature and unstable, experimental phases in European democratic politics of the 1910s and 1920s', and sees the state of exception as 'an anachronism in political modernity, a remnant of a pre-modern era that suddenly re-emerges in a modern constellation', drawing the comparison:

[...] between the role of the writer and that of the pre-modern sovereign. The sovereign heading a state of exception is forced to experiment, but is confined by a friend-foe logic. His decisions instantly yield concrete results and directly affect the lives of his subjects. The writer in the state of exception, and not least the modernist avant-gardist with his stress on subjective sovereignty, too, came close to experiencing a unique form of sovereignty. For, like the political sovereign, they were forced to improvise and experiment in their daily practices, as politics colonised their realm.<sup>133</sup>

Bru does not provide adequate cultural context to understand Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. The avant-garde was neither monolithic nor unified and the broadly defined attitudes of the avant-garde are marked by incongruities and imbrications: anti-capitalist but marketed heavily to consumers; anti-bourgeois but populated mostly by middle-class urban men; anti-establishment but often explicitly political.

David Cottington, a little too decisively, demarcates two periods of the avant-garde: the experimental pre-war avant-garde that valued 'cultural practices and innovation', 'the centrality of individualism for creativity' and its 'autonomy [...] from wider social forces'; and the war-afflicted successors who rejected the values that led to the crisis, a response

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<sup>132</sup> Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 94. For Ball's private and fictional diagnoses of the period, see *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary by Hugo Ball*, ed. by John Elderfield (London: University of California Press, 1996); *Flametti, or the Dandyism of the Poor*, trans. by Catherine Schelbert (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2014).

<sup>133</sup> Sascha Bru, *Democracy, Law and the Modernist Avant-Gardes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 4, 37–38.

that manifested itself in the entrenchment of conservative ideals or the embrace of Marxist economic solutions. Dynamic new forms of capital accumulation and the upheaval of the 1917 Russian Revolution produced a range of intellectual oppositions, including ‘capitalism against communism, classic against romantic, [and] elitism against democracy’.<sup>134</sup> Where Schmitt stood in these debates determined his political theses in the 1920s and 1930s. Placing him within a cultural framework both underlines various genealogies for Schmitt’s thinking about the exception and extends the analysis beyond his legal-historical circumstances.

As Ronald C. Jennings notes, ‘art [...] literally is the exception, and the motif of the abrupt departure from the time of normalcy corresponds exactly to the concepts of shock, the now, and suddenness in the vocabulary of contemporaneous avant-garde thinking’.<sup>135</sup> In one cultural reading, Schmitt shares with the avant-garde the seduction of completely new beginnings. For Alain Badiou, ‘extraordinary cognitive ruptures’ within the avant-garde correspond with Schmitt’s emphasis on the decision.<sup>136</sup> As I argued in the overview of this thesis, formulating a semantic connection between shock and the exception offers only a limited comparison between Schmitt’s political thought and avant-garde aesthetics. This characterization of rupture may be useful for understanding some aspects of the sovereign decision, but I do not think Schmitt’s methodological approach intends to glamourize the notion of shock as in itself a political virtue, as the next section argues.

#### 1.2.4 *Realisms and reordering*

Hugo Ball’s rejection of Dada and turn towards Catholicism was not the only instance of the return to order in the avant-garde. Realist techniques in art were used to regain a sense of aesthetic and political familiarity, often also suggesting the trend towards fascist politics in the interwar years. Benjamin Buchloh sees in these representational currents ‘haunting visions of incapacitating and infantilizing melancholy and then, at a later stage, [...] the outright adulation of manifestations of reactionary power’. According to Buchloh, the

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<sup>134</sup> David Cottingham, *The Avant Garde: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 53–55.

<sup>135</sup> Ronald C. Jennings, ‘Sovereignty and Political Modernity: A Genealogy of Agamben’s Critique of Sovereignty’, *Anthropological Theory*, 11.1 (2011), 23–61 (p. 37).

<sup>136</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 10.

melancholy movement towards reactionary politics was a two-way psychoanalytical process, in which ‘the symbolic modes of concrete anticipation transformed into allegorical modes of internalized retrospection. If one realizes that melancholy is at the origin of the allegorical mode, one should also realize that this melancholy is enforced by prohibition and repression’.<sup>137</sup> Realisms of the time, broadly understood, responded to breakthroughs of aesthetic modernism while recognizing and reinstating traditions of classical art. For Schmitt, the reappropriated tenets of classicism offered the ‘possibility of unambiguous, clear distinctions’, which formed an intellectual framework otherwise lost to the caprice of romantic values and not regained by earlier modernisms.<sup>138</sup>

Fraught sovereign figures of authority are prevalent in realist interventions in avant-garde art. In André Derain’s portrait, *Harlequin and Pierrot* (1924), failed clowns have lost their artistic authority and power.<sup>139</sup> Buchloh characterizes these as ‘ciphers of an enforced regression [who] serve as emblems for the melancholic infantilism of the avant-garde artist who has come to realize his historical failure’.<sup>140</sup> Giorgio de Chirico, who decried dilettantism in culture, rendered the melancholy value of artistic and intellectual sovereignty in his mannequins, in the figures of *The Troubadour*, *The Poet*, *The Painter*, *The Philosopher*, *The Archaeologist*, and *The Great Metaphysician*.<sup>141</sup> Surrealists, more broadly, viewed the return to order as an almost comic repression of unrelenting modernity, and sought sinister and erotic figures of sovereignty, such as anthropomorphic insects, emblemized by André Masson’s drawing, *Praying Mantis* (c. 1942).<sup>142</sup>

Those artists who deployed realisms did not ignore avant-garde advancements, but co-opted, integrated and managed them. Henri Matisse’s wall-sized celebration of artistic creativity, *Music* (1910), contains five naked figures participating in collective song. Matisse leaves in the residue of the initial traces of the painting.<sup>143</sup> Brandon Taylor writes that “‘errors’ in the painting have been *accommodated by change* rather than excised by banishment or destruction’. This approach amounts to an incorporation of failure, which, in

<sup>137</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ‘Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting’, *October*, 16 (1981), 39–68 (p. 41).

<sup>138</sup> Schmitt, quoted in Müller, p. 21.

<sup>139</sup> André Derain, *Harlequin and Pierrot*, 1924, oil on canvas, 175 × 175 cm, Musée de l’Orangerie, Paris.

<sup>140</sup> Buchloh, p. 53.

<sup>141</sup> See Magdalena Holzhey, *Giorgio de Chirico, 1888–1978: The Modern Myth* (London: Taschen, 2005).

<sup>142</sup> André Masson, *Praying Mantis*, c. 1942, ink on paper, 34.9 × 58.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>143</sup> Henri Matisse, *Music*, 1910, oil on canvas, 260 × 389 cm, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

Taylor's words, becomes a 'reintegration and acceptance of loss'.<sup>144</sup> This recognition is a form of aesthetic reordering that acknowledges the tumult of modernity and puts the prevailing melancholy of artists during the period to productive use. Broadly, this tendency in art tried to keep pace with the complexity of reality and the moral developments of modernity. The same impulse existed in Schmitt, for whom order was a necessary concept for responding to contemporary political crises. This view led Schmitt to consider the aesthetics of reordering that were essential to developments in Cubism, a style of art that rejected and modified many Realist principles.



Figure 7: Henri Matisse, *Music*, 1910, oil on canvas, 260 × 389 cm, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg

Situating Schmitt with Cubism establishes the value of positioning his ideas in close relation to the broader melancholic return of modernism within the orders of Realism. T. J. Clark has written persuasively on Cubism, considering Weberian disenchantment and the resolute melancholy of modernity.<sup>145</sup> Whether these ideas translate into a particular politics for certain artists is a matter for dispute. Malcolm Bull notes the correspondence between

<sup>144</sup> Brandon Taylor, *Modernism, Post-Modernism, Realism: A Critical Perspective for Art* (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1987), pp. 32, 37.

<sup>145</sup> See T. J. Clark, 'Cubism and Collectivity', in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 169–224; T. J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Picasso's Mediterranean sympathies and forms of reactionary and radical conservatism.<sup>146</sup> Other scholars have tried to transpose techniques of Cubism onto Schmitt's intellectual methodology. Arthur Bradley and Antonio Cerella characterize his political and legal approach as containing 'the deconstructive gaze that leads him to decompose an issue into non-reassemblable parts, almost a Cubism of thought'. For Bradley and Cerella, Schmitt's way of understanding political theology does not consist of a 'linear perspective that crystallizes the order of things into a specific moment and from the same visual angle',<sup>147</sup> drawing comparisons with Cubist styles and approaches.

While it is fair to suggest that Schmitt thinks often about disorder and reorder, and it is tantalizing to compare his forms of argument to Cubism, Schmitt was anxious about the wider implications of Cubist aesthetics. Responding to the technological progress of the cities, Schmitt wrote about:

[...] a concept of nature that has found its realization in a world transformed by technology and industry. Nature appears today as the polar antithesis of the mechanistic world of big cities whose stone, iron and glass structures lie on the face of the earth like colossal Cubist configurations. The antithesis of this empire of technology is nature untouched by civilization, wild and barbarian—a reservation into which "man with his affliction does not set foot."<sup>148</sup>

For Schmitt, nature and technology comprise a governing 'radical dualism', which function within the 'sphere of the contemporary epoch'.<sup>149</sup> Schmitt's tendency to categorize—his use of dualisms, spheres, and epochs—could produce a melancholy method, a process of reassembly and of reordering connected to a wider rejection of historically prevailing epistemologies. This approach is linked to his desire, in the words of Bradley and Cerella, 'to decipher, through these epochal categories, the relation between man and world, God and history, individual and state and, above all, transcendence and power'.<sup>150</sup> Describing Schmitt's methods as analogous to Cubism glosses the more complex and less absolute suggestions about his relationship to the modernisms, which is indicated by his connection to individual art works and artists.

<sup>146</sup> Malcolm Bull, 'Pure Mediterranean', *London Review of Books*, 20 February 2014,

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n04/malcolm-bull/pure-mediterranean>> [accessed 17 May 2021].

<sup>147</sup> Arthur Bradley and Antonio Cerella, 'The Future of Political Theology and the Legacy of Carl Schmitt', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 20 (2016), 205–16 (p. 208).

<sup>148</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. by G. L. Ulmen (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Bradley and Cerella, p. 208.

In response to the instability of authority and representation, Schmitt presents a formal hallucination of the decision. Schmitt's methodology insists on the political sovereign as the supreme authority, which appears analogous to Picasso's desire that: 'There ought to be an absolute dictatorship [...] a dictatorship of painters [...] a dictatorship of one painter'.<sup>151</sup> This specific comparison is worth pursuing: Schmitt was aware of the leading Cubists, and his close friend, Franz Kluxen, owned over a dozen paintings by Picasso, one of which Schmitt describes in a letter to his sister, Auguste, as being 'very modern'.<sup>152</sup> Picasso's transformation of the sun in one of his most explicitly progressive political works, *Guernica* (1937), indirectly evokes Schmitt's critique of Däubler's idealized use of the same symbol.<sup>153</sup> More acutely, Charles Palermo considers Picasso's response to the loss of authority in modernity as that which anticipates the ensuing crisis of sovereignty. Palermo focuses on the painting, *The Tragedy* (1903), noting Picasso's tendency to luxuriate in 'relished melancholy' during his Blue period.<sup>154</sup>

Anton Ehrenzweig writes that Cubism contained 'this hidden order [which] redeems the near-schizoid character of [...] excessive fragmentation'.<sup>155</sup> This statement is accurate of Cubism in its various forms: synthetic and analytic Cubism, including its abstract and representational modes. Understood as a product of melancholy, Schmitt's state of exception is neither an invitation for social chaos nor the catalyst for a descent into political anarchy; it is a condition of temporary order, in which, according to Schmitt, 'order in the juristic sense still prevails, even if there is no legal order'. The exception has merely the appearance of rupture, a moment Schmitt defined as 'principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order'.<sup>156</sup> This statement evokes the possibility of a hidden order in politics, which responds to crises of representation and authority. The relationship between order and the exception is a key consideration in scholarship on Schmitt, bringing his work into conversation with avant-garde aesthetics.

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<sup>151</sup> Christian Zervos, 'Conversation avec Picasso', *Cahiers d'Art*, 10.1 (1935), 173–78 (p. 173).

<sup>152</sup> Schmitt, quoted in Kennedy, p. 48.

<sup>153</sup> Türk, pp. 764–68.

<sup>154</sup> Charles Palermo, *Modernism and Authority: Picasso and His Milieu Around 1900* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), p. 152.

<sup>155</sup> Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (London: University of California Press, 1971), p. 67.

<sup>156</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 12.

As has been stated, the comparisons between Schmitt and the avant-garde are often indicated in Bohrer's insights about 'rupture, discontinuity, and shock'. Along these lines, according to Horst Bredekamp, the state of exception conducts 'a cessation of ordinary time', producing 'a moment of standstill and shocklike clarity'. Bredekamp makes a crucial but unexplored point about the motif of:

[...] abrupt departure from the time of normality [which] corresponds to the concepts of shock, the now, and suddenness from the canon of the avant-garde propagated by Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger as well as by Andre Breton and Louis Aragon.<sup>157</sup>

For Bredekamp, these comparisons lead us to understand Schmitt as advocating 'the shock theory of the authoritarian avant-garde', which produces the 'aesthetically manifested state of exception'.<sup>158</sup> But this account fails to capture Schmitt's concentration on the hidden authority that underpins the sovereign decision.

A more persuasive reading suggests that to reinvigorate the state, Schmitt and avant-gardes both held, in Lethen's words, a 'dream of amoral mobility, which searches for spaces of lawlessness in which to indulge itself, turns against the security-mindedness of neutrality, and cultivates the consciousness of danger'.<sup>159</sup> The chaos of modernity risks a vacuum, emblemized by the absent and impotent sovereign. The restorative decision, according to Sam Weber, is 'a pure act, somewhat akin to the act of creation except that what it does is not so much to create as to interrupt and to suspend'.<sup>160</sup> Whether it is through creation, interruption or suspension, the sovereign must provide a definitive image for the epoch. The alternative is a world of symbolic turmoil, which Schmitt fretfully describes as 'a time that, in the pregnant sense, is no longer capable of representation and an art without works, at least without works in a grand style, without representation, sympathetically appropriating all forms in a tumultuous disorder'.<sup>161</sup>

In this process, Schmitt was wary of deploying immutable characterizations of human nature, always questioning 'whether man is a dangerous being or not, a risky or harmless creature'.<sup>162</sup> For him, a formula for sovereignty should be situated within the political

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<sup>157</sup> Horst Bredekamp, Melissa Thorson Hause and Jackson Bond, 'From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes', *Critical Inquiry*, 25.2 (1999), 247–66 (pp. 251–53).

<sup>158</sup> Bredekamp, pp. 255–65.

<sup>159</sup> Lethen, p. 90.

<sup>160</sup> Samuel Weber, 'Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt', *Diacritics*, 22.3/4 (1992), 5–18 (p. 10).

<sup>161</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, p. 15.

<sup>162</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 58.



currents of the time, bringing him into conversation with his literary and artistic contemporaries to measure the ambivalent capacity of the human condition. Armen Avanesian states that Schmitt's political theory consists of 'transvalued categories of aesthetic modernism', insofar as these tenets of modernism produce an 'enthusiastic melancholy' that accommodates errors and failures in the social reality.<sup>163</sup> Melancholy, understood as the latent order underpinning a series of political and legal crises, is threaded through Schmitt's ideas and avant-garde practices. While Schmitt shared the 'enthusiastic melancholy' of many reactionary modernisms, it led him to an uglier political place than many modernists finally ventured, as the following section explores.

### 1.2.5 *Fascism and art*

According to Roger Griffin, fascism is 'a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism'.<sup>164</sup> The appeal to palingenesis—the generation of new beginnings after a period of stasis or decline—describes how fascist movements 'looked to both a mythic past and a technological future in a manner that seems highly contradictory'.<sup>165</sup> Fascist governments, in turn, justified physical destruction as 'creative' and 'cathartic'.<sup>166</sup> To regenerate national institutions, fascism appropriated specific aspects of a country's collective past that complemented the values they wished to enshrine in the public.<sup>167</sup> This rebirth was commonly embodied by a *propheta*, a figure who acquired the quasi-spiritual leadership role that brought the nation into a new era that was opposed to previous decadence. Hitler and Mussolini, whose charisma partly produced the consent of the populations they governed, understood the irresistible appeal of national rebirth when 'society as presently constituted seemed doomed to self-destruction'.<sup>168</sup> Schmitt was keen 'to distinguish a diagnostician from a

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<sup>163</sup> Armen Avanesian, 'Anti-Ironic Politics? The Fundamentalisms of Søren Kierkegaard and Carl Schmitt', in *Kierkegaard and Political Theory: Religion, Aesthetics, Politics and the Intervention of the Single Individual*, ed. by Armen Avanesian and Sophie Wennerscheid (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 199–220 (pp. 209, 216).

<sup>164</sup> Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 26.

<sup>165</sup> Mark Antliff, 'Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity', *The Art Bulletin*, 84.1 (2002), 148–69 (p. 148).

<sup>166</sup> Roger Griffin, 'Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism: A "Mazeway Resynthesis"', *Modernism/Modernity*, 15.1 (2007), 9–24 (p. 20).

<sup>167</sup> Antliff, p. 150.

<sup>168</sup> Griffin, 'Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism', p. 20.

prophet',<sup>169</sup> and his vindications of Nazi policy appealed more to dubious effective governance than it did charismatic authority.

Fascist cultural policies endorsed the 'experimental fusion of avant-garde and classical styles' while labelling modernist outliers as degenerate art.<sup>170</sup> The Nazi government famously isolated, collected, curated and displayed modernist art it deemed degenerate, deviant and impure. The 'Entartete "Kunst"' (complete with sneering speech marks) touring exhibition began in Munich 1937, moving around the country into the following year. The Nazis did not simply deem these works bad or forbidden, but sick, corrupting and contagious. Some works selected were abstract and expressionistic, some merely created by Jews and communists. Paintings were deliberately hung and tilted in ugly proximity. Disgust and mockery were encouraged from the incoming public, some of whom were pressured to attend. The Nazis found degeneracy in the intense colours, the inaccurate physiognomy, the serious rendered ridiculous, the decomposition of shape, the apparent contempt of skill, the deliberate distortion, and the stupid subjects. Opposing walls held art deemed acceptable in contrast.<sup>171</sup>

The Nazis' engagement with aesthetic modernism was complicated, containing fraught internal clashes on art policy, generally involving Joseph Goebbels, who saw the value in German-Nordic Expressionism to illustrate, emblemize and regenerate a new Germany. Goebbels appreciated non-naturalistic uses of colour and at times wished to cordon off and preserve Expressionism from the taint of other modernisms. Even so, his 1936 decree restricted the number of people able to talk about art, encouraging mostly anodyne description and a strict monitoring of critique, in a blatant attempt to control the cultural conversation on aesthetics.<sup>172</sup> The Nazis viewed contemporary art criticism as inextricable from the successes of modernist art. The dialogue needed to be neutered.

In an accompanying guidebook, Fritz Kaiser, an official in the German propaganda ministry, writes that the Degenerate Art exhibition 'aims to put an end to the endless chattering by some writers and cliques who deny any degeneration in art forms. [...] It

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<sup>169</sup> Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 59.

<sup>170</sup> Balakrishnan, p. 75.

<sup>171</sup> See Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 51–74.

<sup>172</sup> For a wider discussion on Goebbels and Nazi aesthetics, see Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (New York: Overlook Press, 2003).

does and must mean to prevent the jabbering cliques'.<sup>173</sup> Kaiser identifies two cultural tendencies as the sources of degeneration: the chosen artworks, and the 'endless chattering' from the art establishment about the artworks, their merit, and their perceived degree of degeneration. There is a discursive link between endless chattering and degeneracy. Kaiser elides the potent remnants of Weimar Germany's perceived artistic malaise—the art, and the chattering about the art—into one degenerate force to be nullified and overcome. Kaiser writes that the exhibition intends to put an end to misguided artistic discussion in the effort, more broadly, to dampen pluralistic debate. To strengthen his argument, he includes excerpts from Hitler's speeches, juxtaposed with his own manifesto-style address and the curators' derisive art captions and commentary. The attack on artistic critique, and the art establishment that upheld it, entailed an attack on degenerate art practices.

Hitler stressed the language of law to describe his ideal German art. In one speech, he recites 'a law previously expressed by a great German: "To be German is to be clear", and that means that to be German is to be logical and true. It is this spirit which has always lived in our people, which has inspired painters, sculptors, architects, thinkers, poets, and above all our musicians'.<sup>174</sup> The exhibition was part of a broader action and campaign that was, for Hitler, rooted in, 'the unalterable decision to clean house, just as I have done in the domain of political confusion, and from now on to rid German life of its phrase-mongering'. His vitriol is as much directed at the naming of art movements as it is about the artworks themselves. Hitler stated that these movements were constituted by 'the artifactitious stammerings of men to whom God has denied the grace of a truly artistic talent, and in its place has awarded them the gift of jabbering or deception'.<sup>175</sup>

The key point is that Schmitt, like Kaiser and Hitler, decries the everlasting conversation of romantics, whom he believed poisoned the supreme political sphere with their egoism, passivity and self-indulgence. These aesthetes had infected political life, particularly democracy, encouraging a liberal parliamentarism that merely enacts degenerate forms of decision. Schmitt favourably cites Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote in

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<sup>173</sup> Fritz Kaiser, *Degenerate Art: The Exhibition Guide in German and English* (Milton Keynes: Ostara Publications, 2012), p. 40.

<sup>174</sup> Adolf Hitler, quoted in *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922–August 1939*, vol. I, ed. by N. H. Baynes (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), p. 587.

<sup>175</sup> Adolf Hitler, quoted in Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History: A Study in Twentieth-Century Art and Ideas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 204.

*Repetition* (1843) that '[e]ndless talk about the general becomes boring'.<sup>176</sup> In this reading, the transcendental, exceptional decision is made possible through the sovereign, who in the moment of decision reveals the true nature of sovereignty. Schmitt's politically expedient emphasis on 'degenerate decisionism' appears in the preface to the second edition of *Political Theology*, in 1934, one year into his role as the juridical bulwark for Hitler's actions and policies.<sup>177</sup> The desire to seek out degeneracy connects Schmitt's case against liberal decision-making to the Nazi case against modernist aesthetics. Schmitt used the language of degeneracy to appeal to his political paymasters.

In fact, Schmitt dramatized parliamentary democracy as a mode of government made up exclusively of discussion. '[B]y radically pushing its supposed principles to their limits', as Müller notes, Schmitt wished 'to construct internal incoherence and a fundamental contradiction between liberalism and democracy'.<sup>178</sup> Series of discussions led to what were still technically decisions, but these were so minor and manifold as to be stripped entirely of meaning. As Schmitt writes, 'the "bond to statute law" is a meaningless way of speaking', when one 'can make "statutes" as he pleases'.<sup>179</sup> Schmitt's polemical characterization of liberalism leads to an argument for the alternative: a strong constitutional state that preserves authoritarian democracy.

Schmitt's relationship to fascism was complicated. Likewise, he was disturbed by and attracted to modernisms and the avant-garde because they embodied and criticized the complacencies of the age. Schmitt's work in Weimar is influenced by and responds to these cultural developments before he became a member of the Nazi Party. Kennedy notes of his pre-National Socialist milieu:

The distinctively German modernism of Weimar owed its form and intellectual content to the literary and artistic style and café life in imperial Germany. Its atmosphere fostered an extraordinarily creative impulse during the first third of the twentieth century in art and architecture and in the modernist spirit.<sup>180</sup>

Kennedy situates Schmitt in an experimental and diffuse cultural era. In this reading, the art and literature of the period provides an intellectual basis upon which Schmitt tests the

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<sup>176</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, quoted in Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 15.

<sup>177</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 3.

<sup>178</sup> Jan Müller, 'Carl Schmitt's Method: Between Ideology, Demonology and Myth', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 4.1 (1999), 61–85 (p. 66).

<sup>179</sup> Schmitt, quoted and translated in David Dyzenhaus, 'The Concept of the Rule-of-Law State in Carl Schmitt's *Verfassungslehre*', in *The Oxford Handbook to Carl Schmitt*, pp. 490–509 (p. 495).

<sup>180</sup> Kennedy, p. 39.

hypotheses of his developing political theory. As the next part outlines, the ideas of exception, order and decision are brought to bear in the intersections of aesthetics and politics, as well as in specific examples of literary scholarship.

### 1.3 Schmitt in Scholarship

#### 1.3.1 *Reactionary modernists*

Some critics have understood Schmitt's cultural influence on Weimar through the organizing category of 'reactionary modernism', a view that prevails among scholars who connect Schmitt to modernist fascists.<sup>181</sup> For Schmitt, liberalism was the problem of his political era because it combined passive parliamentary democracies and a desire to reclaim technology for the purpose of politics. Schmitt saw in this cultural and political ideology a trend towards the aesthetic understanding of human life. This belief is captured in his claim '[t]hat art is a daughter of freedom, that aesthetic value judgment is absolutely autonomous, that artistic genius is sovereign—all this is axiomatic of liberalism'.<sup>182</sup> Schmitt's critique of liberalism is embedded within his response to the aesthetics of freedom.

Schmitt's views on the threat of a valueless society recall the sentiments of T. S. Eliot, who remarked:

By destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness rather than wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified, by fostering a notion of getting on to which the alternative is a hopeless apathy, Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanised or brutalised control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos.<sup>183</sup>

Not unlike Eliot, who valorised the autonomy of the aesthetic domain, Schmitt deifies the political domain because of his cravings for the untainted sovereign revelation and its subsequent clarity of representation. For both Eliot and Schmitt, these cravings are not satisfied by the practice and ideology of liberalism. Such a reading invites literary critics to

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<sup>181</sup> See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>182</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 72.

<sup>183</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), p. 18.

draw comparisons between Schmitt and Eliot as well as other ‘reactionary modernists’.

In 1922, the so-called modernist highpoint, Schmitt published his major work on sovereignty. Along with T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the consolidated version of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*,<sup>184</sup> Desmond Manderson positions D.H. Lawrence’s lesser read *Kangaroo* in the list of landmark 1922 modernist publications, suggesting that the character of Ben Cooley embodies Schmitt’s ideal sovereign figure. Manderson also offers Magnus Zeller’s painting, *The Orator* (1920), a rendering of the charismatic political figure who symbiotically feeds off and into the crowd, to highlight Schmitt’s paradoxical endorsement of the resurging romantic spirit.<sup>185</sup> In the edited collection, *1922*, Tracy McNulty pairs Schmitt’s *Political Theology* with Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘Critique of Violence’ (1921) and labels them ‘modernist political theologies’.<sup>186</sup> Andrew John Miller identifies Schmitt as the theorist integral for understanding literary modernist responses to the interwar ‘crisis of sovereignty’.<sup>187</sup> Miller’s book requires a more extensive discussion on philosophical debates of the period.<sup>188</sup>

Gopal Balakrishnan, in his intellectual portrait of Schmitt, would likewise benefit from a deeper analysis of the connections between political philosophy and modernist aesthetics. Balakrishnan locates Eliot, Lewis, Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats as the Anglo-Irish literary cohort closest to Schmitt in intellectual disposition, but fails to give a ‘detailed collective

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<sup>184</sup> For Schmitt-based readings of these texts, see Sean Dempsey, “‘Set my lands in order’: States of Exception, the Cinematic, and *The Waste Land*”, *Mosaic*, 49.1 (2016), 111–27; Kieran Keohane, ‘On the Political in the Wake: Carl Schmitt and James Joyce’s Political Theologies’, *Cultural Politics*, 7.2 (2011), 249–64.

<sup>185</sup> Desmond Manderson, *Kangaroo Courts and the Rule of Law: The Legacy of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 42–46. See also ‘Modernism and the Critique of Law and Literature’, *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 35 (2011), 105–23; ‘Between the Nihilism of the Young and the Positivism of the Old: Justice and the Novel in DH Lawrence’, *Law and Humanities*, 6.1 (2012) 1–23; ‘Modernism, Polarity, and the Rule of Law’, *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, 24.2 (2012), 475–505. Manderson also draws parallels with Schmitt and Gustav Klimt, ‘Klimt’s Jurisprudence—Sovereign Violence and the Rule of Law’, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 35.3 (2015), 515–42.

<sup>186</sup> Tracy McNulty, ‘Modernist Political Theologies: Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology (1922) and Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (1921)’, in *1922: Literature, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Schmitt is tacked onto another edited collection, see Chantal Mouffe, ‘The Stakes of the Political According to Carl Schmitt’, in *Legacies of Modernism: Art and Politics in Northern Europe, 1890–1950*, ed. by Patrizia C. McBride, Richard W. McCormick, and Monika Žagar (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 203–12.

<sup>187</sup> See Andrew John Miller, *Modernism and the Crisis of Sovereignty* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>188</sup> For an expanded criticism of Miller, see Rachel Potter, ‘Review: Modernism and the Crisis of Sovereignty’, *Modernism/modernity*, 16.4 (2009), 820–21. See also Potter’s attempt to reconcile literary modernist sensibilities with Schmitt in ‘Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* and Disqualification’, *Affirmations: of the modern*, 1.1 (2013), 178–95.

biography of this Fascist-sympathizing/collaborating constellation'.<sup>189</sup> Scholars have briefly considered the literary aesthetics of this constellation with reference to Schmitt.<sup>190</sup> In these readings—theoretical, historical, political, tentatively literary—scholars variously use Schmitt to identify within modernism several sensibilities, including charismatic sovereign figures and mixed expressions of postnational identity. While the fascist tendencies of Anglophone modernists have been widely discussed in book-length humanities research,<sup>191</sup> references to Schmitt tend to work on a rather cartoonish notion of his famous maxims. Modernism is positioned around Schmitt but rarely interrogated as a mode of understanding his intellectual forays into law and politics. Overall, these critiques are very selective: McNulty's focus is Benjamin; Manderson is often ahistorical; Miller's readings of Schmitt are overdetermined; Balakrishnan's references are all asides. I offer a more subtle and sustained approach that moves beyond the limited connections that so far have been made.

Some approaches to the relationship between Wyndham Lewis and Schmitt exemplify the limitations of this extant work. Schmitt had read Lewis, noting that his philosophical opus, *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), is 'interesting, witty, and important despite all its leaps of thought'. Schmitt particularly liked Lewis' analysis of democracy as 'the transition from the intellectual to the affective and sensual', characterized as 'a general "feminization" that suppresses the manly'.<sup>192</sup> Most obviously, Lewis styled himself as *the enemy* and proposed radical dualisms in a manner like Schmitt. Each developed criticisms of liberalism—Lewis's skittish and Schmitt's sustained—because it muddled the separation of intellectual domains. Both thinkers wanted to counter the multiplicity and confusion of cultural life by restoring a delineated and supreme sphere of intellect. Tyrus Miller moreover considers Lewis's modernist contemporary, the American poet e.e.

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<sup>189</sup> Balakrishnan, p. 6.

<sup>190</sup> See Andrew John Miller, "'Compassing Material Ends": T. S. Eliot, Christian Pluralism, and the Nation-State', *ELH*, 67.1 (2000), 229–55; G. J. McAleer, 'Catholic Ideas About War: Why Does Carl Schmitt Reject Natural Law Justifications Of War?', *Touro Law Review*, 30.1 (2014), 65–76; David Dwan, 'The Problem of Romanticism in Wyndham Lewis', *Essays in Criticism*, 65.2 (2015), 163–86; Emily Rich, "'To act on one's definition": Ezra Pound, Carl Schmitt, and the Poetics of Sovereignty', *Intertexts*, 20.2 (2016), 135–53; David Lloyd, 'The Poetics of Decision: Yeats, Benjamin and Schmitt', *EA*, 68.4 (2015), 468–82. See also Laura Murphy, 'The State of Exception and Exceptional States in Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Ghost Stories', *Open Library of Humanities*, 5.1 (2019), 1–26.

<sup>191</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (University of California Press, 1981); Elizabeth Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>192</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. by Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 88.

cummings, to bring into relief Schmitt's critique of liberal neutralization of the political domain.<sup>193</sup>

Lewis was a leading figure within Vorticism, an artistic creed antagonistically influenced by F. T. Marinetti and Italian Futurism, which favoured the assimilation of aesthetics and politics, and is often characterized by its confrontational artistic and social manifestoes.<sup>194</sup> Some critics argue that in planning for a European civilisation, both Marinetti and Schmitt represent war as fundamentally aesthetic. Nick Mansfield outlines the threefold comparison: firstly, both contribute to 'the evacuation of identifiable meaning'; secondly, both construct 'a depersonalised yet still individualised subjectivity that requires solidarity'; thirdly, both promote 'a cult of the authoritarian individual, later instantiated in dictatorship, of the political figurehead as a political and military genius'.<sup>195</sup> Mansfield unpersuasively observes in Schmitt an 'enthusiasm for violence for its own sake' and 'the de-personalisation of self-identity', but usefully notes that 'the aporetic nature of war, its entanglement of meaningfulness and meaningless' might be discussed through an analysis of Marinetti's "Futurist Manifesto" (1909) and *The Concept of the Political*.<sup>196</sup>

These readings have stimulated enquiries about Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction, embellished with Däubler's maxim: 'The enemy is our own question as form'.<sup>197</sup> It is not always clear if Schmitt thinks political conflict presupposes legitimate coercion and physical violence. Conflict and battle, nonetheless, often feature in aesthetic diagnoses of Schmitt's writings.<sup>198</sup> Even if Schmitt does not take 'the same kind of pleasure in the scene of violent death as Marinetti does', the desire for intensity, extremity and the disavowal of romanticism has strong associations with the early avant-gardes, particularly in the proponents of Futurism.<sup>199</sup> Walter Benjamin famously cites Marinetti's revelry in war as

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<sup>193</sup> Tyrus Miller, 'Comrade Kemminkz in Hell: e.e. Cummings's Eimi and Anti-Communism', *Literature & History*, 24.2 (2015), 11–26.

<sup>194</sup> For an expert discussion on avant-garde manifestoes, see Martin Puchner, 'Manifesto = Theatre', *Theatre Journal*, 54.3 (2002), 449–65.

<sup>195</sup> Nick Mansfield, 'Destroyer and Bearer of Worlds: The Aesthetic Doubleness of War', in *Tracing War in British Enlightenment and Romantic Culture*, ed. by Neil Ramsey and Gillian Russell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 188–203 (pp. 195–200).

<sup>196</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> Theodor Däubler, quoted in Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 72.

<sup>198</sup> See Flaminia Incecchi, 'The Aesthetics of War in the Thought of Giovanni Gentile and Carl Schmitt', *Carl-Schmitt-Studien*, 2 (2018), 88–97.

<sup>199</sup> Neil Levi, 'Carl Schmitt and the Question of the Aesthetic', *New German Critique*, 34 (2007), 27–43 (p. 43).



the outcome of an aestheticization of politics,<sup>200</sup> and Marinetti had ‘grasped the centrality of social acceleration’ to his aesthetic project and its diagnosis of social reality.<sup>201</sup> Schmitt, conversely, arrived at Weimar politics ‘shaped by four years of mechanized destruction and the memory of the male community in the trenches’.<sup>202</sup> He was horrified by the war and by the ‘Prussian spirit; this creaking, dashing, completely intellectualless and heartless machine’. For him, state machinery rendered the men in the trenches soulless and dehumanized: ‘the result is the machine, which destroys the human countenance. [...] In the name of humanity one destroys the very image of the human being’.<sup>203</sup> While this statement marks a distinction between Schmitt and Marinetti, it has much in common with Lewis’ attitude to war and conflict, which is why the latter provides a more suggestive and prevalent comparison to Schmitt.

Importantly, Schmitt believed that the *possibility* of violence, wrought from enmity, is integral to the friend/enemy distinction, which defines the unique and autonomous political domain. Lewis’ contrarian politics and thirst for animus, illustrated by the title of his review, *The Enemy* (1927–29), emblemize the cultural equivalent of this distinction. Lewis opposed aspects of society he thought stale or degenerate, supporting causes that could revitalize aesthetics and the individual condition. As David Dwan notes, Schmitt’s curiosity for Lewis amounted to ‘wondering in his diaries if he were not a “related soul”’. Dwan outlines four common predilections: ‘both stressed the value of enmity; both directed their animus at representative democracy and liberalism; both had very public trysts with Hitler; and [...] they had a mutual loathing of Romanticism’.<sup>204</sup> Lewis shared and indulged in Schmitt’s concerns about the dangers of aestheticism and the promise of order. Dwan’s research elegantly expands on possible conversations about Schmitt’s relationship to modernisms with right-wing tendencies, including Futurism and Vorticism. Dwan illuminates a persuasive intellectual kinship by basing his connections on Lewis and Schmitt’s shared admiration, theoretical outlooks and contemporary political views.

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<sup>200</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008), pp. 36–37.

<sup>201</sup> Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman, ‘Introduction’, in *High-speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity*, ed. by Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008), pp. 1–33 (p. 19).

<sup>202</sup> Kennedy, p. 39.

<sup>203</sup> Schmitt, quoted in Bendersky, ‘Schmitt’s Diaries’, pp. 126, 122.

<sup>204</sup> Dwan, p. 163.

Both writers also celebrated the influence of Georges Sorel on modern political thinking, particularly his ideas about power, myth, and violence.<sup>205</sup> T. E. Hulme, a strong influence on Lewis, produced the first English translation of Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (1908). William Rasch employs Hulme to illuminate Schmitt's critique of the liberal and romantic anthropologies, noting '[t]he cycle of optimism and despair that Hulme found in romantic poetry finds its social counterpart in the combination of the bourgeoisie's self-confident identification with humanity as such and its violent fear of and hostility toward the propertyless and uncultured "rabble"'.<sup>206</sup> Balakrishnan argues that Hulme and Schmitt, inspired by Sorel, 'saw in the doctrine of original sin a vivid expression of the pessimism of the "classical" world-view'. Schmitt's classical stance signifies an 'intuitive negation of an as of yet undefined enemy', and that to overcome the crisis of political modernity, Schmitt wishes for a 'reinvention of classic political virtues' through a schema that supports 'separate, hierarchically organized political communities' rather than oppositions defined by class struggle.<sup>207</sup>

It is worth noting the readings of fascist aesthetics in Schmitt and Lewis, whose oeuvre is sometimes overlooked because of his curious relationship with fascism and criticisms of modernism.<sup>208</sup> Frederic Jameson's book, *Fables of Aggression* (1979), argues that Lewis is more accurately described as an example of 'protofascism', whose views were shaped by an internal conflict of class antagonism and libidinal struggle.<sup>209</sup> The critical approach post-Jameson emerged in tandem with a broader, serious engagement with modernism and its relationship to fascism.<sup>210</sup> Most post-war literature had treated modernism and fascism as 'intrinsically antithetical and morally incompatible'.<sup>211</sup> This scholarly disavowal avoided in its analysis the aspects of modernity that fascism sought to embrace, instead documenting the overt activities of fascist governments, such as the Nazi

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<sup>205</sup> See Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. by T. E. Hulme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>206</sup> William Rasch, *Carl Schmitt: State and Society* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), p. 93. Rasch gave a paper titled, 'Carl Schmitt, Modernist', in Spring 2014 that explored affinities between Schmitt's political theory and Anglo-American Imagism, arguing that poets such as Hulme and Pound considered clear distinctions and language of visibility parallel to Schmitt.

<sup>207</sup> Balakrishnan, pp. 27, 105, 110.

<sup>208</sup> Peter Bürger, *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 127.

<sup>209</sup> Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, pp. 1–24.

<sup>210</sup> See Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>211</sup> Paul Betts, 'The New Fascination with Fascism: The Case of Nazi Modernism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37.4 (2002), 541–58 (p. 541).

vilification of modern art. Explicit modernist declarations of support for fascism, such as those by Italian Futurism, were viewed as quaint anomalies or misplaced acts of naivety.<sup>212</sup> In sum, deploying Schmitt to read Lewis tends to overstate Lewis's fascism, and using Lewis to read Schmitt tends to understate the complexity of Schmitt's thinking on the relationship between enmity and legitimate violence. It is not meritless to compare Schmitt and intellectual reactionaries, most obviously in the case of Lewis, but the philosophical aesthetics of Schmitt's thought transcend party politics and clearly-stated ideological stances. This type of reasoning is why I seek to explore the nature of Schmitt's relationship to aesthetics in the following section.

### 1.3.2 *Schmitt and aesthetics*

The purpose of this section is to provide an assessment of the work on Schmitt and aesthetics. Tracking the relationship between aesthetics, politics and law in Schmitt's thought is complicated. Several 21<sup>st</sup> century theorists have attempted to situate aesthetics within Schmitt scholarship. Most recently, *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (2017) devotes significant space to Schmitt's cultural thought, placing it on par with his legal and political contributions. In their introduction, Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons note Schmitt considered that the 'disappearance of religious, political, and other socially meaningful concerns from cultural discourse would have destabilizing effects on the existing order'. For him, the Romantic emphasis on the exclusively aesthetic encapsulated the perils of modernity, and under Romantic auspices, the novel had become a sly and endless mode of literature that had 'lost all connection to reality'. The etymological term *Roman* is crucial for Schmitt, because he sees the novel as historically bound to Romantic tropes of extravagance and deception. The literary form intrinsic to Romantics had become an artistic achievement bereft of political import and function. If this wayward aestheticization was left to fester, it would poison the political domain and excessive rumination, multiple voices and unstable forms of representation would reign.

Meierhenrich and Simons note that for Schmitt, 'excessive aestheticism' of modernity creates 'a pure play of forms, a superficial order that lacked the substance required for

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<sup>212</sup> See Walter L. Adamson, 'Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903–1922', *The American Historical Review*, 95.2 (1990), 359–90.

holding together a polity’, which is ‘ill served by cultural representations of its life and values when [Romantics] prioritize aesthetics over politics—and play over seriousness’. He found troubling the pervasiveness of trivial and superficial concerns but thought the point of the decisive sovereign and political symbols was to make order visible. For this purpose, ‘the vocabulary associated with the cultural movement of aestheticism should be overhauled’. The solely or excessively aesthetic may be a weak foundation for ordered community and intellectual society, but, as this statement suggests, it still implies a role for aesthetics that is mitigated by the supreme political domain. The authors’ conclusion is that Schmitt’s philosophy contains ‘not an aesthetic analysis of politics, but a political analysis of aesthetics’.<sup>213</sup>

Neil Levi characterizes Schmitt’s tendency to employ negation as wrought with contradictions, which encourages discussions with modernist aesthetics. First, Schmitt is anxious to insist ‘on how different the aesthetic is from the political’ because separate domains cannot affirm one another’s existence. This negation is rhetorical: to imagine the political domain disappearing argues for its preservation, becoming a strategy to show its distinctive and meaningful features. Schmitt rejects the utility of aesthetics through techniques of aesthetics, because his concern is that aesthetic consumption could lead to political destruction. This negation is also a matter of form. As Levi explains it, ‘for all the talk of concrete situations and life-and-death commitments, Schmitt is ultimately indifferent to content so long as the principle of order itself is asserted and maintained’. Levi sees this indifference as one that situates Schmitt within contemporary modernist developments while also functioning as a critique of liberalism. Finally, this negation is a product of psychic repression. By coupling together ideas of ‘autonomy’ and ‘sovereign’, Schmitt uses diction as ‘parapraxis’, which invites comparison between the aesthetic and political domain through psychoanalysis.<sup>214</sup>

For Schmitt, the dominance of the aesthetic domain defines the crisis of modernity, but problems arise from his desire to diagnose, isolate and rank the political and aesthetic domains in his theory of sovereignty. Schmitt’s attack on aesthetics draws attention to his rhetorical and formal devices, and emphasizes his persistent antisemitism, particularly

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<sup>213</sup> Meierhenrich and Simons, pp. 37–49.

<sup>214</sup> Levi, ‘The Question of the Aesthetic’, pp. 34, 41.

when isolating the figure of the Jew, with its associated tropes, as his polemical antagonist. This view comes to bear on his discussion of political symbols:

Although the enlightened humanitarian could conceive of and admire the state as a work of art, the symbol of the leviathan as applied to the state appeared to his classical taste and sentimental feeling as a bestiality or as a machine turned into a Moloch that lost all the powers of a sensible myth and at first represented an externally driven lifeless “mechanism” and then an animate “organism” of a political contrast, an organism driven from within.<sup>215</sup>

Schmitt decries the interpretation of Hobbes’ image of the Leviathan that ‘distorted [it] to be a horrible Golem or Moloch’.<sup>216</sup> For him, the Jew is represented a Golem or Moloch, which is, in turn, he represents as the enemy figure. This analysis would have cut through into the cultural conversation. Gustav Meyrink’s titular fantasy novel had influenced understandings of the Golem as a *Gestalt* entity, the physical embodiment of an accumulated and nebulous collective psyche.<sup>217</sup>

Schmitt may have seen Paul Wegener’s popular cinematic interpretations of the Golem in the 1920s, and he certainly saw Wegener’s theatrical portrayal of Othello, which he derisively thought as being akin to ‘a wild beast’.<sup>218</sup> Schmitt’s unofficial position as the ‘Crown Jurist of the Third Reich’ came partly from calculating career opportunism, but his antisemitism is indisputable.<sup>219</sup> Raphael Gross correlates Schmitt’s defence of a homogenous German race against a Jewish existential threat with his friend/enemy distinction.<sup>220</sup> For Levi, Schmitt’s broader figuration of the enemy, influenced by rhetoric, form, repression, or antisemitism, is a crucial methodological foil that provokes comparisons with literary modernisms.<sup>221</sup>

Levi argues that Schmitt discusses aesthetics in a twofold manner, ‘as the autonomous realm of art and as a specific mode of perception’.<sup>222</sup> In the first sense, art is the enemy of the political domain. Schmitt formulates the political as a separate and higher domain so it

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<sup>215</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 62–63.

<sup>216</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan*, p. 71.

<sup>217</sup> See Gustav Meyrink, *The Golem*, trans. by M. Pemberton (Cambridge: Dedalus, 1991).

<sup>218</sup> Schmitt, quoted in Höfele, p. 179.

<sup>219</sup> Charles E. Frye, ‘Carl Schmitt’s Concept of the Political’, *The Journal of Politics*, 28.4 (1966), 818–830 (p. 818).

<sup>220</sup> See Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt and the Jews: The “Jewish Question,” the Holocaust, and German Legal Theory*, trans. by Joel Golb (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

<sup>221</sup> Neil Levi, *Modernist Form and the Myth of Jewification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 14.

<sup>222</sup> Levi, ‘The Question of the Aesthetic’, p. 28.

cannot be conflated with other domains: the aesthetic, the social, the economic, the legal and the moral. To suggest equivalence between the political and any of these domains (but particularly the aesthetic) is, as Martin Jay explains, ‘a categorical mistake, and perhaps even a dangerous one at that’.<sup>223</sup> The perceived triviality of the aesthetic domain relative to its claims to authority means that it is inflated, misunderstood and dangerous. In the second sense, Schmitt considers aesthetics through the work of his friend Däubler, writing that ‘[l]anguage entirely becomes an aesthetic medium without regard to the associations the same words carry with them in daily conversation’.<sup>224</sup> He longs for meaningful, utilitarian aesthetic representation and salutes, in Meierhenrich and Simons words, ‘Däubler’s invention of a singularly emotive, poetic language that transcended the purely communicative function of words’.<sup>225</sup> Schmitt worries about the dominant aesthetic domain but wishes to harness its representative power, desiring sensibilities that exceed superficial appearances and form a totality of speech and thought.

Levi focuses on the concept of the political to illustrate Schmitt’s tendency to aestheticization. Schmitt’s intensely realized friend/enemy distinction has four outcomes: 1) it makes visible the seriousness of the political; 2) it offers a clear aesthetic-formal component; 3) it shows dependence on the sovereign; and 4) it presents a structurally empty principle of order. Levi concludes that these ‘aspects of Schmitt’s vision of the political do not mean that the extreme case is not political but raise the possibility that the very intensity of the political both draws on and is shadowed by elements that we might regard as irreducibly aesthetic’.<sup>226</sup> Given that ‘the real possibility of physical killing’ constitutes war, which ‘follows from enmity [and] is the existential negation of the enemy’, the aesthetic domain is thus complicit in legitimizing the sacrifice of human life.<sup>227</sup> Levi articulates this conundrum by guessing at Schmitt’s haunted psychology, which reflects on ‘the idea of the wasted life, the life whose destruction is not redeemed by a higher purpose but is lost for no real purpose at all’.<sup>228</sup>

Eric L. Santner has pioneered recent cultural discussions of sovereignty along these lines, drawing out the ‘modernist mutation’ of political theology found in Ernst

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<sup>223</sup> Martin Jay, *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics* (University of Virginia Press, 2010), p. 77.

<sup>224</sup> Schmitt, quoted in Türk, p. 766.

<sup>225</sup> Meierhenrich and Simons, p. 43.

<sup>226</sup> Levi, ‘The Question of the Aesthetic’, p. 43.

<sup>227</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 33.

<sup>228</sup> Levi, ‘The Question of the Aesthetic’, p. 43.

Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957). Santner combines critiques of biopolitics, applications of Freudian psychoanalysis and appeals to 'the unstable boundaries between figuration and abstraction'.<sup>229</sup> The psychoanalytical approach bears on the analysis of Schmitt's single work of extended literary criticism, *Hamlet or Hecuba* (1956). Although the reader should be wary of equating psychological assumptions—unconscious or otherwise—with definitive aesthetic cravings, Türk attempts to reconcile the two perspectives, locating within Schmitt's perception of art an explication of the repressed taboo. Schmitt's explicit aesthetic theory of Hamlet, grounded in historicism rather than autonomy, consists of 'the situation of an existential conflict [which] insists in the aesthetic play itself in the form of a manifest absence'.<sup>230</sup> According to Türk, Schmitt is not interested in mimesis, or in art's inherent value, but in the possibilities of art to affect and influence the political domain.

Levi offers another useful contribution to Schmitt's relationship to aesthetics by summarizing two distinct scholarly attitudes. On one side, scholars argue that Schmitt's analysis of sovereignty and politics draws on aesthetic sensibilities, despite his antipathy towards aesthetics in his political thought. On the other, scholars comprehend his philosophy through strict frameworks of politics and metaphysics. This second set includes Andrew Norris and Andreas Kalyvas, who reject aesthetic interpretations of Schmitt.<sup>231</sup> They disagree with the previous cohort, by pointing to the internal logic of Schmitt's political theory and persistent disavowal of the aesthetic as a useful domain with which to analyse the political. They argue this misreading of Schmitt falsely applies aesthetic analogies and rhetorical devices to essentially political and legal concepts. Like those they oppose, these scholars deem aesthetics as an inadequate or dangerous basis for a theory of sovereignty and politics. Separating these two camps offers a crude typology of politics and aesthetics but it does help to negotiate the schisms in Schmitt's thought.

The first, more prominent set of scholars connect Schmitt's intellectual journey—from eminent Weimar thinker to leading Nazi jurist—to his indulgence in a form of political

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<sup>229</sup> Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. ix, xxi.

<sup>230</sup> Johannes Türk, 'The Intrusion: Carl Schmitt's Non-Mimetic Logic of Art', *Telos*, 142 (2008), 73–89 (p. 83).

<sup>231</sup> See Andreas Kalyvas, 'Who's afraid of Carl Schmitt?', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 25.2 (1999), 87–125; Andrew Norris, 'Carl Schmitt's Political Metaphysics: On the Secularization of "the Outermost Sphere"', *Theory & Event*, 4.1 (2000), 1–33; Andrew Norris, 'Sovereignty, Exception, and Norm', *Journal of Law and Society*, 34.1 (2007), 31–45;

romanticism, precisely the approach Schmitt criticizes in his book of that name. They associate his work with fascism and Nazism, claiming that the aesthetic domain as an intrinsically weak but also dangerous basis for a political theory of sovereignty. According to Jürgen Habermas, Schmitt ‘asserts the pure immanence of art, disputes it has a utopian content, and points to its illusory character in order to limit the aesthetic experience to privacy’. Schmitt’s ‘expressionistic style’ and ‘dramatic concept of the political’ reveal ‘aestheticizing oscillations’ that certify his fascist kinship. This ‘aesthetics of violence’ defines his theory of sovereignty, which, Habermas argues, ‘acquires a halo of surrealistic meanings through its relationship to the violent destruction of the normative’.<sup>232</sup> From the late-1970s onwards, theorists such as Bohrer, Bürger, Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy embraced this mode of critique and rendered Schmitt’s political philosophy as aesthetic in similar terms.<sup>233</sup> Levi questions why this set fails to explain, define and categorize the aesthetic in its analyses. Taking their cue mostly from Benjamin, these scholars view the role of aesthetics in politics as fascist, harmful and unpolitical, but do not give a useful framework with which to decide on what counts as the aesthetic, which is used ‘polemically and pejoratively’. Levi favours, instead, ‘some broader, more descriptive conceptions of the aesthetic as a mode of presentation and perception that we might see as inherent to political thought’.<sup>234</sup>

Levi omits several of Schmitt’s critical contemporaries, which is important to address for gaining a comprehensive overview of Schmitt’s relationship to aesthetics. Leo Strauss originally queried Schmitt’s strange comments about the aesthetic domain as one that produces only a fun, unserious, and entertaining world.<sup>235</sup> In the mid-1930s, Karl Löwith turned Schmitt’s critique of romanticism towards its interlocutor, labelling him a ‘romantic occasionalist’. The allegedly concrete political situation, on which Schmitt’s decision is predicated, is merely another type of *occasio* for aesthetic production.<sup>236</sup> Johan Huizinga

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<sup>232</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Modernity—An Incomplete Project’, trans. by Seyla Benhabib, in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 3–16 (p. 14); ‘The Horrors of Autonomy: Carl Schmitt in English’, *The New Conservatism*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 128–39.

<sup>233</sup> See Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. by Ruth Crowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘The Nazi Myth’, trans. by Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 291–312 (pp. 303, 310).

<sup>234</sup> Levi, ‘The Question of the Aesthetic’, pp. 31–34.

<sup>235</sup> See Leo Strauss, ‘Notes on The Concept of the Political’, in *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 97–122.

<sup>236</sup> See Karl Löwith, ‘The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt’, in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. by Richard Wolin and trans. by Gary Steiner (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 137–69. This influential critique has had a significant afterlife, see Hjalmar Falk, ‘The ‘Theological



gave a critique of Schmitt by arguing that play and sensuality, while vital to intellectual life, do not interfere with the political domain. Huizinga found unpersuasive Schmitt's friend/enemy logic, which equates political seriousness with physical conflict, because 'it is not war that is serious, but peace'.<sup>237</sup> More recently, David Pan has written extensively on Schmitt's relationship to play and aesthetics in *Hamlet or Hecuba*.<sup>238</sup> Pan and Russell A. Berman suggest Schmitt 'develops a dialectical model', in the vein of Benjamin's work, between the aesthetic and political domain.<sup>239</sup> This reading, while suggestive, precludes Schmitt's statements on the metaphysical image and the subordinated aesthetic domain. It is worth highlighting how the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Schmitt's thought has attracted so many humanities scholars to his work, as the next section demonstrates.

### 1.3.3 Schmitt in the humanities

The previous section asserts that Schmitt is at once dismissive and troubled by 'aesthetic characterization[s]',<sup>240</sup> which elicits an involuntary irony, because he conceives his concepts through a kind of aesthetics, that is, language rooted in literature and art. This reading partly explains why his work on sovereignty persists today and has influenced some major humanities theorists, including Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben. Mouffe uses Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction to articulate a political theory of agonistic pluralism applicable to current forms of social democracy.<sup>241</sup> She amplifies Schmitt's appreciation of the complexity of political reality and his attitude to homogeneity as an important, instrumental basis for the collective. But Schmitt understood the difficulty in achieving this standard of governance, arguing that pluralistic actors

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Nihilism' of Friedrich Gogarten: On a Context in Karl Löwith's Critique of Carl Schmitt', *European Review*, 22.2 (2014), 217–30.

<sup>237</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2016), p. 209. See also *In the Shadow of Tomorrow: A Diagnosis of the Modern Distemper* (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2019), p. 117;

<sup>238</sup> See David Pan, 'Political Aesthetics: Carl Schmitt on Hamlet', *Telos*, 72 (1987), 153–59; 'Carl Schmitt on Culture and Violence in the Political Decision', *Telos*, 142 (2008), 49–72; 'Against Biopolitics: Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben on Political Sovereignty and Symbolic Order', *The German Quarterly*, 82.1 (2009), 42–62; 'Tragedy as Exception in Carl Schmitt's Hamlet or Hecuba', in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, pp. 731–50.

<sup>239</sup> David Pan and Russell A. Berman, 'Introduction', *Telos*, 142 (2008), 3–4.

<sup>240</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 65.

<sup>241</sup> See *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. by Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1999); *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005); *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 2006).

undermined the authority and cohesion of the state.<sup>242</sup> Derrida deploys Schmitt to theorize a politics of friendship, as well as to interrogate bestial symbols of sovereignty that have existed throughout history and culture.<sup>243</sup> Agamben draws upon Schmitt's political philosophy to diagnose in modern societies examples of permanent emergencies, regimes of biopower and conditions of bare life. Agamben's view is that citizens accept the bare minimum of existence to live under almost permanent restrictions of liberty. Governments treat every *event* as a pretext for the suspension of normal laws. Citizens adapt to the new reality: they defer to the exception, and so it becomes the rule.<sup>244</sup> Schmitt remains integral to contemporary thought about the culture of politics and sovereignty and his work provides a prism through which to analyse modernism's intrigue with reactionary politics. It is almost impossible to discuss the cultures of politics and sovereignty without including Schmitt's work.

Schmitt's work on *Hamlet* has led to his theory of sovereignty being used to analyse renaissance drama and the plays of early modernity through the thematic lens of melancholy.<sup>245</sup> Schmitt's state of exception is further untethered from his original designation to frame twenty-first century literature, particularly post-9/11.<sup>246</sup> In recent humanities scholarship, the term (or implicit idea) is employed to interrogate the apparently exceptional qualities of both the aesthetic and political domains.<sup>247</sup> This type of analysis often employs varied, descriptive interpretations of exceptionalism. Literary scholarship should reorient the term towards its historical cultural context and Schmitt's

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<sup>242</sup> Joseph W. Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 4.

<sup>243</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 2, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>244</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>245</sup> See Eric L. Santner, 'The Vicissitudes of Melancholy', in *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 43–96; Santner, 'The Stages of the Flesh: Shakespeare, Schmitt, Hofmannsthal', in *The Royal Remains*, pp. 142–87; Dimitris Vardoulakis, 'Melancholia as Dejustification: Hamlet's Anti-absolutism', in *Sovereignty and Its Other: Towards the Dejustification of Violence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 99–109; Philip Lorenz, *The Tears of Sovereignty: Perspectives of Power in Renaissance Drama* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

<sup>246</sup> See Arne De Boever, *States of Exception in the Contemporary Novel: Martel, Eugenides, Coetzee, Sebald* (London: Continuum, 2012).

<sup>247</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Santiago Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Arne De Boever, 'Aesthetic and Political Exceptionalism', in *Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

intention. Accordingly, his growing popularity within humanities research should provoke consideration of aesthetic modernisms contemporary to his thought. This piecemeal work on Schmitt and modernism has some merit but it does not address what I want to explore and understand. This thesis uses Schmitt's work to find and explicate modernist prose responses to the contemporary period within the literary milieu of England, America and Ireland.

This thesis acknowledges that the modernist literary mission is one historically premised on rupture and transformation. It was the dominant mode through which the collapsing orders of the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s and beyond were challenged and comprehended. This apprehension of crisis and collapse is particularly striking in the apparently politically dispassionate works of Anglophone modernism, in writers such as Woolf, Faulkner, and Beckett. Schmitt is likewise concerned with the relationship between modernity and crisis. Yet, the classic modernist characterization of rupture and transformation, often as a predicate for newness, is neither sufficient nor accurate for evaluating his relationship to aesthetic modernism. It is more persuasive to argue that Schmitt, alert to the political potential of disorder, desires new understandings of order, and that in various periods and modes of modernism there is a similar excitement in disorder combined with a yearning for order. These affective combinations produce subversive responses towards ideas of stasis and continuity amid seismic social and political change.

As established, a melancholy intellectualism defines political and artistic approaches in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century. The contemporary diagnosis of state failure likewise corresponds to the modernist diagnosis of aesthetic failure. Political philosophies and critical theories of the period, as well as literary modernisms, tend to grapple with anticipation; in all, there is a desire for the not-quite-yet to disrupt and clarify the age. I take Schmitt's relationship with modernism beyond extant work on the segues between his thinking and explicitly reactionary and fascist works of modernism; it becomes clear that melancholy, failure and anticipation constitute the Schmitt-modernist diagnosis of sovereignty. Benjamin articulated this melancholy intellectualism in his assertion that '[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule'. Writing in 1940, he calls for 'a real state of emergency' that will transcend the impotent 'amazement' aimed at the contemporary political condition, and in doing so,

establish a more valuable conception of history with which to address fascism. Deception is central to Benjamin's understanding of the state of emergency, and for him, art and literature offer the capacity to identify real states of emergencies, because allegory is integral to his literary and philosophical analysis. In the ninth thesis, Benjamin famously addresses Paul Klee's monoprint, *Angelus Novus* (1920),<sup>248</sup> and the connections between Schmitt and Benjamin—and their respective views on history and aesthetics—have been much remarked upon.<sup>249</sup>

Robert B. Pippin usefully pinpoints the integral intellectual states to philosophical modernism: those of melancholy, failure and anticipation. According to Pippin, modernity shifted from its 'repetitive [...] culture of melancholy', which was 'morbidly fixated on failure', towards:

[...] the realization of an even more radical notion of historical time, without purpose or structure, but infinitely repetitive, one which thereby eliminates any notion of decisive, revolutionary moments, [which] might make possible a "confirmation" of this life, not an anticipation of a future or different or missed life.

In the modern period, Pippin continues, '[w]e require a profound sense of the infinite repeatability, and so of such infinite sameness, to avoid the false hopes that inspire melancholy'.<sup>250</sup> This idea of modernism shares sensibilities with Nietzsche's concept of eternal return,<sup>251</sup> which prefigures Schmitt's concerns about crises of political authority. As Schmitt tried to reinstitute the authority of the decision to counter widespread political

<sup>248</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Bodley Head, 2015), pp. 245–55 (pp. 248–49). See Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920, oil transfer and watercolour on paper, 31.8 × 24.2 cm, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

<sup>249</sup> For analyses of Schmitt and Benjamin's treatments of the exception as image, see Marc de Wilde, 'Violence in the State of Exception: Reflections on Theologico-Political Motifs in Benjamin and Schmitt', in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. by Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 188–200; Marc de Wilde, 'Meeting Opposites: The Political Theologies of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt', *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 44.4 (2011), 363–81. For a comparison of their political theologies, see Kam Shapiro, 'Politics Is a Mushroom: Worldly Sources of Rule and Exception in Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin', *Diacritics*, 37.2/3 (2007), 121–34; Rebecca Gould, 'Laws, Exceptions, Norms: Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin on the Exception', *Telos*, 162 (2013), 77–96. For analyses of their respective ideas about Hamlet and tragic drama, see Sigrid Weigel and Georgina Paul, 'The Martyr and the Sovereign: Scenes from a Contemporary Tragic Drama, Read through Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 4.3 (2004), 109–23; Hyowon Cho, 'Humor or Dying Voice—Hamlet between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 91.3 (2016), 258–76. For a reading of their personal and intellectual correspondence, see Horst Bredekamp, 'Walter Benjamin's Esteem for Carl Schmitt', in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, pp. 679–704.

<sup>250</sup> Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. xi, 152, 156, 157.

<sup>251</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 273–74.

failure, currents within philosophical modernism sought to extinguish and replace the sovereign decision with an infinite series of repetitions that would preclude its existence. This melancholic vision presented a future that could not be seen, traced or expected.

Nonetheless, the diagnoses among modernists were drastically different. By linking the states of melancholy, failure and anticipation, and by drawing upon intellectual traditions that privilege these states within modernism, Pippin suggests these states are interminable and co-productive. In this spirit, this thesis argues, Schmitt and literary modernisms make major appeals to structural continuity, to the interplay of order and disorder, and to the reordering of political and artistic forms. Modernist writers not only invoke rupture, transformation and newness to address the period but also draw on the symbolic and social orders of repetition, reorder and restraint, which correspond to the states of melancholy, failure and anticipation. These three thematic states constitute the methodological nexus for understanding my key texts.

In addition, Stanley Cavell usefully characterizes the period of modernity as:

[...] a moment in which history and its conventions can no longer be taken for granted; the time in which music and painting and poetry (like nations) have to define themselves against their pasts; the beginning of the moment in which each of the arts becomes its own subject, as if its immediate artistic task is to establish its own existence. The new difficulty which comes to light in the modernist situation is that of maintaining one's belief in one's own enterprise, for the past and the present become problematic together. I believe that philosophy shares the modernist difficulty now everywhere evident in the major arts, the difficulty of making one's present effort become a part of the present history of the enterprise to which one has committed one's mind, such as it is.<sup>252</sup>

Literary aesthetics are bound up with broader political, philosophical and legal debates. The story of modern sovereignty is thus inseparable from the tropes of early-20<sup>th</sup> century modernism. Schmitt's formulation of sovereignty brings into relief the complicated use of symbols in modernism to understand a radically changing international order. His theological allusions foreground symbols that purport to both represent and resist traditional ideas of sovereignty. This thesis argues that symbols invoked in modernism are forcefully suggested in Schmitt's principles of the decision and the exception. His theory of sovereignty functions potently as a symbolic space within which modernist sensibilities can be expressed. His borderline concept gestures towards the gaps either side of it. In

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<sup>252</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. xxxiv.

Santner's words, these gaps amount to 'fissures or caesuras in the space of meaning'.<sup>253</sup> The borderline generates the possibility of not only symbols but of symbolic space, a free area of meaning to be identified and rendered upon. The study of humanities is attracted to Schmitt for several reasons, but most potently, scholars are drawn to his work on symbols as illustrative of both myth and representation, which the following section explores.

#### 1.3.4 Schmitt and representation

In his book on *Leviathan*, Schmitt uses Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder to articulate what he understood as the historical trajectory of representative sovereignty:

The image of the leviathan experienced a similar fate in the literature of the sixteenth century, which can be seen in the rendition of the devil or the demons from the time of Hieronymus Bosch until the so-called hell of Bruegel. The medieval belief in demons was still intact in Bosch (circa 1500); his devils are ontological reality, not the products of a fantasy of horror; the landscape is hell, whose fire in many places breaks through the veil of earthly colors, not a mere scene or a stage for an eccentric play of figures. Bruegel's hell (around 1600) reveals no trace of this dangerous reality. Instead, he has turned it into an aesthetic and psychologically interesting place. Between the demonology of Hieronymus Bosch and the hell of Bruegel the notion of worldly realism arose; Bruegel's peasants are typical manifestations in art.<sup>254</sup>

These developments, emblemized by Bruegel's style of painting, concerned Schmitt, because subsequent depictions bore little trace of personalistic sovereign representation. As Thomas Poole notes, the frontispiece of *Leviathan*, under the artificial body of the sovereign, is 'the antithesis of a painting by Bruegel. Rather than a riotous superabundance of lived life spilling out over the canvas, there is sterile order. No teeming crowds, no variety, no interaction: in fact, no apparent vitality'.<sup>255</sup> For Schmitt, aesthetically provocative and psychologically ambiguous images deny the ontological reality that underpins true representation. However, that did not prevent him from deploying suggestive symbols in his political writings.

Jan Werner-Müller works upon Schmitt's analysis of symbol as a form of mythmaking, arguing that Schmitt's polemical concepts resemble myths, or essentially

<sup>253</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. xv.

<sup>254</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan*, p. 24. For more discussion on Schmitt and these painters, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *Bosch and Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. xiii, xiv, 67, 91.

<sup>255</sup> Thomas Poole, 'Leviathan in Lockdown', *London Review of Books*, 1 May 2020, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2020/may/leviathan-in-lockdown>> [accessed 03 July 2020].

irrational ‘concepts of immediate presence’. Schmitt thought myths the most effective, total political concepts during the 1920s and 1930s, and his attraction to immediate concepts can be traced to the ‘immediate, mystical language of images’. Schmitt considered that these images revealed absolute truths about the human condition. Müller notes that the ‘unproblematic immediacy of myths’ is attractive for Schmitt, who also recognises that myths can be disputed. The Leviathan, for example, ‘activated the invisible powers of an ancient, polyvalent myth’, eventually distorting the intended image of a unified state. For Schmitt, the state is obligated to act as a stabilizing, protective force in ‘times of mediacy’ by deciding on the state of exception. State failure causes ‘times of immediacy’, during which citizens are released from their state obligations. The citizen in turn develops an immediate, eschatological approach to political chaos because the primacy of the state and the resultant order are compromised. Myth is then required to stabilize the state. For Schmitt, Hobbes’s image of the Leviathan failed because it lacked the ‘nonproblematic immediacy’ required of unifying myths.<sup>256</sup>

For Schmitt, the best symbols inspire awe and obedience because citizens elevate these to the level of transcendent myth. This reading underlines Schmitt’s political concern about visibility and representation. The Leviathan, the most renowned symbol in political philosophy, did not meet his stringent criteria. In Schmitt’s view, the tetramorphic Leviathan became equal parts great representative, mortal god, animalistic monster and technical machine, despite Hobbes’ intention.<sup>257</sup> This fourfold interpretation created visual ambiguity, irreconcilable to lucid political symbolism. As an exponent of its power, Schmitt did not see myth as an aesthetic folly, but as a utilitarian political instrument that gave the impression of secular authority. That Hobbes showed the Leviathan literally composed of the collective populace was not the problem. It was that the populace could variously interpret the Leviathan as God’s mortal representative, as a wicked beast and as a bureaucratic tool for manipulation. This hermeneutic plurality reduced the symbol’s powerful, mythic aura: it was susceptible to contestation, disagreement and deformity. The Leviathan failed, and Schmitt’s lesson was that invoking a myth invokes all its elements.

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<sup>256</sup> Müller has also written extensively on Schmitt’s use of demonic allegory. See Müller, ‘Carl Schmitt’s Method’, pp. 75–77.

<sup>257</sup> For a discussion of Schmitt’s critique of the Leviathan, see John P. McCormick ‘Teaching in Vain: Carl Schmitt, Thomas Hobbes, and the Theory of the Sovereign State’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, pp. 269–90.

Schmitt's ideas about representation and form produce several points of contention in scholarship.<sup>258</sup> The clouded distinction between aesthetics and politics in his work justifies Kant's prevalence in many of these discussions. In *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant sees art as a necessary component for individual reflection, functioning to certify public reason and social utility. Beauty serves as a disinterested plane upon which humans can develop their critical faculties and selfhood. The appeal to sublime nature is universal and indicates a common humanity, which suggest that the role of art is to embody ethical ideas, suppress corruption and irrationality, and negate weakness and evil.<sup>259</sup> Karl Löwith suggests that Schmitt's concept of the decision is thus in parallel to Kant's definition of aesthetics. Peter Bürger, on the other hand, argues that Schmitt's sovereign is equivalent to Kant's transcendental subject. Victoria Kahn summarizes the view that Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is akin to the Kantian aesthetic, 'which resists the categories of the understanding', and that 'the sovereign who freely decides is the political equivalent of the Kantian genius who gives rules to himself'.<sup>260</sup> All these readings argue that Schmitt and Kant's ideas about art and authority are analogous.

Miguel Vatter, instead, opposes Schmitt and Kant, stating that 'Schmitt's principle of representation stands as the antipode of Kant's republican principle of representation'.<sup>261</sup> Schmitt's concept of aesthetics is the counterpoint to Kant's, because he wishes to situate the work of art in its historical moment. Along these lines, Miriam Leonard notes that for Schmitt, drama, 'through the important limiting role of the audience, grounds the literary production in concrete historical situations'.<sup>262</sup> Moreover, on the question of universal humanity in politics, Seyla Benhabib argues that Schmitt, unlike Kant, 'doubts there can ever be such a condition of legality among nations, based on the authority of a "neutral"

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<sup>258</sup> See Duncan Kelly, 'Carl Schmitt's Political Theory of Representation', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 65.1 (2004), 113–34; Sarah Pourciau, 'Bodily Negation: Carl Schmitt on the Meaning of Meaning', *MLN*, 120.5 (2005), 1060–90.

<sup>259</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 35–183.

<sup>260</sup> Victoria Kahn, 'Hamlet or Hecuba: Carl Schmitt's Decision', *Representations*, 83.1 (2003), 67–96 (p. 69). For a response to Kahn, see Philip A. Michelbach and Andrew Poe, 'New authority: Hamlet's politics with (and against) Carl Schmitt', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 20.3 (2016), 247–65.

<sup>261</sup> Miguel Vatter, 'The Idea of Public Reason and the Reason of State: Schmitt and Rawls on the Political', *Political Theory*, 36.2 (2008), 239–71 (p. 252).

<sup>262</sup> Miriam Leonard, 'Carl Schmitt: Tragedy and the Intrusion of History', in *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity*, ed. by Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 194–211 (p. 203).



judge'.<sup>263</sup> It remains striking how Schmitt's understanding of aesthetics is able to mirror, confront and recapitulate Kantian ideals, which traverse law, politics and art.

Schmitt's anxiety about empty spaces, as a symptom of his anxiety about aesthetics, is reproduced throughout his work and has its origins in his legal critique. According to William E. Scheuerman, Schmitt's criticisms of the rule of law led him to formulate and endorse 'a National Socialist alternative to liberal jurisprudence',<sup>264</sup> which acknowledges the problem of indeterminacy, the philosophical view that legal questions lack single right answers. His legal scepticism and 'dire portrayal of the political universe' prompted his understanding that emergencies were unavoidable, irrepressible and ubiquitous, because they recognise and exploit the gaps within law.<sup>265</sup> Schmitt also draws on the semantics of space to illustrate his critique of Hobbes' symbol of the Leviathan, arguing that the Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, 'noticed the barely visible crack in [Hobbes'] theoretical justification of the sovereign state'.<sup>266</sup> By revealing this crack, Spinoza expanded the possibilities of the symbol and rendered inadequate its effective meaning. The Leviathan myth thereby lost its power. Throughout his writings, Schmitt interrogates the slippery relationship between pure, immediate images and the dangerous plurality of meanings such images can provoke. These concerns about representation form a central component of his engagement with aesthetics.

In *Land and Sea*, Schmitt describes the human conception of empty space as one that requires an unambiguous symbolic tethering, not unlike Hobbes' Leviathan, before it was gradually uprooted from its foundations. Without such an image, Schmitt contends that humans are consumed by their fear of the vacuum:

Previously, humans feared emptiness; they had the so-called *horror vacui*. Now they forget their fear and are not at all worried by the fact that they and their world exist in a vacuum. [...] But attempt just once to really conceive for yourself a really empty space! Not only a space emptied of air but rather a space wholly empty of even the most sublime and refined matter! Attempt just once in your imagination to really distinguish space and matter, to separate both from each other and think to yourself the one without the other! You can just as well think the

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<sup>263</sup> Seyla Benhabib, 'Carl Schmitt's Critique of Kant: Sovereignty and International Law', *Political Theory*, 40.6 (2012), 688–713 (p. 699).

<sup>264</sup> William E. Scheuerman, *The End of Law: Carl Schmitt in the Twenty-First Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), p. 2.

<sup>265</sup> Scheuerman, p. 289.

<sup>266</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan*, p. 57.

absolute Nothing. [...] [T]his was perhaps only the graspable shudder before the Nothing and before the emptiness of death, before a nihilistic conception and before Nihilism itself.<sup>267</sup>

Schmitt wishes to explicitly address this problem of ‘Nothing’, and what ‘Nothing’ gives rise to, because there is little more frightening to him than a world occupied by endless regulatory systems and indifferent branches of technology. Such a world has deceptive claims to be meaningful, because, for him, it ignores the truth of the vacuum, which transforms into human society through the authoritative representation of a pure image. If the Leviathan were less strange and contested, it could have solved the problem of authority. In Schmitt’s contemporary moment, its failure allowed for the dominance of impersonal political systems and mechanical forms of production. In its place, Schmitt offers his own conception of nothingness: the groundless decision on the exception.

Empty space is also a crucial concept in Schmitt’s discussions of aesthetics. In *Hamlet or Hecuba*, Schmitt suggests that the potency of the historical situation transforms the pure play of theatre into what he terms as tragedy, the fusion of reality and fiction in the context of a public dramatic spectacle.<sup>268</sup> This understanding illustrates the spatial and temporal intersections central to his work. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s acute critique of Schmitt, who reads *Hamlet* ‘like a *roman à clef*’, inverts Schmitt’s belief that the time erupts within art, arguing instead that the play ‘leaves an indefinite space around its real theme’ and that because of its ‘open indeterminacy, myth is able to produce constant new invention from within itself’.<sup>269</sup> This statement underlines a fair appraisal of Schmitt: that he was a poor reader of literary texts whose refusal to recognise the productive ambiguity of art skewed his understanding of the relationship between politics and aesthetics, and of the difference between mere images and transcendent myth. As Kahn puts it, Schmitt shows an ‘insensitivity to literary form’ and a ‘blindness to the aesthetic dimension’.<sup>270</sup> This framing is why it is so curious to see Schmitt in conversation with literary authors, and why it is so important to correctly deploy him in literary studies.

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<sup>267</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation*, trans. by Samuel Garret Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2015), pp. 56–57.

<sup>268</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*, trans. by David Pan and Jennifer Rust (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2009).

<sup>269</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 498–500.

<sup>270</sup> Kahn, p. 69.

### 1.3.5 Schmitt in literary studies

These discussions on the relationship of aesthetics and representation to Schmitt's thought form the basis of this thesis' engagement with literary modernism. To provide one example: Schmitt's preoccupation with the space of images invokes the modernist poet, Wallace Stevens, whose apparently direct appeal to image and intellect has made him a popular figure within the discipline of law and literature.<sup>271</sup> Stevens' ambiguous and indeterminate poetics do not necessarily lend themselves to obvious legal judgements. In fact, his search for meaning is often predicated on how the space from which meaning derives can easily dissolve. This argument does not prevent scholars from using excerpts of his poems, such as "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", for suggestive, though oblique, framing techniques to understand Schmitt's thought.<sup>272</sup> Stevens' work is more challenging and discomforting than this type of deployment insinuates. As Kateb argues, in Stevens' "Of Mere Being", 'there is something rather than nothing; [...] any given thing, present here or there, now or then, is accidental, contingent, precarious, mutable, always amenable to different viewings and interpretations, uneternal, and perishable'.<sup>273</sup> The characterization of Stevens as a poet of pure images, and the more wide-ranging assertion provided by Kateb, appeal to scholars of Schmitt, which invites a wider discussion of his work and the concerns of literary modernism.

Yet Schmitt has yet to be satisfyingly confronted by literary critics. Hal Foster argues that to deal with him as a thinker, 'we need to think about the extremity of our condition, historically, politically, socio-economically, and to find an aesthetic that's adequate to it—and not an aesthetic that is compensatory'.<sup>274</sup> This statement is emblematic of the anxiety that surrounds Schmitt in the humanities. By employing his thought as cultural critique, scholars risk framing valorised art objects within a reactionary and fascist politics. To avoid this, they seek to conflate Schmitt's critique of liberalism with a critique of aesthetic autonomy. His relationship to aesthetics is less clear-cut, tidy and comforting. To discuss

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<sup>271</sup> See Thomas C. Grey, *The Wallace Stevens Case: Law and the Practice of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>272</sup> See Simon Critchley, 'The Philosophical Significance of a Poem (On Wallace Stevens)', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 96 (1996), 269–91 (p. 269); Simon Critchley, 'On Alain Badiou', in *The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, ed. by Heidrun Friese (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), pp. 91–111; Rasch, p. 1.

<sup>273</sup> Kateb, p. 33.

<sup>274</sup> Ben Davis, 'I Drank the Apocalyptic Kool-Aid': Art Historian Hal Foster on Why He Has Developed an Unromantic View of the Avant-Garde', *artnet*, 26 March 2018, <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/hal-foster-1251083>> [accessed 21 May 2020].

matters of politics, philosophy and law requires decisive and complex interventions from aesthetics, art and literature.

Claims about the sovereignty of the modernist author or artist are central to these discussions.<sup>275</sup> Is an act of creation commensurate to an act of decision? Is an artistic rejoinder towards cultural conformity akin to a suspension of normal laws?<sup>276</sup> Schmitt's appeal to seriousness and political existentialism, which grounds his theory of sovereignty, encourages the tragicomic retort found within the credo of modernism: that the artistically realizable human condition is undercut by both the fallibility of perception and the complex powers of literature. To bolster the conception of modernism, Eugene Lunn gives a useful, matter-of-fact list of sensibilities: 1) 'Aesthetic Self-Consciousness or Self-Reflexiveness'; 2) 'Simultaneity, Juxtaposition, or "Montage"'; 3) 'Paradox, Ambiguity, and Uncertainty'; and 4) "'Dehumanization" and the Demise of the Integrated Individual Subject or Personality'.<sup>277</sup> These creative criteria, taken together, illustrate a literary mode of confusion and multitude, an excessive articulation of details, which are channeled into narrative techniques of stream-of-consciousness and free indirect discourse. As it is conventionally told, and as Lunn's categories emphasize, innovations in modernist prose destabilized the omniscience of third-person narration, while movements in modernist art complicated the authority of perceptive Realism. Because the sovereign author has a disruptive attitude towards content, form and style, his or her work no longer necessarily claims to hold emancipatory or empathetic value. These developments confront Schmitt's anxiety about the aesthetic domain because modernism's tendency to critique and undermine itself reaffirms its importance to intellectual life and risks displacing the ultimate political domain.

The innovations, momentums and destabilizations wrung by modernism paradoxically draw attention to the scaffolding that sustains the realms of literature and art. By acknowledging his or her innate failures, the modernist author and artist provides a deceptive, trickier opponent than that of the romantic poet, whose desire for intellectual

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<sup>275</sup> See Frederick R. Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist, 1885–1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1988); Christophe Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>276</sup> See Paul W. Khan, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 123–52.

<sup>277</sup> Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 34–37.

primacy is never hidden, and, who as a result, provides a clearer antithesis for Schmitt's political sovereign.<sup>278</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley's characterization of romantic poets as 'the unacknowledged legislators of the World' clarifies Schmitt's concern.<sup>279</sup> Citing Nietzsche, Lord Byron and Charles Baudelaire among its most pernicious forebears, Schmitt summarizes 'the romantic treatment of the universe' as one concerned with:

The instant, the dreaded second, [which] is also transformed into a point. The present is nothing other than the punctual boundary between past and future. [...] A circle can be wrapped around it as the center. It can also be the point at which the tangent of infinity is contiguous with the circle of the finite. It is also, however, the point of departure for a line into the infinite that can extend in any direction. Thus every event is transformed into a fantastic and dreamlike ambiguity, and every object can become anything. [...] Instead of mystical forces, the emanations [from individuals] are geometric lines.

Schmitt, in his broad-brush polemical disdain, conflates the individual egoism of the romantic poet with the egalitarian geometry of the modernist artist; he acknowledges, though, that it is 'not the geometric line, but rather the arabesque that is romantic'.<sup>280</sup> This distinction heeds the idea that modernisms, more than romanticisms, were self-critical, self-reflexive and acutely aware of literary forms and artistic traditions. Yeats ironized the romantic claim to legislative capacity, noting that poets 'have no gift to set a statesman right'.<sup>281</sup> Modernists thus pose different, difficult questions about the nature of aesthetics that haunt Schmitt throughout his work. Critically reading his theory of sovereignty both with and against developments of modernism illuminates his writings on representation, liberal democracy, the political, myth, symbol, humanity, and *nomos*.

The decision, according to Schmitt, 'emanates from nothingness' and 'contains a moment of indifference from the perspective of content, because [it] is not traceable in the last detail to its premises and because the circumstance that requires a decision remains an independently determining moment'.<sup>282</sup> He privileges decision above that of indecision, exposing what looks like an essential desire for form over content. This act of privileging

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<sup>278</sup> For a reading of Schmitt against the major English Romantic poets, including William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, see Kir Kuiken, *Imagined Sovereignities: Towards a New Political Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

<sup>279</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *The Major Works: Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 674–701 (p. 701).

<sup>280</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, pp. 20, 76, 74.

<sup>281</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'On being asked for a War Poem', in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 130.

<sup>282</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 32, 30.

is a defining component of literary modernism. Gopal Balakrishnan concludes that Schmitt's writings:

[...] contain a number of sharp, composite images of an era characterized by the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. They are attempts to capture the experience of the end of several overlapping eras in European history at an explosive convergence of turning points [...] during] a seemingly irreversible devaluation of the dominant political traditions of the belle époque: conservatism, liberalism and moderate socialism.

This summary illustrates the scholarly desire to place Schmitt's politics in his literary, political and historical contexts. Modernisms, in far less obvious ways than Balakrishnan suggests, sought to redress the poverty of meaning engendered by technological, anticipatory political liberalism. Through close inspection of key works, this thesis intends to assess whether Schmitt's writings are, as Balakrishnan states, 'modernist texts *par excellence*'.<sup>283</sup> Can the belief in political providence undergird the uncertainties of both modernist formal experimentation and Schmitt's 'radical conceptualization' of sovereignty?<sup>284</sup> Does Schmitt's idea of the unanticipated decision preclude the possibility of political consequences? Do modernist artists, authors and philosophers feel they have the permission to repeatedly fail without the guarantee of social renewal? Such questions interrogate the tension between order and disorder common to these systems of thought and expression.

Many works of modernist literature anticipate a late, symbolically crumbling but institutionally resilient global imperialism. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) famously depicts the brooding melancholy, cataclysmic shocks and subsequent confusions that destabilized European understandings of sovereignty and post-national orders. Lauren Benton, who exemplifies the contemporary law and literature approach to sovereignty, notes how the novella imagines and reformulates 'the wilderness [which] threatened to lure men into the usurpation of sovereign authority, [and] into delusions of kingliness that might have borne some superficial similarity to [Colonel] Kurtz's interior empire'. Benton states that Conrad 'worried about dark places upriver where nature ruled'. In his depiction of the Congo, 'the big trees were kings'.<sup>285</sup> Uncertain spaces of looming nature form key

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<sup>283</sup> Balakrishnan, p. 268.

<sup>284</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 46.

<sup>285</sup> Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 42. See also Pericles Lewis, who does not cite Schmitt in his chapter-length discussion of Conrad in *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 97–125.

modernist tropes of sovereign anxiety. Nonetheless, Benton alludes to modernist literature in her discussion of sovereignty without fully realising its unique potential for explaining the nature of sovereign authority. Schmitt's theory of sovereignty echoes the modernist tendency to use ill-defined symbols for a radically changing order. Conrad shows the forces of nature as tantalizing and deceptive, able to encourage phantasmal forms of sovereignty; in doing so, they preclude the genuine, visible decision. Suggestive of Schmitt, *Lord Jim* (1900) features disciplinary regimes apparently defined by racialized conceptions of sovereignty, while *Nostramo* (1904) contains a republic purportedly founded on the state of emergency.<sup>286</sup>

Conrad's fiction is broadly elusive, foreboding and anticipatory. In his short story 'The Secret Sharer' (1910), central to his collection *Twixt Land and Sea* (1912), he malforms the timeworn symbols of the severed head and the festering cadaver, reproducing sovereign anxieties about decapitation and decay.<sup>287</sup> In the darkness, the unnamed ship captain recalls first misidentifying his *doppelgänger*, the stowaway Leggatt, as a headless corpse, before placing himself onto the figure whose 'shadowy dark head', like his, 'seemed to nod imperceptibly'. He remembers facing his abyssal 'reflection in the depths of a sombre and immense mirror'.<sup>288</sup> The deception of the sovereign exists through his nominal memories: his melancholy sense of aloneness, his failed authority and consequent disorientation, his anticipatory fear of violent displacement, and his complicated desire for doubling.

Opposed to Schmitt's clear delineation of land and sea, Conrad's suggestion of betwixt and between represents sovereignty as a contested space, which can be dubiously reconstructed as one of unambiguous decision. Daniel R. Schwarz notes that the captain, through his relationship to Leggatt, 'discovered within himself the *ability to act* decisively that he had lacked'.<sup>289</sup> The sometimes vivid, sometimes hazy reflective monologue

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<sup>286</sup> Andrea Rehn, 'White Rajas, Native Princes and Savage Pirates: Lord Jim and the Cult of White Sovereignty', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17.3 (2012), 287–308; David Adams, *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 168–71.

<sup>287</sup> For discussions on the relationship of the severed head to ideas of sovereignty, see Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (London: Cornell University Press, 2005); Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, trans. by Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Frances Larson, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* (London: Granta Publications, 2014). For a discussion of modernist corpses beyond Conrad, see Erin E. Edwards, *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

<sup>288</sup> Joseph Conrad, 'The Secret Sharer: An Episode from the Coast', in *Twixt Land and Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 79–124 (pp. 86–88).

<sup>289</sup> Daniel R. Schwarz, *Conrad: The Later Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), p. 2.

functions as an immediate present, which places the reader amid the character's psychic and moral development. By steering the ship away from land and its associated dangers, the captain obtains the appearance of resolve and command. By looking backwards but presenting forwards, Conrad identifies the captain's figurative movement into the assured and respected sovereign. Conrad's work is so suggestive of many of the themes that concern Schmitt, and he provides one example of a modernist approach to the question of sovereignty. But to expose the relationship between modernist aesthetics and Schmitt, this thesis uses three detailed case studies of literary modernism that correspond with Schmitt's thought across the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 1.4 Chapter Outline

The previous section asserts that the problems of sovereignty appear transformed in Anglophone literary modernisms. For Schmitt, political decisions entail melancholy, arise out of political failure, and cannot be anticipated through politics alone. The question is how these components appear in modernist representations of sovereignty. To pursue this question, I draw from an existing conceptual framework. Meierhenrich and Simons identify symbol, tragedy, and the katechon as Schmitt's three key cultural concepts. The authors note that for Schmitt, '[p]oetry was attractive [...] as a medium that was capable of revealing the elementary function of language'.<sup>290</sup> Schmitt also placed value on 'genuine tragedy' that 'has a special and extraordinary quality, a kind of surplus value that no play, however perfect, can attain because a play, unless it misunderstands itself, does not even want to attain it'.<sup>291</sup> They further identify the katechon as crucial to Schmitt's diagnosis of 'a deteriorating world order or a modernist aestheticism that must be brought to a halt'.<sup>292</sup> Moreover, by approaching sovereignty as a series of tropes, it is possible to move away from modernist comparisons to Schmitt that only invoke political programmes and

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<sup>290</sup> Meierhenrich and Simons, p. 43.

<sup>291</sup> Meierhenrich and Simons, p. 39.

<sup>292</sup> Meierhenrich and Simons, p. 48.



ideologies, and away from methods that try to translate the exception into a workable literary concept.<sup>293</sup>

I have sequenced the chapters to show the movements between different literary attitudes to the sovereign power of literature. The first chapter highlights how the title character in *Orlando* perseveres to write literature, namely a poem called “The Oak Tree”, through a process of solitary brooding, idle window gazing and time spent ruminating under the oak, rooted in the grounds of the ancestral estate. The playful and subversive ironizing of symbols centres on Orlando, whose durable personality spans centuries and outlasts passing, successive occupants of sovereign rule. In the second chapter, the mocking tone of *Orlando* finds a more severe counterpart in *The Wild Palms*, which also ironizes the fabled autonomy of literature while cautioning against its deleterious consequences. The third chapter pursues these consequences to their endpoint in its analysis of “Ping”, which tracks a paralyzed attitude to the possibilities of literature through its depiction of a suffocated and not-quite human subject.

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) has long been understood as a study of melancholy; in particular, finding connections between melancholy and creativity has grounded many thoughtful critical readings of the book. For Sara Crangle, Woolf ‘parodies the reverence attached to melancholy’ but extolls Orlando’s ‘capacity to turn melancholy into creative vision’.<sup>294</sup> My first chapter expands upon this insight. Focusing on the intertextual gestures and her ironic use of symbols, I argue that Woolf articulates the power of melancholy through references to narratives of political sovereignty, and specifically through references to Shakespeare. Woolf shows us melancholy monarchs and poets jostling for the position of ultimate authority, indicating a broader competition for supremacy between the domains of politics and literature in intellectual life as a defining feature of the evolving nation state. This reading is framed and amplified by Schmitt’s reading of *Hamlet*, his work on land and sea-based political cultures—and his focus on England in this work—as well as his epoch-defining images of sovereignty. This reading allows me to understand how both Schmitt and Woolf present sovereignty as an intractable paradox. The sovereign

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<sup>293</sup> See Jess Boersma, ‘What About Schmitt? Translating Carl Schmitt’s Theory of Sovereignty as Literary Concept’, *Discourse*, 27.2/3 (2005), 215–27; Jon Kertzer, ‘Flouting and Scouting: Rules and Heroic Exceptions’, *Law & Literature*, 27.3 (2015), 417–40.

<sup>294</sup> Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter, and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 89–91.

defines the time but is crucially defined by a sense of being outside of time: and this statement captures the defining feature of sovereign melancholy.

William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* (1939) also explores the relationship between the autonomy of the artist and a feeling of melancholy. The work itself is often characterized as a literary failure. The two apparently unconnected stories that comprise the novel have generated significant editorial and critical confusion. Sean O'Faolain, for instance, writes that the text is 'unlikely, incredible, badly-constructed and indeed rather silly'.<sup>295</sup> This type of judgment does not attend to the serious concern with failure that joins the two stories. Faulkner's own statements about failure therefore offer one way to bring together the apparently disparate stories of Charlotte and Harry in "Wild Palms" and the Tall Convict in "Old Man". But in this chapter, I suggest that *The Wild Palms* is more than a self-reflexive exercise about the failure of fictions and the self-deceptions of the artist. In the novel, Faulkner shows suffering as amounting to a kind of grace: in Charlotte's uncompromising death, Harry's determined guilt, and the Tall Convict's voluntary return to prison. The psychology of Faulkner's characters provides an illustration and critique of the romantic attitude, which invites a fresh understanding of Schmitt, whose work anxiously and insistently outlines the perils of romanticization on social life. Schmitt instead advocates 'the complex of opposites' to explain certain types of representative power, which in turn opens an antinomic reading of the novel's much-contested formal qualities. This chapter therefore seeks to deromanticize the common critical view of Faulkner's failure and present how, in *The Wild Palms*, he retools failure as a contingent measure for use against external orders of sovereign authority. Drawing upon their shared reverence for Herman Melville, I also read Faulkner to highlight the extent to which Schmitt's theses on sovereignty are grounded in an anxiety about failure and a concern with ideas of negation and opposition.

Samuel Beckett's "Ping" (1967) exposes the absurdity of anticipation. The densely worded prose short portrays a declining figure that absorbs basic sensory data in a harsh, white environment. The suffocating syntactic and lexical form provokes fundamental questions about the value of literature, and the forlorn desire of the reader to follow conventional narrative progression. Famously, much of the contemporary discussion of its

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<sup>295</sup> Sean O'Faolain, 'Hate, Greed, Lust and Doom', *London Review of Books*, 16 April 1981, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v03/n07/sean-o-faolain/hate-greed-lust-and-doom>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

relative merits appeared in *Encounter*, the journal where it first appeared in English. Ihab Hassan had predicted its existence through the lens of anti-literature; David Lodge responded to it as a referential work of art.<sup>296</sup> My view is that a political reading of the text negotiates these contrasting critical perspectives. The figure exists under some external order—under some locus of authority—and the reader’s attempt to understand its plight is akin to their inability to understand their own under modern forms of sovereignty. Beckett elides humanity, as an operative political category, and of the human, as a philosophical account of human nature. Schmitt’s rejection of humanity as a political category is widely documented and discussed, but his consideration of the human is less noted. In particular, his early satire, “The Buribunks”, has not been much read or analysed as a commentary on human nature. Comparing “The Buribunks” and “Ping” allows me to find new angles on the relationship between the human and humanity as ideas bearing upon sovereignty in Schmitt and in Beckett. The process of anticipation debilitates the Buribunks, which offers a striking counterpart to the process of anticipation that debilitates the “Ping” figure. Following “The Buribunks”, Schmitt pursues abstractions, symbols and figures of political anticipation throughout his work, citing at various points Melville’s “Benito Cereno”, the katechon and Epimetheus. Beckett, on the other hand, indicates the comic pointlessness of such a search, rendering the anticipatory “Ping” figure as an incomprehensible and overwhelming set of sense impressions, whose negative meaning can be—via my comparative reading—identified as a rejection of Schmitt’s self-regarding search for anticipatory symbolism and post-war redemption.

Schmitt’s membership of the Nazi Party is integral to his reception in Anglophone scholarship. Suggestions he distanced himself from Catholicism because of pressures within Nazi Germany amount to little more than guesswork.<sup>297</sup> This perspective encourages and negates serious critical engagement. This thesis must negotiate the recuperation of Schmitt as a critic of liberalism and the troubling, sustaining legacy of Schmitt as a symbol of reactionary thought that purports to be intellectual but is integral to fascism. He has become an improper name within the academy, his suffix form ‘Schmittian’ an unimpeachable tool for characterizing the current political era. Critically

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<sup>296</sup> See Ihab Hassan, ‘The Literature of Silence: From Henry Miller to Beckett & Burroughs’, *Encounter*, January 1967, 74–82, <<https://www.unz.com/print/Encounter-1967jan-00074/>> [accessed 27 May 2021]; and David Lodge, ‘Some Ping Understood’, *Encounter*, February 1968, 85–89, <<https://www.unz.com/print/Encounter-1968feb-00085/>> [accessed 27 May 2021].

<sup>297</sup> Timothy Nunan, ‘Translator’s Introduction’, in *Writings on War*, by Carl Schmitt (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 9.

reading modernist literature has allowed me—I hope—to cut through and past these versions of Schmitt, whom I have read mostly in translation.

In this process, I have consulted Tracy Strong's invaluable critical introductions, which unpick Schmitt's dicey deployment of his conceptual terms, which are regularly conflated in English translations of his works from the German. Schmitt's original formula of sovereignty reads: *Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet*. The verb-preposition *entscheiden über* suggests that the sovereign decides both on and what to do about the exception. Schmitt moves between terms including *Ausnahmezustand*, *Ausnahmefall*, *Notstand*, and *Notfall*, all of which have independent semantic connotations. As Strong notes, '[r]etaining the seeming ambiguity is central to grasping what Schmitt wants to say'.<sup>298</sup> I hope to have acknowledged these linguistic uncertainties throughout the thesis, and by doing so, minimized misappropriations of Schmitt's thought and writing.

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<sup>298</sup> Strong, 'Foreword', in *Political Theology*, pp. xi–xiv.



## CHAPTER TWO

## Enduring Oaks: The Melancholy of Epochal Time in *Orlando*

The time is out of joint: O cursèd spite, | That ever I was born to set it right!

—HAMLET<sup>1</sup>

There is an oak tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shattered.

—WILHELM MEISTER<sup>2</sup>

The mournfully dressed, melancholy prince has become in the end a primal image of the human condition. The symbolic force of this figure has produced an authentic myth that finds its justification in a process of inexhaustible transformation.

—CARL SCHMITT<sup>3</sup>

For it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act. Each of us is more Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, than he is John Smith of the Corn Exchange.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1 Introduction

Goethe wryly associates Hamlet's forlorn situational burden with the symbolic swelling of the oak tree, whose 'roots expand',<sup>5</sup> characterizing the prince as a natural melancholic, unable to decide. Hamlet's melancholic personality is emblematic of the failed sovereign disposition. Failed sovereignty is, after all, a form of sovereignty, and Hamlet is a common

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<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet*, I .5. 190–91.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, trans. by Thomas Carlyle (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1917), Book IV, Chapter XIII (para. 17).

<sup>3</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*, trans. by David Pan and Jennifer Rust (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography', in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 95–100 (p. 100).

<sup>5</sup> Goethe, Book IV, Chapter XIII (para. 17).

subject for Goethe, Schmitt, and Woolf, all of whom draw different conclusions about the sovereign disposition from this failure. Illustrating its peculiar relationship to authority, the oak is also the dominant, contested image in Woolf's extended satire on melancholy and sovereignty, *Orlando* (1928). In the novel, the enduring oak symbolizes sovereignty in two ways: it is the autonomous realm of literature, emblemized by Orlando's long-gestating poem, and it is a form of political and legal entitlement, providing a metonymic image for Orlando's ancestral home and allegiance to England, if not the English state. The works of Shakespeare, specifically, draw on both facets of the oak image, supplying a wealth of strategies and symbols that help to negotiate representations of sovereignty in the text.

In this chapter, I argue that Woolf is compelled playfully and subversively by four aspects of sovereignty that also compel Schmitt, historically and philosophically: the sovereign as epoch-defining; the sovereign as comprising a dual constitution; the sovereign as symbol; and the sovereign as melancholy, out of time. This disambiguation leads me to the broader insight that for Schmitt and Woolf, sovereignty presents an intractable paradox: the sovereign defines the time but is crucially defined by a sense of being outside of time, which can be understood as a type of sovereign melancholy that bears on the relationship between temporality and sovereignty. In *Political Theology* (1922), Schmitt found the mythic status of sovereignty in the moment of decision; 34 years later, in his essay, *Hamlet or Hecuba* (1956), he finds it in indecision. Whereas the supposed uniformity of Hobbes' Leviathan once functioned as a semi-effective political myth for the body politic, Shakespeare's Hamlet functions as an authentic literary myth for the autonomous modern subject, born out of the character's capacity for 'inexhaustible transformation'.<sup>6</sup> The relationship between symbols and epochs in Schmitt's thought, exemplified by his discussion of Hamlet, interrogates the role of sovereign images in *Orlando*, which this chapter seeks to illustrate.

Hamlet's melancholy also stems from his surplus of knowledge. By valorizing Hamlet's 'personality' as a source of knowledge,<sup>7</sup> Woolf echoes Goethe's reading in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96), in which Wilhelm characterizes Hamlet as politically weak, unserious and inadequate by virtue of his pure conscience and erratic intellect, malformed by emotional guilt, vengeful desire and a hereditary duty to Denmark.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Woolf, 'The New Biography', p. 100.

This mixture of personal qualities and political circumstances merge to form a complicated picture of Hamlet's motivation. Literary in tastes and intricate in character, Hamlet is known for his dubious cunning, apparent madness and existential grief instigated by the political situation. Neither immoral nor virtuous but wretched and vacillating, Hamlet is provoked by the agency of time to act. His father's murder has precipitated things, because it is the unanticipated event to which he does not know how to respond, producing the cavalcade of successive events in which he cannot successfully intervene. The moment forces his claims on the sovereign, a role unsuited to his melancholic disposition.

Goethe also emphasizes the view that for Hamlet, '[t]he time is out of joint',<sup>8</sup> a metaphor with temporal, spatial and corporeal resonances. Claudius is a product of this same distorted moment, the political struggle for authority and the conflicting interests of the court. In Hamlet's act of vengeance against him, which doubles as an attempt of sovereign reclamation, Hamlet fails to become king. Only in the knowledge of his own imminent death does Hamlet make what could be understood as the sovereign decision, which the distorted moment, now levelling out, requires. His final orders call the conquering son of Fortinbras to take the throne. The revelation of his sovereignty lasts, in time mediated by the play (a separate temporality afforded to the viewer), a matter of minutes. Hamlet's destruction has been wrought by his difficult present, the short period between Claudius murdering his father and marrying Gertrude. Combined with the multiplicity of sensible, personal, psychological and circumstantial factors, which manifest themselves as 'duties holy to him',<sup>9</sup> the distorted moment causes Hamlet's hesitation upon his sovereign right.

Goethe's temporal reading of Hamlet has been influential. Paul Oppenheimer cites Goethe's dim grappling with the 'jumbings of epochs' and the 'modern anachronistic age' as a prelude to literary modernist experimentation. Read like this, modernism confronts 'the jarring intrusions of the present into the past, and of the past [...] into the present'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Hamlet*, I. 5. 190–91.

<sup>9</sup> Goethe, Book IV, Chapter XIII (para. 18).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Oppenheimer, 'Goethe and Modernism: The Dream of Anachronism in Goethe's "Roman Elegies"', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 6.1 (1998), 81–100 (pp. 89, 81). Goethe's temporal wrangling less impressed T. S. Eliot, who assessed him as 'that most dangerous type of critic, the critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order, but which through some weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead'. See T. S. Eliot, 'Hamlet and His Problems', *The Athenaeum*, 26 September 1919, 940–41.



Schmitt disdained the ‘Goethe mask’ of romantic self-development,<sup>11</sup> worn by bourgeois intellectuals of the period, but he had a complicated relationship with the author. Conscious of his significance to the German intellectual tradition, Schmitt cited Goethe regularly throughout his life.<sup>12</sup> In his essay on *Hamlet*, Schmitt approvingly quotes Ferdinand Freiligrath’s 1844 lament, which extolls Shakespeare’s greater cultural suffusion: ‘Germany is Hamlet’, not Goethe.<sup>13</sup> Schmitt was sceptical, too, of T. S. Eliot’s interpretation of the play, which ‘pay[s] too much attention to the subjectivity of the poet and too little to the objective situation from which the drama emerges’.<sup>14</sup> For him, both Goethe and Eliot erroneously privilege the imagination of aesthetic sensibility over the reality of the concrete situation.

Dimitris Vardoulakis suggests that Goethe’s interpretation focuses on Hamlet’s ‘misplacement’, which reveals the ‘discontinuity between the personal and the political’, shown through Hamlet’s ‘psychological constitution [that] precludes him from participating in politics’.<sup>15</sup> In other words, Hamlet may have fine, complex personal qualities but these do not translate into the decisive political realm. He fails to embody a heroic figure, bring immediate vengeance upon Claudius and seize the throne. According to Vardoulakis, this failure is rooted in Hamlet’s ‘melancholia and chronic indecision’, but Goethe misses the ‘essential political import’ of melancholy:

Hamlet’s inability to act against Claudius, his pervasive indecisiveness, challenges the psychology of the human that is [...] an intrinsic part of absolute sovereignty. Goethe fails to recognize that the misplacement of Hamlet—the placing of a tree in a jar—contains a radical political message.<sup>16</sup>

Characterized like this, Hamlet’s melancholy destabilizes ‘the hierarchies of sovereign power observed by Hobbes’; the drama becomes ‘a critique of the exposition of absolutism in the Leviathan’.<sup>17</sup> The personal and political realms collapse into one another, undermining Hobbes’ concept of absolute sovereignty. For Vardoulakis, the composite

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<sup>11</sup> Carl Schmitt, quoted in Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Schmitt cites Goethe in “The Buribunks” (1918), *Political Romanticism* (1919), *The Leviathan* (1938), *Land and Sea* (1940), *Ex Captivitate Salus* (1950), *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950), *Hamlet or Hecuba* (1956), and *Political Theology II* (1970).

<sup>13</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other: Toward the Dejustification of Violence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 102–04.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

image of the ‘tree in a jar’ is right and represents Hamlet, but Goethe does not understand its full implication, which is not that Hamlet is an unsuitable sovereign, but that Hamlet’s quality as a sovereign is defined by his act of misplacement.<sup>18</sup> Goethe, while able to locate Hamlet’s qualities through overt appeals to symbolism, overlooks the character’s capacity for political decision.

In *Hamlet or Hecuba*, Schmitt acknowledges Goethe’s influence on contemporary *Hamlet* scholarship. Schmitt’s project attempts to classify Hamlet’s critical assessment in epochal terms, starting with the *Sturm und Drang* [storm and stress] poets, including Goethe, who mythologized the title character as:

[...] a Werther who is destroyed by the burden of an all-too-heavy task. The nineteenth century made Hamlet into a passive anti-type of the active Faust and, at the same time, into a combination of genius and insanity. In the first third of our own twentieth century, the founder of the psychoanalytic school, Sigmund Freud, put forth the assertion that every neurotic is either an Oedipus or a Hamlet, depending on whether his neurosis is fixated on the father or the mother.<sup>19</sup>

It is typical of Schmitt’s literary criticism to define intellectual epochs by reference to changing critical approaches to symbol. The present, though, is not simply bracketed but a response to the instability of the previous epoch. So, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hamlet is considered inadequate by the likes of Goethe; at the next critical juncture, in response to Goethe, Hamlet is deemed to be passive and indecisive; in the next, he is a totem of colourful madness. In Schmitt’s methodology, the truths of the time, demonstrated in the modern period by Freud’s analytical prevalence, are not immutable; they are metaphysical attempts to define the era. Whether ‘every neurotic’ is a stand-in for the modern human subject is hard to answer, but Schmitt’s dry allusion to ‘either an Oedipus or a Hamlet’ indicates his own disposition to consider splits and duality.<sup>20</sup> For Schmitt, critical approaches to *Hamlet* reveal the concerns of whole intellectual epochs, but his engagement with these critical approaches also leads him to more definitional ideas about modern sovereignty.

Responding to Walter Benjamin’s analysis in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), published in the same year as *Orlando*, Schmitt concludes that Hamlet’s combined condition of mourning and melancholy contributes to the character’s critical adaptability

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

and longevity. Hamlet's potency as a 'primal image' of 'symbolic force' is down to his un-sovereign properties, including his tendency to self-reflection and chronic indecision.<sup>21</sup> For Schmitt, this ascension to literary myth through personality is key to the play's authenticity as a modern tragedy. Hamlet is not an ancient hero but a definitively modern character, because his actions are dictated by melancholy. This characterization is why Hamlet is so interesting to think about in the writings of Schmitt and Woolf, both of whom recognize the melancholy personality, for better or worse, as essential to modern depictions of sovereignty.

## 2.2 Epochs and Shocks

Schmitt's epochal framing poses Hamlet as a fictional analogue of the defeated Leviathan. The modern is postmodern, in the sense that Hobbes offers the Leviathan to describe modern sovereignty as more than the personality of the monarch, as, rather, an artificial person. Schmitt's reading of *Hamlet* intervenes in this analysis because it suggests that the Leviathan in fact fails to replace the personality of the sovereign. Instead, this once-upon-a-time sovereign always returns, not as decision and order, but as indecision and melancholy, which suggests a new type of political and literary myth. This chapter thus proposes that Woolf's *Orlando* explores the characterization of sovereignty as indecisive and melancholic in response to this new type of myth, which incorporates the budding powers of the literary author to destabilize the once unequivocal authority of political sovereigns. These connotations show why the oak tree in the novel, composed of two elements, is so suggestive: it is a totem of literary craft and imagination and a natural, physical emblem of territorial ownership. One aspect is the expression of personality; the other aspect is the power derived from political and legal rights.

The emphasis on personality, and its intimate connection to literary authority, is given its fullest expression in English modernist literature through Woolf. Bringing Schmitt's thoughts on *Hamlet* and his broader thesis on sovereignty into conversation with *Orlando* reveals Woolf's understanding of an intricate, competitive and transformative relationship between the literary and the political. Woolf thus offers an indirect challenge to Schmitt,

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

who mostly considers literary art based on its potential service to politics. This chapter considers how *Orlando*, a century-spanning ‘fun [...] fantasy’,<sup>22</sup> intervenes in philosophical discussions of history and sovereignty. Whereas Schmitt thinks Hamlet is authentic insofar as his personality endlessly transforms across epochs of critical discussion, Woolf thinks Hamlet is real insofar as he emblemizes the human personality in the modern period. I assess the value of several interlocutors who illuminate this intellectual distinction.

Angeliki Spiropoulou argues that Benjamin’s famous reference to the “Angel of History” explicates the character of Orlando, who acts as a ‘depository of historical memory, of past knowledge and experiences which she carries through into the present’.<sup>23</sup> Orlando undoubtedly takes on the burden of her traumatic longevity, but it is even more illuminating to consider how Schmitt’s epochal understanding of collective history, opposed to Benjamin’s notional process of private experiential accumulation, clarifies the world-historical sensibilities of Woolf’s novel. Reading *Orlando* via Benjamin, as Spiropoulou does, produces some interesting work; reading the text via Schmitt is even more provocative and revealing. In language reminiscent of Schmitt, Woolf describes how Orlando:

[...] had inclined herself naturally to the Elizabethan spirit, to the Restoration spirit, to the spirit of the eighteenth century, and had in consequence scarcely been aware of the change from one age to the other. But the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to her in the extreme, and thus it took her and broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands as she had never been before (120).<sup>24</sup>

Orlando’s iconic change from a man into woman, which takes place in Constantinople midway through the novel, dominates readings of the text.<sup>25</sup> Orlando’s personality variously adapts to and rejects the external conditions of a cultural epoch so fully that it even stretches to a change in biological sex. Orlando’s agency and autonomy are repeatedly wrung from ‘the spirit of the age’ (116, 120, 121, 130, 131), defined by a wrangling between her shifting legal status, as per her sex, and her internal motivation.

<sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, 7 November 1928 (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2003), p. 134.

<sup>23</sup> Angeliki Spiropoulou, ‘Historical Fictions, Fictional Fashions and Time: *Orlando* as the “Angel of History”’, in *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 75–95 (p. 90).

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2003). I hereafter use in-text citations.

<sup>25</sup> See Karen Kaivola, ‘Revisiting Woolf’s Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 18.2 (1999), 235–61.

This reading is exemplified by her apparent legal and psychological defeat in the Victorian period, which encourages her to comply with inhibiting social norms and provisions, most notably the institution of marriage, to obtain rights over her property and restore her sense of selfhood (112–29). Orlando’s personality, mutable in line with the age and as wrung from the age, is distinguished from her character, which is unbendable across the ages.

For Woolf, Orlando’s mortal longevity is partly the result of her calcified temperament: ‘the lines of her character were fixed, and to bend them the wrong way was intolerable’ (120). In this sense, the bending of her sex is an easier proposition than the bending of her character. Her relative adherence to successive epochs depends on her complicated relationship with the epoch’s concomitant authority, because ‘the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age [...] batters down anyone who tries to make a stand against it’ (120). Orlando’s personality, or ‘fictitious life’,<sup>26</sup> should be thus understood less as a site of mass internal contradictions, and more as a characterization of durability, which adapts to different external conditions during and across the centuries. This temporal adaptation is a matter of personality and action, which brings into relief conceptions of epochal time and of the sovereign disposition.

For Woolf and Schmitt, Henri Bergson is a negative influence.<sup>27</sup> Bergson’s temporal philosophy is often deployed to explicate Woolf’s narrative style, but her emphasis on delineated epochs to organize history in *Orlando*, complicates this comparative point. The movements between chapters in the novel, from daylight to darkness, indicate drastic and abrupt changes in the cultural period and human condition (111–112). Woolf likewise mocks the recurring trends of the era to satirize the present moment, ridiculing exaggerated conceptions of modernity in the final chapter. That Schmitt evokes the metaphysical image puts him at odds with Bergson, whose irrationalist conception of history, which deposes *Raum* [space] for duration, made him appear to Schmitt as ‘the epitome of all things lifeless and mechanical’.<sup>28</sup> Schmitt preferred to apply an epochal framing to politics, arguing that ‘[m]etaphysics is the most intensive and the clearest expression of an epoch’, within which citizens can ‘postulate the sovereign as a personal unit and primeval

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<sup>26</sup> Woolf, ‘The New Biography’, p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> See J.W. Graham, ‘A Negative Note on Bergson and Virginia Woolf’, *Essays in Criticism*, 6.1 (1956), 70–74.

<sup>28</sup> Schmitt, ‘*Raum* and Rome’, pp. 14–15.

creator'.<sup>29</sup> Hobbes' Leviathan, for instance, produced 'an immense person' who entered 'point-blank straight into mythology'.<sup>30</sup> Schmitt argues that in the modern period, the machine is the dominant image, which effaces the personalistic sensibility of the sovereign.<sup>31</sup> This reading potentially opens the space for literary myth to assume the vacant position left by the departed personalistic sovereign.

In *Orlando*, the reigns of monarchs roughly correspond to each of the six chapters, illustrated when Orlando tries to purchase some linen and dreamily considers the state of the royal bed: 'Many kings and queens had slept there—Elizabeth; James; Charles; George; Victoria; Edward; no wonder the sheet had a hole in it' (149). The bathetic undertow here mocks sovereign authority and is key to the narrative focus on the degeneration of the monarchy's relevance. In a lengthy scene near the beginning, Elizabeth I effectively bestows Orlando with immortality (9–11); near the end, Edward VII is casually mentioned in passing, 'stepping out of his neat brougham to go and visit a certain lady opposite' (146). The King's lustful misadventure functions as a witty aside and a vague allusion to past authority, now diluted and diminished. Suggestive of Schmitt's warning about the machine, which in the modern period 'now runs by itself',<sup>32</sup> monarchical authority has been superseded by mechanical modernity.

In the present, the 'shrinkage', brightness, and sartorial conformity constitute a sensory 'explosion' of social transformation that suggests to Orlando:

[...] something definite and distinct about the age, which reminded her of the eighteenth century, except that there was a distraction, a desperation—as she was thinking this, the immensely long tunnel in which she seemed to have been travelling for hundreds of years widened; the light poured in (147).

Even at a point where Woolf deploys the modernist narrative playbook of rapid sense impressions and interrupted consciousness, the passage relies on comparison with a previous epoch. The homogenous dress sense of the people recapitulates the narrator's observation, rooted in the past century, that '[c]lothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath' (92). The reminder of 'the eighteenth century' precipitates the temporal compression that launches Orlando into 'the present moment' (147). Orlando's experience

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<sup>29</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 46–48.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

of epochal time is the repeated ‘shock’ (147; 151) of modernity, emphasizing the durability of her personality against the passing, successive occupants of sovereign rule.

Woolf juggles bathetic and pathetic incidents throughout the novel. The reader is invited to laugh at and feel sympathy for Orlando. This literary pursuit of affective simultaneity generates a doubling, trebling, polyvalent quality of melancholy, which, although traditionally understood as the preserve of private dwelling, can be also discovered in the act of public performance. Woolf shows the biography of Orlando to be an impossible document of truth because of the immutable multiplicity of human beings. Near the end of the novel, as Orlando considers the instances of loss in her life, she remembers, too, its timeless foundations: ‘Trees, she said. (Here another self came in.) I love trees (she was passing a clump) growing there a thousand years’ (154). While the narrator makes the link between flowering trees and the blossoms of fame, the wild goose appears before immediately flying away. This is one of the novel’s final symbols, supplying droll signage for unachieved and unachievable literary excellence. This scene amuses the reader, who is aware of Orlando’s writerly shortcomings, but it is an event shrouded in melancholy, because ‘the whole of her [is] darkened and settled’:

So she was now darkened, stilled, and become [...] rightly or wrongly, a single self, a real self. And she fell silent. For it is probable that when people talk aloud, the selves (of which there may be more than two thousand) are conscious of dissection, and are trying to communicate, but when communication is established they fall silent (155).

The imagistic melding of darkness and silence, and the culmination of unified representation, drawn from multitude, yields the existential maxim. Orlando’s hidden and solitary self, the sum of erstwhile remnants of multiple lifetimes and multiple selves, goes quiet; the self-possessed sovereign individual is the result, both resolute and silent. Orlando’s apparent triumph of personality has negotiated the shocks of modernity, which produces an aesthetic resonance that unpacks the relationship between the political and literary effects in the novel.

At a formal level, literary shocks disrupt the very nature and possibilities of the novel itself. At a dramatic level, literary shocks disrupt the plot. Both types of literary shock, in this way, are analogous to political shocks. In *Orlando*, Woolf uses a playful tone to explore the potency and ramifications of both types of shock. Whereas political shocks must provide revelatory clarity to meet Schmitt’s criteria of sovereignty, because they are

otherwise pale and insidious imitations,<sup>33</sup> Woolf's deliberately repetitious narrative—'so insidious is the repetition of any scene' (150)—mocks this distinction. Among apparently radical changes in body, space and time in the novel, the system of nominal authority—a series of incumbent constitutional monarchs—remains essentially the same. Woolf's novel blurs the distinction between inauthentic and authentic political shocks through the multiplicity of melancholy, and in this way poses a challenge to Schmitt's thesis on the sovereign exception.

This challenge is consolidated in Woolf's deployment of the dual symbol of the oak, which spans and endures epochs, elevating it beyond mere symbol, and, on Schmitt's terms, to the level of myth. But, for Woolf, this use of the oak symbol is a necessarily ironic enterprise, which reduces narrative shocks and mythic images to casual adornments of something greater, that of the central literary personality in the novel, Orlando. Orlando's suggested immortality thus functions as a wry rejoinder to the temporally bound, decisive monarch. The indulgence in solitude and in the literary personality advocates for artistic autonomy against political supremacy. The culmination of Orlando's personality in the novel's present, 1928, is the result of a set of world-historical assumptions about the nature of the person and of the sovereign. The specific assumption that the melancholy personality, and multiple personalities, dilute the representative authority of sovereignty is most at stake in Woolf's telling.

### 2.3 Truth and Biography

Woolf shares Schmitt's diagnosis of modern sovereignty but chooses to revel in its contradictions rather than abhor them. Both writers produce epochal perceptions of the sovereign; both criticize formulaic and repetitious understandings of sovereignty; both scrutinize the personal and political condition of melancholy, famously embodied by Hamlet, as a competitive alternative to sovereign authority. But importantly, Woolf is ironic about these modern developments at the point where Schmitt is exasperated. Because at its centre, *Orlando* is a celebration of 'the sacred subject of poetry' (41), as well as a criticism of the institution of literature, a 'farce' (46), which through its play on

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<sup>33</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 3.



the sacredness of the literary effectively challenges the supposedly supreme domain of politics.

Woolf, more directly than Schmitt, follows Goethe's analysis of *Hamlet*, indicating that the melancholic disposition, rather than the relative capacity for decision, illuminates the sovereign. For Woolf, *Hamlet* shows that the modern understanding of reality is derived from the multitudinous constitution of the sovereign individual rather than the monolithic embodiment of sovereign authority. *Orlando* exemplifies Woolf's ironizing of sovereignty and of *Hamlet* by indulging and subverting classic depictions of melancholy; by giving us a title character who exceeds the centuries-spanning successive rule of kings and queens; and, centrally, by playing subversively with symbols of sovereignty. Woolf's reflexive symbolism centres on the oak, which is variously illustrative of the creative impulse, bestial nature, the human body and the processes of 'brevity and diuturnity' (48). But as stated at the start of this chapter, I argue that the enduring oak symbolizes both literary independence and the extent of political and legal ownership in the novel. This tension between literature and politics is drawn out further by Woolf's complicating of the biographical form.

Literature, like sovereignty, is a mixture of reality and fiction. Both are complex mechanisms for truth-telling. Woolf wrote several essays on the nature of biography, which function as tempered manifestoes for a redesigned genre and a new critical approach. Woolf writes in "The New Biography" (1927) that the character of Hamlet is the ideal figurative emblem for documenting the 'increasingly real [...] fictitious life'<sup>34</sup> of the modern human subject. Hamlet is the origin story for the contemporary biography of private complexity. Multifaceted Hamlet is compared to an unadorned archetype or cipher, which Woolf designates as 'John Smith of the Corn Exchange'.<sup>35</sup> By this logic, the modern biographer should depict reality as derived from its subject's personality rather than through his or her actions. Truth, in this rendering, is more likely found among fraught individual subjectivities than in action, items, names and dates. As Woolf summarizes it, this mode of biography should complement the 'granite-like solidity' of fact with the 'rainbow-like intangibility' of imagination.<sup>36</sup> Woolf identifies the formal and sensual motivation for this search in *Orlando* as '[a] desire for distance, for music, for shadow, for

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<sup>34</sup> Woolf, 'The New Biography', p. 100.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Woolf, 'The New Biography', p. 95.

space, [which] takes hold of us' (103). All of which seems to offer the infatuated biographer and its visual analogue, the documentarian, plenty of leverage to 'be truthful; but fantastic'.<sup>37</sup>

The movement between biographical text and documentary vision can be obfuscating, but it is worth considering how Woolf's thoughts on biography and her writing of *Orlando* develop concurrently with advances in the moving image.<sup>38</sup> This pursuit is worthwhile because Woolf's mocking and reflexive address of the literary as a critique of the political seems so bound up with questions of broader artistic representation. Although Woolf was ambivalent about the ability of cinema to adapt literature, she acknowledged how silent film could offer a fresh artistic perspective. In her 1926 article, "The Cinema", Woolf generously speculated on the overall possibilities of the medium; in her diaries, she sedulously noted her viewing habits.<sup>39</sup> These included *Man of Aran* (1934), Robert J. Flaherty's partly fabricated study of inhabitants living in relative isolation off the Western coast of Ireland.<sup>40</sup> Given Woolf's depiction of the human subject both in its dizzying multitude and as a necessary product of modernity, Flaherty's nostalgic hankering for a primitivist, premodern existence may have supplied her with some form of jarring counterpoint. Not that they were without similarities in approach. Both drew on ostensibly sympathetic colonial imaginaries to distinguish between Western civilization and what they reverentially deemed to be far-flung and exotic social orders.

Mostly for laughs, Woolf provides a sketchily drawn Constantinople in Chapter Three of *Orlando* (58–74). Woolf renders imperialism in *Orlando* as a risible, scornful exercise but detaches it from its exploitative structural moorings, comically othering the indigenous population in Constantinople. Sally Potter's film adaptation, *Orlando* (1992), brings this problem into relief through an explicit address of imperialism. After a sceptical welcome in Constantinople (or Khiva, as Potter designates it), Tilda Swinton's Orlando tells the local leader, The Khan (Lothaire Bluteau)—who worries 'the English make a habit of collecting [*pause*] countries'—that 'we have no designs on your sovereignty. No, none at

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<sup>37</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, vol. 3, 1925–1930*, ed. by Anne Oliver Bell (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 157.

<sup>38</sup> See Andrew Shail, "'She looks just like one of we-all': British cinema culture and the origins of Woolf's *Orlando*", *Critical Quarterly*, 48.2 (2006), 45–76.

<sup>39</sup> See Virginia Woolf, 'The Cinema', in *Selected Essays*, pp. 172–76.

<sup>40</sup> Caroline Marie, 'Virginia Woolf's Cinegraphic Poetics in *The Years*', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 52.3 (2015), 510–38 (p. 520).

all'.<sup>41</sup> Potter, who wrote and directed the film, characterizes The Khan, who does not appear in Woolf's novel, as Orlando's immediate political equal and eventually noble collaborator. Their initial meeting takes place in a darkened mosque, the pair surrounded by translucent arras and concrete pillars. Potter is careful to present a balanced exchange through a typical use of shot/reverse shot, knowingly emphasizing Orlando's attempt to convince his foreign counterpart that their countries have mutual enemies. This act of ambassadorial misdirection reveals Orlando's accidental diplomatic naivety, which is also designed to reveal the cloaked rapaciousness of England's ostensibly civilized efforts at international relations.



Figure 8: *Orlando*, dir. by Sally Potter (Sony Pictures Classics, 1992)

Potter's version of *Orlando* is particularly alert to this trajectory from symbolism towards legal brute fact. It is thus a critique of Woolf's *Orlando*, not just an adaptation. Given Woolf's opinion on the possibilities of cinema, which she worried could be embroiled in uninspired transpositions of text to screen, Potter's reworking of her novel rather proves the opposite, showing that the medium can productively transform the sense and value of written source material. For all Woolf's subversive play between ideas of biography and the potential of fiction as an intervention into the political domain, Potter's

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<sup>41</sup> *Orlando*, dir. by Sally Potter (Sony Pictures Classics, 1992).

film reveals her limited attention to the imperialist valences of the symbolism of sovereignty. After all, Woolf's century-spanning fantasy, *Orlando*, is only, in some ways, 'A Biography'. Her polemical insistence on genre emphasizes the essential deception of art forms that seek to conflate empirical modes of knowledge. Different forms of media draw out the links between Woolf and Schmitt, and also invites discussion of literary genres, particularly the relationship between tragedy and biography, which Schmitt illuminates through his work on *Hamlet*.

## 2.4 Tragedy and Biography

Schmitt identifies two mysteries in *Hamlet*, which he labels 'the taboo of the queen' and 'the figure of the avenger'.<sup>42</sup> Schmitt argued that the most famous drama of all could not be understood as fiction alone because these conundrums required the viewer to turn to further external contexts. Schmitt could not accept even a literary ambivalence around questions of guilt and innocence, which bear upon the friend/enemy distinction that energizes political life. As it is discussed in the play's opening act, Gertrude has married Claudius, who murdered her ex-husband, Hamlet's father and namesake. How much did she know about the plan? It is one of the play's dark areas, which, for Schmitt, only makes sense by acknowledging the historical intrusion that rumbled during its first performances: Mary, Queen of Scots, deceased mother to the reigning King James I, had married her husband's murderer. For Schmitt, the power of the tragedy was in its suggestion of reality and not, for example, in Freud's prominent Oedipal interpretation.<sup>43</sup> The taboo, in this case, collapses the distinction between fact and fiction, remaking the drama as an authentic tragedy, which bears on discussions of Woolf's treatment of biography.

Schmitt writes about the 'Hamletization' of the avenger to capture 'the hero of the revenge play [who ...] suffers an internal distortion of his character and motivation'. Hamlet, though not a 'copy' of James I, brings to light the circumstances of his 1603 accession to the English throne. The Earl of Essex, meanwhile, 'with his melancholy, [...] was the model for Hamlet'.<sup>44</sup> These developments transform Hamlet from the traditional

<sup>42</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, pp. 11–31.

<sup>43</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 24.

mythic hero into a necessarily tragic and modern one, ‘into a reflective, self-conscious melancholic’.<sup>45</sup> The taboo of the queen is one of several ‘[s]tructurally determining, genuine intrusions’, which acquire greater potency than techniques that merely mirror or allude to contemporary events.<sup>46</sup> For Schmitt, the dramatic and necessarily tragic effects conjured by Hamlet’s psychological distortions are products of true historical circumstances. Embracing the play as a tragedy effaces its melancholy aspects; otherwise, it is a ‘melancholy play for melancholy spectators and a deeply moving *Trauerspiel*’.<sup>47</sup> As Schmitt summarizes it, ‘[m]any things are sad and melancholy. But tragedy originates only from a given circumstance that exists for all concerned—an incontrovertible reality for the author, the actors, and the audience’.<sup>48</sup> What defines tragedy, for Schmitt, is the shared assumptions between the crowd and performer—a common sense—which is maintained from the author to viewer, as mediated by the actors.

As stated, Schmitt’s reassertion of *Hamlet* as tragedy responds to Benjamin’s analysis.<sup>49</sup> For Benjamin, *Hamlet* should not be judged by ‘the absurd concept of tragedy’, because Hamlet’s death ‘is in its drastic externality characteristic of the *Trauerspiel* [and ...] tragedy ends with a decision—however uncertain this may be’.<sup>50</sup> Hamlet’s indecision means that ‘the trial of the creature whose charge against death [...] is only partially dealt with and is adjourned at the end of the *Trauerspiel*’.<sup>51</sup> While Schmitt accepts Benjamin’s premises only to invert them, both agree that ‘the exceptional instance of the play within the play proves the rule of the representation of sovereignty in the drama at large’, which in turn ‘provides a key to grasping the nature of European sovereignty’.<sup>52</sup> Schmitt ‘distinguish[es] the exceptional case of Shakespeare’s England from the artificial order of the continental state’ by emphasizing in the former the close linkage of the theatre and the real events of the court surrounding it.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, pp. 21–25.

<sup>47</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 40.

<sup>48</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> Carl Schmitt, ‘On the Barbaric Character of Shakespearean Drama: A Response to Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*’, in *Hamlet or Hecuba*, pp. 59–68.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 136–37.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Jennifer R. Rust and Julia Reinhard Lupton, ‘Introduction: Schmitt and Shakespeare’, in *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. xxix.

<sup>53</sup> Rust and Lupton, p. xxx.

The social etiquette of the royal court also forms an essential part of Orlando's England, particularly before he journeys to Constantinople, but the tragic intrusions of real life in the novel tend to stem from 'the iron countenance of law' (82) rather than through pomp and ceremony, gossip and hierarchy. On Orlando's return to England, her legal status has dramatically shifted. She is legally dead, a woman married with three sons who wish to claim her inheritance:

Thus it was in a highly ambiguous condition, uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity, that she posted down to her country seat, where, pending the legal judgment, she had the Law's permission to reside in a state of incognito or incognita, as the case might turn out to be (82).

The big house is a fictional stand-in for Vita Sackville-West's ancestral home at Knole, which represents the biographical underpinning for Orlando's fraught legal entitlement. English common law, including that of intestacy,<sup>54</sup> thus plays a significant role in the novel, providing the concrete conditions by which the effects of tragedy and biography intertwine. On the novel's publication in 1928, the reader was aware of the inferior legal status of women in England, which produces much of the dramatic force and consequent ironies in the text, because Orlando, after all, 'was herself legally unknown' (87).

Woolf's real-life oriented works have been described as 'precariously balanced', 'puzzling and unfortunate', part of a broader trend in 'autobiografiction', 'reconfigure[d] life narrative', and, simply, 'life-writing'.<sup>55</sup> Her preoccupation with biographical forms is partly credited to her father, Leslie Stephen, the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, whose intellectual and paternal influence on Woolf has been widely discussed.<sup>56</sup> These circumstances partly explain the complexity of her relationship with Shakespeare as both the author of plays and a kind of antagonistic biographical

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<sup>54</sup> See Caroline Webb, 'Listing to the Right: Authority and Inheritance in *Orlando* and *Ulysses*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 40.2 (1994), 190–204; Jamie L. McDaniel, 'The Power of Renewable Resources: *Orlando*'s Tactical Engagement with the Law of Intestacy', *Gender & History*, 24.3 (2012), 718–34.

<sup>55</sup> See Elena Gualtieri, 'The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 29.4 (2000), 349–61 (p. 349); Ray Monk, 'This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality, and Character', *Philosophy and Literature*, 31.1 (2007), 1–40 (p. 1); Max Saunders, 'Woolf, Bloomsbury, the "New Biography", and the New Auto/biografiction', in *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 438–83 (p. 438); John Paul Riquelme, 'Modernist Transformations of Life Narrative: From Wilde and Woolf to Bechdel and Rushdie', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 59.3 (2013), 461–79 (p. 468); Elizabeth Abel, 'Spaces of Time: Virginia Woolf's Life-Writing', in *Modernism and Autobiography*, ed. by Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 55–66 (p. 55).

<sup>56</sup> See Katherine C. Hill, 'Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution', *PMLA*, 96.3 (1981), 351–62; A.H. Bond, 'Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: a father's contribution to psychosis and genius', *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 14.4 (1986), 507–24.

counterpoint within *Orlando*. According to Robert Sawyer, he ‘becomes an actual character’ that guides the novel.<sup>57</sup> I think Shakespeare is a rather more mythical presence, a totem through which Orlando idolizes the powers of literature. Symbols in Shakespeare’s tragedies, particularly the handkerchief from *Othello*, consolidate tropes of racial and sexual exclusion in the novel.<sup>58</sup> For Sasha, the ‘Muscovite’, Orlando dares, in the vein of Othello’s tragic jealousy, to ‘catch the spotted kerchief which she had let drop’, as ‘the lover [who] hastens to anticipate’ (19). Such symbolic turns propose tragedy as a literary genre that interacts and combines deceptively with biography.

Woolf’s turn to the symbols from Shakespeare’s tragedies works against the biographer’s concentration on the ‘facts’ of race and sex. This point appears less didactic and more playful through Woolf’s references to the comedies, and particularly to the cross-dressing Rosalind and Orlando in the pastoral *As You Like It* (1603), which can be read through the authors’ respective gender politics. As Christine Froula, notes, ‘where Shakespeare, a man, creates Rosalind, a woman, who becomes Ganymede, a man of sorts who yet resembles a woman, Woolf, a woman, appropriates Shakespeare’s Orlando and recreates him as a man who becomes a woman who sometimes dresses as a man and yet gives birth to a baby’.<sup>59</sup> The character of Orlando in the play is naïve and lacking education. Rosalind, disguised as a man, tutors him. Rosalind’s actions combine with the name of her prospective lover, Orlando, to create Woolf’s sovereign subject. References to *As You Like It* also amplify Woolf’s concerns with the symbols of sovereignty. Pursuing these intertextual references foregrounds the connections between Woolf’s complex play on tragedy and biography. This approach also helps to understand the texture of her critique of sovereignty more fully.

In *As You Like It*, the oak is an image of decline and dilapidation. The devious Oliver imagines his brother, Orlando, encountering a beggar: ‘Under an old oak, whose boughs were mossed with age, | And high top bald with dry antiquity’.<sup>60</sup> Despite Oliver’s

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Sawyer, ‘Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Modernist Shakespeare’, *South Atlantic Review*, 74.2 (2009), 1–19 (p. 8). See also Beth C. Schwartz, ‘Thinking Back Through our Mothers: Virginia Woolf Reads Shakespeare’, *ELH*, 58.3 (1991), 721–46.

<sup>58</sup> See Celia R. Caputi Daileader, ‘Othello’s Sister: Racial Hermaphroditism and Appropriation in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*’, *Studies in the Novel*, 45.1 (2013), 56–79.

<sup>59</sup> Christine Froula, ‘Virginia Woolf as Shakespeare’s Sister: Chapters in a Woman Writer’s Autobiography’, in *Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare: On the Responses of Dickinson, Woolf, Rich, H.D., George Eliot, and Others* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 123–42 (pp. 129–30).

<sup>60</sup> *As You Like It*, V. 2. 131–32.

presentation of the oak as a site of deception, the Forest of Arden provides resolution and justice, because it is where Orlando saves Oliver from the lioness and restores their fraternal bond. After this reconciliation, Frederick returns the dukedom to his brother, the legitimate sovereign. In *Orlando*, the oak is instead a site of polymathic psychological development: ‘Long before [Orlando] had done thinking about Love (the oak tree had put forth its leaves and shaken them to the round a dozen times in the process) Ambition would jostle it off the field, to be replaced by Friendship or Literature’ (48). The reconciliation of various attitudes and behaviours, which defines Woolf’s Orlando, more closely mirrors that of the do-nothing philosopher, Jaques, in *As You Like It*, who himself refers to the multiplicity of melancholy:

I have neither the scholar’s melancholy, which is emulation; nor the musician’s, which is fantastical; nor the courtier’s, which is proud; nor the soldier’s which is ambitious; nor the lawyer’s, which is politic; nor the lady’s, which is nice; nor the lover’s, which is all these: but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, which, by often rumination, wraps me in a most humorous sadness.<sup>61</sup>

Jaques’ melancholy derives from his multiple experiences on his itinerant travels. Jaques compares himself to an array of archetypal figures, all of whom embody different characterizations of melancholy. As previously discussed, a similar emphasis on multiplicity defines melancholy, formally and dramatically, in *Orlando*.

Orlando’s authorial attempts at fiction begin at an early age, with ‘Aethelbert: A Tragedy in Five Acts’, a homage to Shakespearean tragedies, and with juvenile poetry in which ‘Vice, Crime, Misery were the personages of his drama; there were Kings and Queens of impossible territories; horrid plots confounded them; noble sentiments suffused them’ (6). Orlando, as a young boy, is drawn to tragedies about sovereigns.<sup>62</sup> The tenets of tragic and poetic forms—the dramatic arc fostered over several acts; the visibly capitalized Themes; the focus on heroic figures; the necessary external machinations and internal fatal flaws—allow Woolf to satirically elide biography and tragedy. Throughout, Orlando’s various lives are described with passive detachment by an overbearing reflexive narrator. In directly invoking the tropes of tragedy and binding them into her play upon biography, Woolf depletes sovereign authority and privileges the endurance of the multiple-sexed

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<sup>61</sup> *As You Like It*, IV. 1. 10–20.

<sup>62</sup> Orlando is illustrated as a young boy in the text’s first photographic portrait, on which plenty has been written. See Helen Wussow, ‘Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 40.1 (1994), 1–14.



sovereign self. Much less forcefully and carefully, she attempts the same recuperation of the racially multiple sovereign self. This distinction is itself interrogated by her broader concern with the valences of symbol and myth, beyond the oak and the symbolic connections to Shakespeare. I explore this view more fully below where I address how Woolf uses Shakespeare's characters, who are often exasperated by too much language and too many symbols, to articulate a broader critique of sovereignty.

## 2.5 Symbols and Myth

In a scene where Orlando resolves to write, she claims that 'poetry can adulterate and destroy more surely than lust or gunpowder' and that the poet holds 'the highest office of all' (85). The poet is depicted as above that of the politician, the leader and the deity, because '[h]is words reach where others fall short. A silly song of Shakespeare's has done more for the poor and the wicked than all the preachers and philanthropists in the world' (85). The poet, then, has a sovereign-like power. However, Orlando proceeds to shut a book once owned by Mary Queen of Scots, a deflating moment that indicates Woolf's portrayal of the poet-as-sovereign is one of slippery mockery, and not quite the truth that her own work is going to reveal. For Schmitt, Mary Queens of Scots is the primary source of tragedy in *Hamlet*; for Woolf, on the hand, the reference to the fateful queen is a fleeting gesture towards general inconsequence. Minor objects and heirlooms pass through history, indicative not of an integral tragic status but of some comic biographical addenda. When Orlando positions herself at the top of the intellectual hierarchy, she does so with a wink, providing a knowing contrast to the seriousness of competing epistemic regimes. The play upon literary self-aggrandizement is one of Woolf's main strategies for comparing epistemologies of sovereignty in the novel.

In this vein, the six clearly delineated chapters of *Orlando* evoke epochs, within which metaphysical and poetic concepts are all too conspicuously exclaimed: 'Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No!' (65), while the 'Ladies of Purity, Chastity and Modesty' visit Orlando to declare, accompanied with trumpet blasts, 'THE TRUTH!' (67). Woolf pokes and prods great men of letters in the ironic preface (3–4) and in Orlando's underwhelming meeting with

illustrious poets, such as Addison, Dryden, and Pope (82; 97). Deceit and cowardice are humorously common in these encounters, exemplified by the literary critic, Nicholas Greene, who betrays Orlando's trust and hospitality by writing a public satire of her overly refined behaviour and creative delusions. Here, Woolf appears to mock overwrought literary cultures. I would argue, however, that her more specific target is the overwrought symbolism of sovereign proclamations within literary and political cultures.

In *Orlando*, and indicated by her thoughts on early cinema, Woolf is acutely aware of the role of images and symbols as deceptive avatars of sovereign rule and legal precedent. The novel introduces the subject of symbols immediately, bringing into focus the use of literary signage in the production of biographical narrative. The story begins with Orlando in 'the act of slicing at the head of a Moor' within 'the attic rooms of the gigantic house of the lord who had slain him' (5). The shadow of Othello alludes to the Moor's decapitation in a past life. Invoking colonial ironies, Orlando's forefathers 'had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders', and the long deceased 'enemy grinned at him through shrunk, black lips triumphantly' (5). The racialized head speaks to an imperial tradition of pillage and murder, an assertion of violence and power that subsequently becomes the sovereignty of colonial rule. The narrator suggests that:

[...] those who like symbols, and have a turn for the deciphering of them, might observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face, as he threw the window open, was lit solely by the sun itself (5–6).

Woolf coaxes forward both Orlando's body and the sun that reveals the body. In this scene, the promise of hope, matched to the stark light, inverts the darkness of the hanging moor. The light shines on the potential of multiple personalities, which consolidates the point about the representation of Orlando in contrast to the undeviating figure of the Moor. Woolf mocks the reader's interpretation of symbols, and in doing so, refers to their endemic effects. One way in which the narrative trajectory of the novel can be summarized is that Orlando moves from the ancestral world of natural violence, emblemized by the rope and the sword, onto the modern world of literature, emblemized by the pen and the inkpot. The slicing at the Moor's head prefaces Orlando's idling observation at the window, the beginning of his literary expression, a transformation Woolf shows through caustic irony, indicating the ever-present violence within civilized orders.

Woolf makes clear the importance of the imagery onto which general readers latch: ‘Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in [Orlando’s] mind’ (17). Orlando, who immediately falls in love with Sasha, ‘hastily note[s] that all his images at this time were simple in the extreme to match his senses and were mostly taken from things he had liked the taste of as a boy’ (17). This line prefaces Orlando’s explicit reckoning with melancholy, in which:

[...] the sight of the old woman hobbling over the ice might be the cause of it, or nothing; and would fling himself face downwards on the ice and look into the frozen waters and think of death. For the philosopher is right who says that nothing thicker than a knife’s blade separates happiness from melancholy (21).

‘All ends in death’, Orlando repeats twice over, to the reader’s amusement (21). His courting of Sasha flounders on a literary and linguistic struggle: ‘Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another landscape, and another tongue. English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed a speech for Sasha’ (22). Woolf even satirizes and indulges her previous works considering these misarticulations, noting that ‘time went by’ (23), referencing the famous section, “Time Passes”, from *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Woolf’s reckoning with the inadequacy of too many words and too much speech draws on Hamlet’s proclamation of ‘words, words, words’,<sup>63</sup> which expresses the meaningless and melancholy that comes from excessive indulgence in one’s reading habits. After all, Hamlet’s failure is as much about inarticulation as it is inaction: ‘Yet I, | A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak | Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, | And can say nothing’.<sup>64</sup>

However, at other points in the narrative, the mockery of too much literary language gives way to a more serious contemplation of the relationship between too much literary language and melancholy. Orlando watches a performance of *Othello*, which the narrator describes as an ‘astonishing, sinuous melody of words [that] stirred Orlando like music’ (26). The play-within-a-biographical-fiction induces a doubling effect on the reader. When the performance ends, the narrator remarks: ‘All had grown dark. The tears streamed down his face. Looking up into the sky there was nothing but blackness there too. Ruin and death, he thought, cover all. The life of man ends in the grave. Worms devour us’ (27). Orlando’s risible melancholy is framed by the darkness of the night that brings light upon

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<sup>63</sup> *Hamlet*, II. 2. 210.

<sup>64</sup> *Hamlet*, II. 2. 593–96.

the soul: ‘Long before midnight Orlando was in waiting. The night was of so inky a blackness that a man was on you before he could be seen’ (27). Again, the entropic relationship between darkness and brightness suggests the tension between fiction and reality that Woolf outlines in her biographical manifestoes. Woolf links her critique of too much overwrought symbolism, exemplified by her use of light and not-light, with her critique of too much language. It is striking how Woolf’s broad literary critique is akin to Schmitt’s critique of the endless chatter of liberalism, outlined in the introductory chapter.

Orlando’s invocation of darkness ironizes Claudius’ fleeing cry when he sees the performance written by Hamlet, which insinuates his guilt: ‘Give me some light—away!’<sup>65</sup> The performance of “The Mousetrap” in *Hamlet* supplies a similar aesthetic effect to the performance of *Othello* in *Orlando*: both draw out the dubious value of truth as a product of fiction. This idea is illustrated later in the novel, when the whole of London society—chatty, boozy, decadent—wants to know about Orlando’s lawsuit, but, according to the narrator:

To give a truthful account [...] is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it—the poets and the novelists—can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma—a mirage (94).

This scene draws out further comparison with Schmitt’s interpretation of “The Mousetrap” in *Hamlet*, which he describes as a *Trauerspiel* within a tragedy. *Orlando* illuminates what Schmitt cannot bear about the sheer fiction of theatre, its pretence of nothingness, because the power of an artwork should not be explained through the specific terminologies of art but be instead connected to a specific historical reality. Schmitt’s thinking on how to address the pretensions of fiction also draws out the pronounced Englishness of *Orlando*, as the following discussion on England’s state-making illustrates.

For Schmitt, the movement from terrestrial sovereignty to maritime sovereignty, driven by the English state, undercuts the image of Leviathan. This transference of representative authority inevitably begins again in the modern period. As Schmitt puts it, ‘the epoch defined by the domination of sea over land, is over. It will soon be nothing more than a historical memento, a mere episode in the grand history of the *Völker*

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<sup>65</sup> *Hamlet*, III. 3. 295.

[peoples]’.<sup>66</sup> Russell A. Berman notes how Schmitt locates ‘the fundamental tensions between land-based and sea-based cultures’, which are ‘symbolized by the existential struggle between two beasts’.<sup>67</sup> Schmitt argues that ‘near the end of the nineteenth century it was a beloved image to depict the tensions of the time between Russia and England as the battle of a bear with a whale-fish’.<sup>68</sup> Each nation, for Schmitt, according to Berman, ‘derives genealogically from a totemic animal’, the Behemoth and the Leviathan, respectively. Berman states that Schmitt emphasizes ‘the mythic repetition of the irrepressible conflict between terrestrial and maritime worlds, between the order and stability of solid earth and its chaotic, disorderly, and threateningly anarchic opposite, the sea’.<sup>69</sup> In *Orlando*, Sasha, the princess, is described as a ‘white Russian fox’ (20), which indicates Woolf’s more incongruous take on national symbolism, relative to Schmitt’s overburdening of the totemic political image.

Schmitt identifies England’s peculiar ‘insular self-understanding’ in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, through John of Gaunt’s famous utterance: ‘This other Eden, this scepter’d isle, demi-paradise’.<sup>70</sup> Schmitt had previously elaborated on England’s particular relationship to the Leviathan, which is ‘cited a few times in Shakespeare’s dramas as a powerful, enormously strong, or quick sea monster, without any symbolism pointing toward the politico-mythical’.<sup>71</sup> Schmitt argued that in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, English literature did not depict the ‘nonmythical and nondemonic’ Leviathan through ‘enigmatic symbolism’; not by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, nor in the satires of Thomas Dekker. Schmitt’s view is shaped partly by the ‘thoroughly literary-ironic sense and in the style and in the atmosphere of English wit’, which would later encourage the likes of Sanderson, Burke, and de Quincey to build upon this incipient imagery.<sup>72</sup> Trees, particularly, provide an illustrative romantic contrast to Schmitt’s argument about the representative power of the Leviathan image:

When a widespread romantic feeling began to perceive in the image of the “state” a plant, a growing tree, or even a flower, the image generated by Hobbes began to be perceived as downright grotesque. The new symbol left nothing to remind people of a “huge man” and a

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<sup>66</sup> Schmitt, ‘Sea Versus Land’, p. 24.

<sup>67</sup> Russell A. Berman, ‘Geography, Warfare, and the Critique of Liberalism in Carl Schmitt’s *Land and Sea*’, in *Land and Sea*, pp. xiii–xxix (p. xiv).

<sup>68</sup> Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, p. 11.

<sup>69</sup> Berman, p. xv.

<sup>70</sup> William Shakespeare, quoted in Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, p. 77.

<sup>71</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan*, p. 24.

<sup>72</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan*, p. 25.

god created by human reason. The leviathan assumed an inhuman or a subhuman appearance which led to a secondary question that need not be answered, namely, whether the perceived inhumanity and subhumanity represented an organism or a mechanism, an animal or an apparatus.<sup>73</sup>

In *Orlando*, the oak tree is a product of England that marks vertically English sovereignty, so it is productive to think about volume, not only territory, in discussions of sovereign images.<sup>74</sup> I have shown that Woolf's use of the oak as a conduit of both literary personality and political/legal entitlement, which is foregrounded by her interrogations of the biographical form, ideas of truth and the genre of tragedy. The value of this section has been its broader engagement with symbols in *Orlando*, illuminated by Schmitt's discussion of representative images. This discussion set up a detailed genealogy of oak, starting with its appearances in *Orlando*, examining its development as a romantic image of sovereignty in different literary traditions and throughout cultural epochs. Historical illustrations of the oak in classic literature inflect readings of its deployment in Woolf's novel, which is itself transparently concerned with genealogies of English literary culture.

## 2.6 Genealogy of the Oak

Orlando flings himself/herself to the ground in proximity of the oak throughout the novel, first viewing a great span of England and Wales from a high mound on the estate, where 'he flung himself under his favourite oak tree and felt that if he need never speak to another man or woman so long as he lived' (47). Orlando sees his country from the hilltop bearing the oak and, as Erica L. Johnson notes, while 'the topography of Orlando's identity remains constant, [...] it remains English'.<sup>75</sup> After living in Constantinople, Orlando despairs at losing her haven and respite, because she 'no longer could [...] fling herself beneath the oak tree' (121), nor 'a cloak under (as the rhyme requires) an oak' (145). Johnson argues Woolf's elemental linking of Orlando to the English soil acts as 'both a critique and reconfiguration of the concept of national identity'<sup>76</sup> Orlando's relationship

<sup>73</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>74</sup> See Stuart Elden, 'Secure the volume: Vertical geopolitics and the depth of power', *Political Geography*, (2013), 1–17, <dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.12.009>.

<sup>75</sup> Erica L. Johnson, 'Writing the Land: The Geography of National Identity in *Orlando*', in *Woolf in the Real World*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press, 2005), pp. 105–09 (pp. 105–06).

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

with the state changes when he becomes a woman, now ‘chastised and disinherited’, and must marry to retain home ownership, which ‘builds continuity between Orlando’s possession of England and English identity as a man, and her more adjacent relationship to England as a woman’.<sup>77</sup> This fusion means that ‘the geography of England is central to Orlando’s identity’,<sup>78</sup> which is integral to thinking about sovereignty on the basis of nationality, territory and sex in the novel. Geography and territory are predicates of identity because Orlando in England is treated as a vastly different figure than in Constantinople, and because her legal status is a matter of location as much as it is sex.

Orlando’s early written works are a vast repository, from which, during his youth, he plucks ‘one thick document called “Xenophila a Tragedy” or some such title, and one thin one, called simply “The Oak Tree” (this was the only monosyllabic title among the lot)’ (37). Echoing Woolf’s meditations on the work of biography, Orlando ruminates on nature and its ability to mould personalities, ‘making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite’ (37), which recalls her famous biographical maxim in “The New Biography”.<sup>79</sup> The novel’s preoccupation with literary biography brings into relief the political past of Orlando’s bloody ancestry: ‘Standing upright in the solitude of his room’, Orlando vows to upend the history of his violent ancestors and become ‘the first poet of his race’, to achieve immortality advanced from a mere ‘skull’ and ‘finger’ (39). As a self-possessed sovereign individual, Orlando wishes to outshine ‘all the glories of blood and state’ (39), replacing centuries of exercised political power with modern literary autonomy.

Orlando works on “The Oak Tree” manuscript for more than three hundred years, often in the shadow of the literal oak tree situated on the grounds of the estate. The narrator suggests equivalence between Orlando’s ‘love of solitude and books’ (40). The two are one and the same until the entrance of the literary critic, Greene, who glides in and dismantles Orlando’s developing literary ambitions. Startling Orlando, Greene declares that ‘the art of poetry was dead in England’ and that ‘the great age of literature is past’ (42), explaining the ‘faults’ of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*, which he ascribes to Shakespeare’s drinking and amour (44). These half-baked diatribes aim to impress and solicit money from Orlando, signifying a vaguely drawn history of glorious literature, of which Greene claims to be the sole inheritor. Woolf’s consideration of genealogies of

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Woolf, ‘The New Biography’, p. 100.

literature and symbol in *Orlando* heavily frame the genealogy of the novel's central oak motif. The narrative includes so much explicit, tricky intertextual referencing and meditation on the value of symbol, such that the reader queries the symbolism of the narrative itself and seeks to trace its possible precursors.

*Measure for Measure* (1604), for instance, shows Isabella equating the oak's toughness, strength, and eventual deformity with individuals who withstand true acts of sovereignty. She berates the Duke's deputy Angelo, a temporary sovereign, for sentencing her brother to death: 'Thou rather with thy sharp and sulphurous bolt | Split'st the unwedgeable and gnarled oak | Than the soft myrtle; but man, proud man, | Drest in a little brief authority'.<sup>80</sup> As represented here, the oak is a worthwhile recipient of sovereign power, relative to the soft myrtle, which is targeted by the capricious tyranny that masquerades as sovereignty.<sup>81</sup> In *Orlando*, Woolf draws upon the symbol of the oak in its association with English historical traditions and its regular deployment throughout English literature.

The oak has historically symbolized sovereignty, seducing ancient Greek and Roman poets, who were variously awed by its unembarrassed physicality, remarkable enigma and capacity for both endurance and decay. In politics, the oak symbolizes statehood, national identity and military might. In aesthetics, the oak symbolizes autonomy, dignity and existence. *Orlando* plays on both traditions, because as the epochs pass, the oak remains the marker of continuity, the anachronism of the novel's present. In the final sections of this chapter, I draw together my analysis of allusions to characters and symbols from Shakespeare; my analysis of the mockery of literary cultures and literary forms; and my comparison of literary and political symbols. The disquisition on the oak works on these ideas I have laid out, consolidating the differences and similarities of the relationship between melancholy and sovereignty in Woolf and Schmitt.

Known as the king of trees, sacred to Zeus and Jupiter, and a vessel of lightning and thunder, the oak is embedded in ancient and mythological literature. In these traditions, the oak symbolizes strength and power. In Homer's *Iliad*, oak trees delineate the city from the

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<sup>80</sup> *Measure for Measure*, II. 2. 114–17.

<sup>81</sup> For a discussion on tropes of sovereignty in the play, see Philip Lorenz, 'Reanimation: The Logic of Transfer in *Measure for Measure*', in *The Tears of Sovereignty: Perspectives of Power in Renaissance Drama* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 59–96.



zone of war, indicating safety, refuge and respite. Homer compares a forest of oaks to the battlefield itself:

As the East and South Winds fight in killer-squalls deep in a mountain valley thrashing stands of timber, oak and ash and cornel with bark stretched taut and hard and they whip their long sharp branches against each other, a deafening roar goes up, the splintered timber crashing.<sup>82</sup>

Through battling winds and fallen trees, Homer presents the setting of political violence, the intensity of killing between the Trojans and Achaeans. Homer depicts the magnitude of destruction as winds wreaking vengeance on the forest, producing an alien cacophony. In the image of the fallen oak, conflict is shown at its most extreme and political. Oaks are desiccated warriors whose roots are upended. The oak is personified and its ‘long sharp branches’ represent flailing limbs. The ‘splintered timber crashing’ forms a fundamental image of human mortality. In Homer’s work, humans are worthy of sovereign imagery on the battlefield.

Sappho presents wind and the oak as conditions of individual sovereignty: ‘Love shook my heart like wind | on a mountain punishing oak trees’.<sup>83</sup> Sappho articulates affective intensity through falling winds; the oak portrays thought and sensibility rather than flesh and body. Sappho depicts a powerful effect on her private disposition and the Sapphic tendencies of *Orlando* have been widely remarked upon.<sup>84</sup> In political and personal illustrations, the wind-ravaged oak is an avatar for sensation during an exceptional event. The assailable oak, battling against natural elements, evocatively persists in Homeric and Sapphic literature. Schmitt, too, discusses Homer to illustrate his concept of *nomos*.<sup>85</sup> Bridging Greek and Roman poetry, Schmitt notes how these poets denoted, often in metaphysical terms, the nature of the relationship between land and sea:

None of Homer’s heroes would have been ashamed to have been the son of such a daring adventurer, who tries his luck as a pirate. On the open sea, there were no limits, no boundaries, no consecrated sites, no sacred orientations, no law, and no property. Many peoples kept to the mountains, far from the coasts, and never lost the old, pious fear of the sea. In his fourth

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<sup>82</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), p. 437.

<sup>83</sup> Sappho, *Sweetbitter Love: Poems of Sappho*, trans. by Willis Barnstone (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2006), p. 77.

<sup>84</sup> See Sherron E. Knopp, “‘If I Saw You Would You Kiss Me?’: Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*”, *PMLA*, 103.1 (1988), 24–34; D.A. Boxwell, ‘(Dis)orienting Spectacle: The Politics of *Orlando*’s Sapphic’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 44.3 (1998), 306–27.

<sup>85</sup> Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, pp. 76–78.

eclogue, Virgil prophesied that in the felicitous age to come there would be no more seafaring.<sup>86</sup>

Schmitt draws on ancient literary traditions to illustrate telluric and maritime interpretations of sovereignty. Virgil's poetry contains many references to Jupiter's oak grove in Dodona. John Dryden's influential translation of the Second Georgic, for instance, makes explicit the solemn, unbreakable bond between the oak and the sovereign: 'Jove's own tree, | That holds the woods in awful sovereignty'.<sup>87</sup> Virgil presents the oak as a godly figure, which the wind and winter cannot assail, emphasizing its immortal regeneration.

Anglican cleric William Gilpin was a proponent of picturesque British landscapes and Virgil's poetry. In *Remarks on Forest Scenery and Other Woodland Views* (1791), Gilpin identifies five qualities of the oak outlined in Virgil's work: firmness, which indicates power and strength: 'we seldom see the oak [...] take a twisted form from the winds'; stout limbs, which appear to divide rather than spring from the trunk: 'to not mark the limbs is equal to painting Hercules without his muscles'; twisted branches, of which 'there is not a characteristic more peculiar to the oak'; expansive spread, which is 'like a monarch [who] takes possession of the soil'; longevity, which traces the oak from beauty to decay: 'the branches rot away, and the forlorn trunk is left alone, the tree is in his decrepitude—the last stage of life; and all beauty is gone'.<sup>88</sup> These qualities inform depictions of the oak, revealing its complicated engagement with ideas of sovereignty.

The oak of antiquity influenced English literary tradition. Desiring to emulate Virgil's *Eclogues*, Edmund Spenser wrote *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579). In the section marking February, which tells the fable of 'The Oak and the Briar', Spenser, too, focuses on the oak: 'But now the gray Moss marred his Rine, | His bared Boughs were beaten with Storms, | His Top was bald, and wasted with Worms, | His Honour decay'd, his Braunches sere'.<sup>89</sup> Spenser shows the lifetime of a tree: from might, girth, and beauty through to damage, waste, and decay. Paul E. McLane reads this story as a political allegory because the oak 'represents some powerful statesman of the period who was maligned and "cut down"'.<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth I is the sovereign who destroys the statesman at her will. Spenser

<sup>86</sup> Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, p. 43.

<sup>87</sup> Virgil, cited in Miles, p. 129.

<sup>88</sup> William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery and Other Woodland Views*, <<http://archive.org/details/remarksonforests01gilp>> [accessed 24 May 2018].

<sup>89</sup> Edmund Spenser, cited in Miles, p. 130.

<sup>90</sup> Paul E. McLane, 'Spenser's Oak and Briar', *Studies in Philology*, 52.3 (1955), 463–77 (p. 464).

depicts the Queen's absolute dominion over her subjects: 'Ah my Sovereign, Lord of Creatures all, | Thou Placer of Plants both humble and tall'. He reiterates the statesman's suffering at the hands of the Queen: 'How falls it then that this faded Oak, | Whose Body is sere, whose Branches broke, | Whose naked Arms stretch unto the Fire, | Unto such Tyranny doth aspire?'. Spenser moves onto the statesman's demise: 'And broughten this Oak to this Misery | For nought mought they quitted him from | Decay, for fiercely the good Man at him did lay'.<sup>91</sup> The oak supplies the imagery for the weathered and beaten human disposition due to the suffering wrought by the sovereign figure.

The oak is integral to the image of the monarch. In 1659, Charles II escaped the Roundheads and hid in the now-named Royal Oak. This event initiated the Restoration and the modern conception of English sovereignty. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shipbuilding using oak protected and expanded the British conception of sovereignty. Unmatched naval resources and insatiable mercantile interests are hallmarks of Britain's imperial expansion. The age of wood-built ships ended when iron replaced timber, but the decline in its symbolic significance did not follow its practical demise in shipbuilding. The oak is identified as the great provider and patriarch, as a haven for power in the natural world, symbolizing antiquity, resolve, respect, veneration and benevolence, as well as patriotism, royalty, naval forces and military victory. Featured in emblems of international relations, the oak is bound up in the United Nations, a body defined by pooled sovereignty and universal values. Walter Lippmann described 'the world state' as 'inherent in the United Nations as an oak tree is in an acorn'.<sup>92</sup> Schmitt was wary of Lippman's book, *Public Opinion* (1922), and his ideas on symbols,<sup>93</sup> because the oak had become integral to an idealized image of world sovereignty. Schmitt saw the decimated tree as an alternative marker of sovereign possession: 'One landed, erected a cross or inscribed the King's flag in a tree, set up a moveable flag-stone, or laid an announcement in the hole of a tree stump'.<sup>94</sup> Schmitt is, as ever, conscious of the power of symbols to shift and shape the narratives of momentous historical events.

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<sup>91</sup> Spenser, cited in Miles, p. 130.

<sup>92</sup> Walter Lippmann, 'International Control of Atomic Energy', in *One World or None*, ed. by Dexter Masters and Katharine Way (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), p. 74.

<sup>93</sup> Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, p. 65.

Rust and Lupton place Schmitt's invoking of taboo next to his own position in history, noting 'the taboo of the monstrous errors that led to his own [...] complicity in war and Holocaust'.<sup>95</sup> To emphasize the nature of symbolic ambiguity, it is worth returning to Goethe, whose relationship to the oak is complicated. Stephen Eric Bronner states that the Nazis 'were experts at transforming traditions by taking works and symbols out of context'.<sup>96</sup> In Hitler's Germany, oak leaves adorned Nazi Party uniforms. Goethe had several oaks named after him. Under an oak in Ettersberg, near Weimar, he supposedly wrote a part of *Faust*. This oak became the centrepiece of Buchenwald concentration camp. Bronner states that 'it is no accident that [the Nazis] left Goethe's oak tree in the middle of Buchenwald'.<sup>97</sup> One prisoner at the camp wrote that 'the legend went that the fate of Germany was connected with the life of the oak of the Ettersberg: when the oak died, the German Reich would also fall'.<sup>98</sup> Klaus Neumann points out the contrasting imagery of the oak in Buchenwald:

What could have been more fitting for establishing a link between Goethe and the sort of Germanic ancestry the SS was trying to construct for itself? For Buchenwald's first prisoners the tree symbolized the world outside the camp and another Germany—one that was removed in space and time from the Germany that held them prisoner.<sup>99</sup>

The SS and Buchenwald's prisoners appropriated Goethe's oak, because 'for both, the tree represented the epitome of a German intellectual and artistic genealogy that needed to be upheld'.<sup>100</sup> Nazi, Jew or communist, Goethe was on their side. His link to the oak was tenuous. He spent time elsewhere in the forests of Ettersberg, but 'in the intellectual climate of 1937, a beech forest was not as loaded a concept as a lone oak tree'.<sup>101</sup> If Goethe's oak symbolized Germany, its sovereignty would be contested.

The aim of this disquisition is to suggest that the genealogy of the oak symbol is impossible to separate from its deployment in *Orlando*, which draws on the historical resonance of the oak and its relationship to ideas of sovereignty. To unpack the meaning of the oak in relation to melancholy more specifically, the following section locates the

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<sup>95</sup> Rust and Lupton, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 89.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Prisoner 4935, 'Über die Goethe-Eiche im Lager Buchenwald', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 4 November 2006, <

<sup>99</sup> Klaus Neumann, 'Goethe, Buchenwald, and the New Germany', *German Politics & Society*, 17.1 (1999), 55–83 (pp. 57–58).

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*

tension between rashness and melancholy in Woolf's writings, which is only suggested through Schmitt's work on *Hamlet* but given fuller explanation in his criticisms of liberal parliamentary democracy. Rust and Lupton argue that Schmitt reads *Hamlet* as 'a continuous *real space*, that is, a space in which real violence can occur. The failure of mediation describes not only Hamlet's rashness, but also Schmitt's own "rashness" with respect to the political conflicts of his time'.<sup>102</sup> The authors make the historical connection between Hamlet and Schmitt himself, noting 'Hamlet's uncanny, fundamentally unmediated condensation of a highly developed theoretical consciousness alongside a capacity for rash and violent thoughtlessness—the rogue character, that is, of their shared thought'.<sup>103</sup> Rather than identify the tendency to 'rashness' as a vague point of reading between Schmitt, Woolf, and Hamlet, I make a different common connection: that the excess of knowledge and articulation, suggested earlier in this chapter, classifies the work of melancholy in *Orlando*.

## 2.7 Rashness and Melancholy

In the essay, "On Being Ill" (1926), Woolf states that during the body's state of sickness, the 'ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted'.<sup>104</sup> In this metaphor, oaks function as refined cultural appetites, developed critical apparatuses and inhibitions of literary influence. The unique state of illness requires a sense of immediacy not discernment, which is why Woolf finds herself returning to Shakespeare during her periods of debilitation and convalescence.<sup>105</sup> Woolf emphasizes the corporeal qualities of illness ahead of abstraction and psychology by reckoning with the immediacy of Shakespeare, who, otherwise deadening and constant, is imbued with transcendental effects when approached in exceptional circumstances. Woolf lends metaphorical equivalence to the state of being ill and to the state of being outside law:

Rashness is one of the properties of illness—outlaws that we are—and it is rashness that we need in reading Shakespeare. It is not that we should doze in reading him, but that, fully conscious and aware, his fame intimidates and bores, and all the views of all the critics dull in

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<sup>102</sup> Rust and Lupton, pp. xlix–l.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', in *Selected Essays*, p. 101.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

us that thunder clap of conviction which, if an illusion, is still so helpful an illusion, so prodigious a pleasure, so keen a stimulus in reading the great. [...] Illness, in its kingly sublimity, sweeps all that aside and leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself.<sup>106</sup>

Woolf acknowledges the critical cacophony surrounding Shakespeare as one that amounts to endless chatter. This reading shares confluences with Schmitt's critique of liberalism, which he thinks 'discusses and negotiates every political detail [...] in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in everlasting discussion'.<sup>107</sup>

Woolf's literary translation of this sentiment is illustrated by her paean to Shakespeare, who becomes even more potent and meaningful at her acute stage of physical debilitation, because of his ability to cut through the noise of literary discourse and critical overaccumulation.

In *Orlando*, nature stands in opposition to overwrought literary cultures, drawing attention to the protagonist's 'love of solitude' that defines much of the novel: 'Orlando naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone' (7). Chapter Two draws attention to the role of the biographer, who must address the omissions created from a subject's solitude, and who:

[...] is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; [...] Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may (31).

When Orlando is exiled from Court, he retires to the country house to live in 'complete solitude' (31). This first instance of lengthy sleep provokes a change in Orlando. His failure to rise lasts seven days, by which time he has 'an imperfect recollection of his past life' (31). Solitude and sleep, both silent antidotes to voluble excess and chatter, entwine to confirm Orlando's process of change through melancholy relief. His period of slumber moves into a more reflective state, emphasizing the picaresque features of the novel. Orlando subsequently 'gave himself up to a life of extreme solitude', and began 'perambulating the house alone', during which he 'took a strange delight in thoughts of death and decay' (33).

<sup>106</sup> Woolf, 'On Being Ill', p. 108.

<sup>107</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 63.

Melancholy has long been a particular subject of English literature and English literary criticism.<sup>108</sup> Freud's 1917 essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia', provides the most prevalent 20<sup>th</sup> century characterization of melancholy, for English as well as other literary cultures, associating the feelings of melancholy with the psychology of loss and mourning. In 1924, Woolf's Hogarth Press became the first to publish the complete works of Freud in translation. Jennifer Radden argues against semantic pedantry and terminological baggage when discerning between melancholic states, melancholy and melancholia,<sup>109</sup> whereas Esther Sánchez-Pardo focuses on Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis to analyse literary and artistic modernisms, identifying etymologies of melancholy through its physical manifestations of blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile. Melancholia, on these terms, is bound up with clinical diagnoses, illustrating 'anxious modernisms' that indicate 'a symbolics of loss'.<sup>110</sup> According to Sánchez-Pardo, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf 'devises a grief practice that comes too close to the Kleinian theorizing on mourning, melancholia, and manic-depressive states'.<sup>111</sup> Lecia Rosenthal draws on the same novel for a political rather than psychoanalytic reading, arguing that Woolf depicts '[t]he masculine war sublime: power, mastery, order, the mighty yet well-ordered spectacle of a particular form of violence [... that] repeats familiar gestures of the gendered rhetoric of sovereign power'.<sup>112</sup> There are other notes of political affect in the novel: Nancy is described as a totemic representative image on her trip to the beach: 'Out on the pale criss-crossed sand, high-stepping, fringed, gauntleted, stalked some fantastic leviathan (she was still enlarging the pool), and slipped into the vast fissures of the mountain side'.<sup>113</sup>

Critical concentration on melancholy and the political in *To the Lighthouse* has not entirely obscured the significance of the theme within *Orlando*, which makes melancholy far more schematically, structurally and explicitly about sovereignty than in the former novel, a point which has been much less addressed in scholarship. Sara Crangle argues that while Woolf in *Orlando* 'revisits the longstanding connection between melancholy and

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<sup>108</sup> See Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2001).

<sup>109</sup> Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. vii.

<sup>110</sup> Esther Sánchez-Pardo, *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 10–15

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Lecia Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and the Politics of Consolation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 16.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*

creativity [...] her focus eventually becomes boredom itself'.<sup>114</sup> Orlando's boredom makes him a 'thoroughly modern character [...] and] thoroughly bourgeois'.<sup>115</sup> Crangle writes that Woolf 'parodies the reverence attached to melancholy' but extolls Orlando's 'capacity to turn melancholy into creative vision', connecting "The Oak Tree" to the passage of time, suggesting that the poem 'sustains Orlando in a similar fashion for centuries'.<sup>116</sup> This chapter has expanded upon this insight. Focusing on the intertextual gestures and her ironic use of symbols, I argue that Woolf articulates the power of melancholy through references to narratives of political sovereignty. I summarize and annotate a selection of critics below to support this reading.

The durability of the literary oak is central to Orlando's psychological and intellectual development. James O'Sullivan notes how the concept of literature in the novel, embodied by the "The Oak Tree", provides 'the technology of time from which Orlando achieves her solace', which 'resolves her position in a world of deconstructed time and a multitude of dialogical, and quite opposing selves', giving 'structure to the chronological chaos'.<sup>117</sup> Under the oak, Orlando is 'unhindered by the demands of time'; in this form and that of the poem, the oak is the one constant 'through the narrative, when all else is in flux'.<sup>118</sup> As Howard German and Sharon Kaehele point out, the dual oak provides Orlando 'with an awareness of an impersonal perspective outside of human time'.<sup>119</sup> Orlando gains a physical vantage point beneath the tree, where she is able to observe the both the inherited house and the unfurling centuries of English history. Orlando completes "The Oak Tree" at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The literary epiphany occurs when she 'awakens as if from a dream, realizes the world goes on, and that if she died, it would continue the same'.<sup>120</sup> If *Orlando* is an exercise in life-writing, instead of a satirical biography, its method gathers up the points, events and encounters of the past. For Pamela Caughie, the present in the novel is an accumulation of past moments, and Orlando's 'composition [...] over three

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<sup>114</sup> Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter, and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 74.

<sup>115</sup> Crangle, pp. 89–91.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> James O'Sullivan, 'Time and Technology in *Orlando*', *ANQ*, 27.1 (2014), 40–45 (pp. 44–45).

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Howard German and Sharon Kaehele, 'The Dialectic of Time in *Orlando*', *College English*, 24.1 (1962), 35–41 (p. 39).

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*



centuries is not fantastic, a temporal aberration, but emblematic of how writing and reading work'.<sup>121</sup> "The Oak Tree" reflects the sovereign artistic process.

Victoria L. Smith notes that *Orlando* shows 'melancholia with a difference; the novel is fundamentally concerned with loss, but loss that is recuperated, made a success of'.<sup>122</sup> Smith argues that 'like the melancholic's recuperation of the lost object through constant speaking about it, the text offers a recuperation of the object while bemoaning the inadequacy of language'.<sup>123</sup> Elise Swinford understands the novel, too, as resisting 'resolution and representation', arguing that Woolf articulates the pristine form of 'modernist melancholia' in the attempt to form 'an unconventional elegy'.<sup>124</sup> The oak, as the toiled-over manuscript and the tree:

[...] represents Orlando's struggle with figuration, both through words and through his own changing physical manifestation. In light of Apollo's elegiac declaration of the laurel watching over the oak, we see in Orlando a reversal of this convention—the laurel, the sign of traditional poethood, is subordinated to the oak tree, both the document Orlando carries in his bosom and the tree that provides him refuge.<sup>125</sup>

Swinford's analysis states the artistic creative process as integral to understanding the oak as Orlando's haven. Orlando burns almost all his written work after Greene, a man who cannot distinguish 'an oak from a birch tree' (44), publishes an excoriating satire of Orlando's writing and lifestyle, despite the latter's beneficence.

The subsequent shame provokes Orlando's first major trauma, inspiring him to immolate his writings. Only "The Oak Tree" avoids the funeral pyre, dodging the 'great conflagration [of] fifty-seven poetical works' (46). Orlando retains this one poetic draft, which was 'his boyish dream and very short' (46). Woolf mournfully describes 'vast bonfires of cedar and oak wood' and 'a whole oak tree, with its million leaves and its nests of rook and wren, burnt to ashes' (46). In this rush to arson, Orlando's literary illusions are all but destroyed. Nonetheless, "The Oak Tree" remains. After his embarrassment, Orlando

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<sup>121</sup> Pamela L. Caughie, 'The temporality of modernist life writing in the era of transsexualism: Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Einar Wegener's *Man Into Woman*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 59.3 (2013), 501–25 (p. 502).

<sup>122</sup> Victoria L. Smith, "'Ransacking the Language": Finding the Missing Goods in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29.4 (2006), 57–75 (p. 63).

<sup>123</sup> Smith, p. 68.

<sup>124</sup> Elise Swinford, 'Transforming Nature: *Orlando* as Elegy', in *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World*, ed. by Kristin Czarnecki and Carrie Rohman (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press, 2011), pp. 196–201 (p. 197).

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

retreats under the physical oak, where he begins what Swinford calls ‘a process of mourning by turning from the lost object—literature—to its signification in the oak tree’.<sup>126</sup> Later, Orlando’s brief residence in Constantinople ends on a linguistic misunderstanding with ‘gipsies’, who distrust her nonutilitarian melancholy, over the nature of the oak (69–74). This encounter convinces Orlando to revisit the “The Oak Tree”, reinterrogating her affection towards England and the natural world, rather than its contemporary legal and political conditions.

The symbol of the oak is intertwined with the human body in the novel. Orlando has sturdy oak tree legs, which for Nicky Hallett represent, in noticeably modernist terms, ‘the fragments of personality [which] give a sense of the whole’.<sup>127</sup> While in conversation with the Queen at the start of the novel, Orlando is said ‘to be the son of her old age; the limb of her infirmity; the oak tree on which she leant her degradation’ (11). Orlando’s love for Sasha is presented in purely physical language: he ‘stared; trembled; turned hot; turned cold; longed to hurl himself through the summer air; to crush acorns beneath his feet; to toss his arm with the beech trees and the oaks’ (17). On several occasions, Orlando stretches his limbs out under the oak tree, musing on Shakespeare and his melancholy disposition. “The Oak Tree” manuscript often seems bound to Orlando’s chest: ‘in the bosom of her shirt as if for some locket or relic of lost affection’ (116); ‘fluttering above her heart rebuked her with having forgotten all about it’ (136); ‘part of her dress burst open, and out upon the table fell “The Oak Tree”’ (138); and ‘a little square book bound in red cloth fell from the breast of her leather jacket’ (160).

Perspectives on the body also articulate the relationship between the sovereign and the subject. Orlando offers a bowl of rose water to Queen Elizabeth I:

[...] he saw no more of her than her ringed hands in water; but it was enough. It was a memorable hand; a thin hand with long fingers always curling as if round orb or sceptre; a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand; a commanding hand too; a hand that had only to raise itself for a head to fall; a hand, he guessed, attached to an old body [...] his mind was such a welter of opposites—of the night and the blazing candles, of the shabby poet and the great Queen, of silent fields and the clatter of serving men—that he could see nothing; or only a hand (9–10).

From the view of the sovereign, Orlando’s entirety is deduced from the back of his head. She projects her desire for youth onto him, and while Orlando is asleep that night, she gifts

<sup>126</sup> Swinford, p. 198.

<sup>127</sup> Nicky Hallett, ‘Anne Clifford as Orlando: Virginia Woolf’s feminist historiology and women’s biography’, *Women’s History Review*, 4.4 (1995), 505–24 (p. 508).

him the house. The finger has pointed towards Orlando and made the initial decision, providing a symbol of sovereign authority that echoes and reechoes throughout the text.

In one instance, Sasha's betrayal provokes Orlando's journey into the ancestral crypt, where he apes Hamlet's melancholy brooding over Yorick's skull, noting the hands and fingers of the deceased:

‘Nothing remains of all these Princes’, Orlando would say, indulging in some pardonable exaggeration of their rank, ‘except one digit,’ and he would take a skeleton hand in his and bend the joints this way and that. ‘Whose hand was it?’ he went on to ask. ‘The right or the left? The hand of man or woman, of age or youth? Had it urged the war horse, or plied the needle? Had it plucked the rose, or grasped cold steel?’ (34).

All that lasts of the sovereign is the finger which commanded, the instrument of past rule, to which Orlando responds through paralyzing multiplicity. The biographer is uncertain of Orlando's precise mood because her subject ‘was strangely compounded of many humours—of melancholy, of indolence, of passion, of love of solitude, to say nothing of all those contortions and subtleties of temper which were indicated on the first page’ (35). His ‘love of literature’, which was a ‘disease to substitute a phantom for reality’, leaves Orlando sitting ‘by himself, reading, a naked man’ (35). ‘[T]he disease of reading’ leads ultimately to the ‘wretch of writing’ (36). The hand becomes a metonymic stand-in for Orlando's written work, far away from the coercive digit of historic notability, functioning as both the words on the page and the tool that grasps the pen and inkpot.

Orlando's attempts at poetry are knotted together with the act of looking out of the window, which has defined cultural renderings of melancholy since Albrecht Dürer's engraving, *Melencolia I* (1514), studied by Benjamin in his work on tragic drama.<sup>128</sup> The novel features countless windows for melancholy brooding. In one case, Orlando's anxieties about the institution of marriage overwhelm her to such an extent that ‘her errant fingers were playing scales’ (118). Her body is consumed with vibrations that ‘concentrate in her hands; and then in one hand, and then in one finger of that hand, and then finally to contract itself so that it made a ring of quivering sensibility about the second finger of the left hand’ (118). This ring holds none of the desired symbolism for Orlando, who ‘felt positively ashamed of the second finger of her left hand without in the least knowing why’ (118). In the elided moment of consummation, Orlando ‘instantly glanced at

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<sup>128</sup> Benjamin, pp. 150–58.

Bartholomew's left hand, and instantly perceived what she had never noticed before—a thick ring of rather jaundiced yellow circling the third finger where her own was bare' (118). So, Orlando contemplates marriage and demands to see Bartholomew's ring, stretching out her hand for it:

She started back a pace or two, clenched her hand and flung it away from her with a gesture that was noble in the extreme. 'No,' she said, with resolute dignity, her Ladyship might look if she pleased, but as for taking off her wedding ring, not the Archbishop nor the Pope nor Queen Victoria on her throne could force her to do that (119).

Orlando's individuality is paradoxically bolstered by her expectations of marriage, allowing her to resist the coercive power of sovereignty. The link is established between the finger, marriage and literature itself, the first of which 'tingles uncontrollably and persisted more violently, more indignantly than ever' (120). The finger, now acting as an appendage of the autonomous literary subject, functions in a much more frantic and contingent manner that it did when attached to Elizabeth, the political sovereign, who, during a moment of counsel at the start of the novel, calmly decides on Orlando's fate for epochs thereafter.

At the abrupt point that Orlando meets Shelmerdine, her husband, she stoops, with her entire body, to 'the spirit of the age':

For it would seem—her case proved it—that we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person. The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver. Though the seat of her trouble seemed to be the left hand, she could feel herself poisoned through and through, and was forced at length to consider the most desperate of remedies, which was to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband (120).

Within two minutes, Orlando is engaged to Shelmerdine, who reveals his name: "'I knew it!" she said, for there was something romantic and chivalrous, passionate, melancholy, yet determined about him which went with the wild, dark-plumed name' (124). Orlando receives the important legal documents that reconcile her official marriage with the entitlement to her property, and 'using the first finger of her right hand as pointer' (125), the lawsuits are settled. Her signature, as an inscribed outcome of her fingers, provides the essential confirmation. Following this, 'the ring pass[es] from hand to hand', and 'all was movement and confusion' (129). Orlando suddenly has the ring on her finger, and the rolling time of the history, once previously and insistently demarcated by epochs, comes to a stop. The final chapter enters Woolf and Orlando's present, known otherwise as the

modern period.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Frank Kermode writes acutely about the ‘fiction of transition’, describing it as central to the modern condition because:

[...] it reflects our lack of confidence in ends, our mistrust of the apportioning of history to epochs of this and that. Our own epoch is the epoch of nothing positive, only of transition. Since we move from transition to transition, we may suppose that we exist in no intelligible relation to the past, and no predictable relation to the future.<sup>129</sup>

For Kermode, the literary idea of transition is an ending in and of itself in the modern period, because ‘[t]he belief that one’s own age is transitional between two major periods turns into a belief that the transition itself becomes an age’ composed of ‘perpetual crisis’.<sup>130</sup> In *Orlando*, Woolf identifies the central riddle of modern sovereignty as one of repetition and, as such, of melancholy. Whereas the physical embodiment of the sovereign continues to alter, the formal constraints of the position demand eternal repetitions, which generate a sort of risible listlessness in both the occupant and the subjects under its rule.

In *Orlando*, sovereignty is a joke, to be repeated over and over again, a limitless historical recurrence of words, words, words. Conversely, a sincere sense that every epoch involves an existential shift is key to Schmitt’s understanding of sovereign representation and political symbolism. For Schmitt:

[...] every nation has its own concept of nation and finds the constitutive characteristics of nationality within itself, so every culture and cultural epoch has its own concept of culture. All essential concepts are not normative but existential. If the center of intellectual life has shifted in the last four centuries, so have all concepts and words. It is thus necessary to bear in mind the ambiguity of every concept and word.<sup>131</sup>

Nonetheless, Schmitt’s conception of history and culture is also defined by repetition, by the ‘two remarkable calls for silence at the beginning and at the end of an epoch’, where

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<sup>129</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 101–02.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Schmitt, ‘The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations’, p. 85.

the situation [is] no less brutal at the beginning of the epoch than it is at its end'.<sup>132</sup> For both Woolf and Schmitt, then, repetition is central to the idea of an epoch, as the idea of the epoch is central to the legitimation of sovereign power. For both writers, melancholy is a defining feature of both the endurance and the friability of the sovereign.

This chapter thus argues that through intertextual gestures and an ironic use of symbols in *Orlando*, Woolf shows us melancholy monarchs and poets jostling for the position of ultimate authority, indicating a broader competition for supremacy between the domains of politics and literature in intellectual life. The book tells us that this jostling is a defining feature of the evolution of the modern nation state. This reading is framed and amplified by Schmitt's reading of *Hamlet*, his work on land and sea-based political cultures—particularly his focus on England in this work—as well as his concern with epoch-defining images of sovereignty. My argument is that Orlando's infinite life undercuts the importance of the dual sovereign for political life and national culture, in its role as authority and mortal inhabitant; it ironizes incidental royal succession; and it collapses notions of cultural change across epochs. Orlando changes outwardly, taking on different roles as per his/her title, sex and epoch, but fundamentally remains the same. I argue that *Orlando* is less about the internal life of an individual and is more about the fluctuations and repetitions of national life, particularly as they are defined by a fraught relationship between political and literary ambitions. The sense of real loss and haunting that accompanies the recognition of epochs of power is always overtaken or undercut by an ironic and melancholy sense of mere repetition.

To comprehend the importance of the relationship between melancholy and authority for Woolf, I have attempted to forge connections between the melancholy of Hamlet and the melancholy of Orlando. Hamlet's personality is drawn from internal and external pressure because his inaction is borne 'of my weakness and my melancholy', and, as Claudius famously points out, it is Hamlet's soul 'o'er which his melancholy sits on brood'.<sup>133</sup> This melancholy of the soul conducts a fraught relationship with sovereignty. Claudius reads melancholy as a human defect that thwarts sovereign claims, but to rather consider melancholy as a political attribute exposes the ambiguity of sovereignty. Orlando achieves this exposure in a twofold manner: first, by writing the poem, "The Oak Tree",

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<sup>132</sup> Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus: Experiences, 1945–47*, ed. by Andreas Kalyvas and Federico Finchelstein, trans. by Matthew Hannah (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 60.

<sup>133</sup> *Hamlet*, II. 2. 630; *Hamlet*, III. 2. 179.

across the centuries; and second, by a process of solitary brooding, idle window gazing and time spent ruminating under the oak, that which is rooted in the grounds of the ancestral estate, over which s/he is sovereign. Orlando and his/her estate outlast successive occupants of national sovereign rule, but the poem about this famous symbol of sovereignty is finally a melancholy—and only ever partial—literary achievement. The failures of authority endure. In *Orlando*, Woolf deploys an array of symbols to place the condition of melancholy in relation to the state of sovereignty: but most significantly, the oak as a tree, as a symbol and as a poem produces a literary confrontation with the melancholy affect of the epochal sovereign disposition.

This chapter has moved between Woolf and Schmitt's interactions with Shakespeare and critical work on Shakespeare, their relative comprehension of England via the oak, and their respective assessments of the tragic genre. I highlight how, in his reading of *Hamlet*, Schmitt acknowledges the symbolic and representative authority of melancholy across the epochs, contrary to his emphasis on the revelatory power of the exception. These moves have allowed me to show the paradox of Schmitt's sovereign decision. In the following chapter, the mocking tone of *Orlando* finds a more severe counterpart in *The Wild Palms*, which also ironizes the fabled autonomy of literature while cautioning against its deleterious consequences. Faulkner's complicated critique of the romance genre allows me to show the paradoxes within Schmitt's ideas about the romantic and the mythic.







## CHAPTER THREE

Resisting Romance: Failure as Contingency in *The Wild Palms*

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget *her cunning*.

—PSALM 137<sup>1</sup>

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport.

—KING LEAR<sup>2</sup>

—*Yes he thought Between grief and nothing I will take grief.*

—THE WILD PALMS<sup>3</sup>

Grief is stupid. I choose nothing.

—À BOUT DE SOUFFLE<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1 Introduction

If William Faulkner had had his way, on its initial publication, his 1939 novel, *The Wild Palms*, would have been called *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*.<sup>5</sup> Because the book comprised two stories, intercut chapter by chapter, Faulkner had sought a title indicative of the unifying themes—those of devotion, failure and freedom—to further emphasize its pleated formal construction. Following poor sales of the biblically phrased *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Faulkner’s publisher, Random House, elevated the name of one of the stories, “Wild Palms”, to headline the novel instead. The author was reportedly furious.<sup>6</sup> Seven years later, Faulkner’s friend and editor, Malcolm Cowley, disentangled the interwoven

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 137. 5; V Psalms 107–50.

<sup>2</sup> Gloucester, in *King Lear*, IV. 1. 37–38.

<sup>3</sup> William Faulkner, *The Wild Palms* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 273. Subsequent references to this work are cited in the body of the text.

<sup>4</sup> Michel, in *À bout de souffle*, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (UGC, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> I refer to the novel using its original title in this chapter. Its component stories are written as “Wild Palms” and “Old Man”.

<sup>6</sup> Noel Polk, “William Faulkner “Continues to Amaze””, *Southern Bookman*, <[louismayeux.typepad.com/southern\\_bookman/noel-polk-interview.html](http://louismayeux.typepad.com/southern_bookman/noel-polk-interview.html)> [accessed 08 April 2021].

stories, isolating the supplementary narrative, “Old Man”, from the primary one, “Wild Palms”. Cowley included only the former in his compendium edition, *The Portable Faulkner* (1946), which constituted an early and influential attempt to canonize the author’s indispensable writings.<sup>7</sup> The textual severance of *The Wild Palms* for the collection occurred even though Faulkner saw the stories as intimately bound, drawing attention to their paired significance with a homophone conflation on the book’s opening page, describing the beach cottage as having ‘two stories’ (3).<sup>8</sup>

The corrected text, with Faulkner’s preferred title reinstated and the stories maintained in alternating sequence, appeared 44 years later, producing more critical anxiety about this atypical work.<sup>9</sup> In the intervening period, the detached tales had come to be treated as editorial playthings, their contents spliced and repackaged on several separate occasions.<sup>10</sup> This event was a travesty, given that the dual narrative and contrapuntal form are fundamental to the meaning of the whole. The proposed title, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, is also essential to comprehending the text, which contains a pair of mythic storylines that move forwards and backwards across time and place, conjuring the warped temporalities and materialities of the American South and of American Gothic writing. This chapter identifies how Faulkner transforms classic myths and established symbols from this location and genre to animate his ironic, forceful engagement with romance and adventure fiction.

This chapter further analyses the contrapuntal form of *The Wild Palms*. My argument is that the complex form of the double-narrative allows us to see that failure is a matter of contingency for the main characters. By contrasting the will to freedom with the desire for security, the two stories show how people are reduced to making choices from the same set of spiritual and ethical options, regardless of their intentions and however these choices may be formulated. When all else fails, the admission of failure itself becomes an active decision for Harry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer in “Wild Palms”, and for the Tall Convict in “Old Man”. I argue that each character vows resilience and resistance at the

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<sup>7</sup> See Malcolm Cowley, ed., *The Portable Faulkner* (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> When Harry is in prison, ‘stories’ is accurately rendered in the appropriate context: ‘The jail was somewhat like the hospital save that it was of two storeys, square, and there were no oleanders’, p. 258.

<sup>9</sup> See its inclusion in Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk, eds, *William Faulkner Novels, 1936–1940* (New York: The Library of America, 1990), pp. 493–726.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the novel’s fraught publication history, see Gary Harrington, *Faulkner’s Fables of Creativity: The Non-Yoknapatawpha Novels* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp. 63–94 (p. 63).

expense of personal freedom, which illustrates failure *as* a kind of contingency. The contingent action exists within the Faulknerian world that consists otherwise of absolutes: the absolute power of authority and the absolute submission of the subject, the paradigm within which the contingent actor attempts to negotiate. Faulkner's characters rely on the possibility of contingency in a universe dead set against them, one formed of a blank nature, an incompetent politics and a pernicious legal system. In the novel, tensions between individual liberty, will and autonomy intertwine with grander historical and spiritual forces, those of slavery, civil war and religious predestination.

The symbolic and thematic connections between the stories offer an innovative depiction of failure that also provokes questions about Faulkner's famous wrestling with failure as creative method. Walter J. Slatoff's study, *A Quest for Failure* (1960), is emblematic of this scholarly trend, tying Faulkner's style to the genius of failed creation and to the nobility of literary defeat.<sup>11</sup> This romantic characterization of Faulkner's pursuit of failure has obscured the complicated and deeply political ironies that give depth and breadth to his writing.<sup>12</sup> Through the methods outlined above, this chapter considers Faulkner as a deeply political writer concerned with sovereignty of many kinds, as it appears through nature (the wild palms as a metonym for disasters such as the flood) and through individual grace (the characters' decisions to submit to external forces). *The Wild Palms* also explores authorial sovereignty, defined by the relationship between the autonomy of the artist and the associated feelings of melancholy. But in this chapter, I suggest that the novel is more than a self-reflexive exercise about the failure of fictions and the self-deceptions of the artist. I argue that *The Wild Palms* involves a sustained exploration of the relationship between romance, myth and the politics of sovereignty, which bears on discussions of Schmitt's prominent critique of romanticism, outlined in the introductory chapter. The period of romanticism and the genre of romance are not synonymous, but many of the attitudes, modes and styles from within the period inform Faulkner's post-romantic and noticeably modernist rearticulation of literary genre tropes.

Part of the exploration of failure in *The Wild Palms* is keyed on fiction unlike Faulkner's own writing. Faulkner gives short shrift to the authors of dime-store novels and

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<sup>11</sup> See Walter J. Slatoff, *Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960).

<sup>12</sup> Surprisingly, there is not a single mention of Faulkner in Matthew Stratton's otherwise extensive *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

romance fiction in the text, because these writers follow meagre artistic pursuits that bring moral ruin upon characters within a deeply unforgiving historical milieu. The realm of literature facilitates failure in such circumstances. While linking ideas of valour and doom to his literary endeavours, Faulkner also presents literature's damaging and deceitful effects on the social condition. The critical approach to Faulkner's work as one of romantic failure is a long tradition, beginning in his lifetime and extending through to contemporary scholarship.<sup>13</sup> I de-romanticize this view by recognising the use of failure as an ironic, reflexive tool in *The Wild Palms*.

Frederic Jameson argues that for writers such as Faulkner, 'images and effects [...] were initially only "poetic" and produced as "conceits" by the ingenuity of the author, in order, in some deeper self-indulgence, to admire them and celebrate their unexpectedness as "realities"'.<sup>14</sup> For Jameson, these lead to 'an external referent—the contingency of the inspiration (or *Einfall*)—[which] is drawn inside the work and made to seem organic and inevitable'.<sup>15</sup> The term *Einfall* invites reference to Schmitt, who uses it to describe Hobbes's Leviathan image, which he reads as 'a half-ironical literary idea [*literarischer Einfall*] borne out of good English humour'.<sup>16</sup> For Schmitt, if a literary image starts a conversation with itself, the subsequent reflexivity produces a germ of failure within what the image claims to represent. In the case of absolute sovereignty, the literariness of the Leviathan develops a 'crack' in its representative directness that can be exploited into a chasm of multiple meanings.<sup>17</sup> This characterization works in contrast to Schmitt's deployment of *Notfall* to define a political emergency: whereas *Einfall* bathes in oblique irony, *Notfall* seeks revelatory clarity. In this way, positioning Faulkner's *Einfall* (in Jameson's words) against Schmitt's *Notfall* is productive for reading *The Wild Palms* in a political as well as literary register.

The interleaved *The Wild Palms* moves between a limited and an omniscient third person point of view. The first story to be set in motion, "Wild Palms", takes place in

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<sup>13</sup> For a recent analysis of Faulkner's relationship to failure, see David M. Ball, *False Starts: The Rhetoric of Failure and the Making of American Modernism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), pp. 113–66.

<sup>14</sup> Frederic Jameson, 'Prussian Blues', *London Review of Books*, 17 October 1996, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v18/n20/fredric-jameson/prussian-blues>> [accessed 02 July 2021].

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan*, p. 57.

1937, and features Harry and Charlotte, who escape their lives—an unfulfilling job and staid marriage, respectively—by travelling fatefully across the length of America, from New Orleans to Chicago, from Wisconsin to Utah, and back down to the Mississippi Coast, in an agonized pursuit of heady ideals and earthly pleasures. The pair desire deliverance from mundanity and pursue a pure state of freedom. Their journey ends in tragedy, with Harry, a medical school dropout whose will to be a doctor falls away, performing an illegal abortion on Charlotte, who dies from a subsequent infection. The book ends with Harry in jail. The secondary story, “Old Man”, is set ten years earlier, in 1927, and focuses on the Tall Convict, whom the local prison authorities equip with a skiff, commanding him to rescue a pregnant woman stranded by the flooded Mississippi River. During the dangerous and circuitous route, the nameless delinquent is beaten at all sides by the current, forced to double back on himself, and longs throughout his voyage for the relative order of the penal colony. Eventually, the man achieves his wish and returns, forgoing the opportunity of escape. The trip consolidates his yearning to exist in a life without interruption.

### 3.2 Rhetoric of Failure

How much agency does Faulkner lend to the characters in his fiction? In an interview conducted for *The Paris Review* in 1956, Jean Stein asks Faulkner whether his characters ‘carry a sense of submission to their fate’.<sup>18</sup> Faulkner doubts this, citing the protagonist, Lena Grove, in his novel, *Light in August* (1932), who ‘was the captain of her soul’, and Dewey Dell Bundren, the daughter who seeks an abortion in *As I Lay Dying* (1930), who ‘failed this time to undo her condition, but she was not discouraged. She intended to try again, and even if they all failed right up to the last, it wasn’t anything but just another baby’.<sup>19</sup> Even as they envisage resignation, Faulkner’s characters are studies in resilience not submission. Their fates are of course in his hands, but that does not make them fatalistic. Expanding on the settings these characters inhabit, Faulkner gives a standard account of the authorial sovereign as one who creates ‘a cosmos of my own’:

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Stein, quoted in *The Paris Review Interviews*, vol. 2, ed. by Philip Gourevitch (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> William Faulkner, quoted in *The Paris Review Interviews*, p. 55.

I can move these people around like God, not only in space but in time too. The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*. If *was* existed, there would be no grief or sorrow.<sup>20</sup>

Faulkner's fascination with his authorial sovereignty is complicated by his more intensive concern with failure.

In the interview, Faulkner assesses the varying levels of freedom afforded to the author: 'The writer doesn't need economic freedom [... and] man is indestructible because of his simple will to freedom'.<sup>21</sup> Discussing *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner outlines the narrative potential of a determining literary architecture, because he 'simply imagined a group of people and subjected them to the simple universal natural catastrophes, which are flood and fire, with a simple natural motive to give direction their progress'.<sup>22</sup> *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), meanwhile, consists of 'the [symbolical] tragedy of two lost women [... and] the book I feel tenderest toward. I couldn't leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I'd probably fail again'.<sup>23</sup> Faulkner encouraged his attachment to failure in this fiction through his formal repetition of the same event, which he views from a variety of character perspectives. For him, this approach culminates in 'a grand failure'. Having rewritten the story four times, he notes that '[t]he book just grew that way. I was trying to tell one story which moved me very much and each time I failed'.<sup>24</sup>

Writing about American modernism, David Ball describes 'the transvaluation of failure as a watchword for literary success', which is premised on 'the authority of failure', the 'guiding paradox [that] suggests both the creative possibilities in failure and the generative roles of these failures'.<sup>25</sup> This reading emphasizes the framing of Faulkner's modernism as one of great, Sisyphean talent. According to Ball, the literary context within which Faulkner worked is filled with 'aspirations for impossible intellectual achievement, the prestige accorded commercial failure, or simply the unrelenting return to figures of

<sup>20</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>22</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, pp. 44–45.

<sup>24</sup> William Faulkner, quoted in Sean O'Faolain, 'Hate, Greed, Lust and Doom', *London Review of Books*, 16 April 1981, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v03/n07/sean-o-faolain/hate-greed-lust-and-doom>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

<sup>25</sup> Ball, p. 7.

collapse, exhaustion, and futility in the text themselves'.<sup>26</sup> American modernism is thus emblemized by Faulkner's aesthetic failure to write a conventional novel. Ball further characterizes 'the rhetoric of failure as a master trope of modernist American literary expression [...] consciously cultivating a language and aesthetic program that valorized failure' in response to modernity, and 'encoding fundamental questions of language, audience and authority'.<sup>27</sup> This account of the centrality of rhetorical failure to American modernism, its overt consideration and use as a literary device, and its subsequent effect on the reception and the reputation of the author invites an understanding of authorial sovereignty as a relationship to failure.

For *The Paris Review*, Faulkner also more broadly isolates failure as a crucial methodological and thematic mooring for the literary artists of his generation:

All of us [contemporary writers and I] failed to match our dream of perfection. So I rate us on the basis of our splendid failure to do the impossible. In my opinion, if I could write all my work again, I am convinced that I would do it better, which is the healthiest condition for an artist. That's why he keeps on working, trying again; he believes each time that this time he will do it, bring it off. Of course he won't, which is why this condition is healthy. Once he did it, once he matched the work to the image, the dream, nothing would remain but to cut his throat, jump off the other side of that pinnacle of perfection into suicide. I'm a failed poet. Maybe every novelist wants to write poetry first, finds he can't, and then tries the short story, which is the most demanding form after poetry. And, failing at that, only then does he take up novel writing.<sup>28</sup>

The semantics of dreams, impossibility and the novelist are set in pairs with the images of slit throats, suicide, and the failed poet. Faulkner took up novel writing to destabilize the form, contribute to its failure, and so produce an understanding of the human spirit therewithin. Faulkner's deliberate failure is easily understood as emblematic of the futility that is a defining theme of literary modernism.

But this view encourages the romantic idea of failure that my reading of *The Wild Palms* surpasses. While Faulkner's artistic mission tries to reconcile the spirit and the mind, it also contains a crucial corporeal component. The emphasis on the encumbered body in his writing transforms literary and theological abstractions into the materialities of everyday life. The burdens of the flesh are illustrated through Faulkner's symbolism and grand themes, of course, but also through the mental fortitude and internal dialogue of his

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*.

<sup>28</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, pp. 35–36.



characters. Faulkner's statements about himself as a kind of God, and his self-conscious courting of failure, thus find a kind of parallel expression through his granular exploration of failure and authority in *The Wild Palms*. As he states in the same interview, the writing process and intended form of the novel sprung out of his own physical labour of creative failure and contingent inspiration: 'I did not know it would be two separate stories until after I had started the book. When I reached the end of what is now the first section of *The Wild Palms*, I realized suddenly that something was missing'.<sup>29</sup>

Against Faulkner's meditations on the creativity of failure, critics have mostly approached *The Wild Palms* as a failure in a more mundane sense. The novel is not as widely read or studied as other works by Faulkner. In this sense, it is a mundane failure. However, those critics who have engaged with the novel have found themselves struggling to define its quality of failure. According to one review, it is 'unlikely, incredible, badly-constructed and indeed rather silly'. To selectively quote from other critics: the novel fails even as a tragedy 'because so much of the behavior of its two lovers is caused by a wilfulness bordering on stupidity', although it is not a 'negligible effort or outright failure'. More promisingly, Faulkner ironically 'subverts themes, [to] show how they fail'. It is a novel of 'extreme cases' and 'extreme narrative strategies'. Elsewhere, failure is entwined with its experimental ambition, so 'the novel fails, but it fails most interestingly'. That, or it fails 'technically', insofar as the relative merit of each story differs.<sup>30</sup> In contemporary reviews, the strength of "Old Man" over "Wild Palms" was attributed to the rugged simplicity of the former compared to the soapy melodrama of the latter, a characterization that belies the literary achievement and complicated ironies of Faulkner's text. In this vein, George Marion O'Donnell considers "Old Man" a success while "Wild Palms" fails because 'the natural protagonist-antagonist schematism of [...] Faulkner's myth is reversed'.<sup>31</sup> The relative success of each story is rooted in character, which encourages a deeper consideration of the exact relationship between the two stories.

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<sup>29</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> O'Faolain; Irving Howe, "'The Wild Palms'", in *Modern Critical Views: William Faulkner*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), pp. 93–99 (p. 99); Frederick R. Karl, *American Writer: A Biography* (London: Faber, 1989), p. 603; David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 174; Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years, A Critical Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> See George Marion O'Donnell, 'Faulkner's Mythology', *The Kenyon Review*, 1.3 (1939), 285–99.

Stein's questions in the interview amplify the difficulty readers have in joining the two stories: 'Are the two unrelated themes [...] brought together in one book for any symbolic purpose? Is it, as certain critics intimate, a kind of aesthetic counterpoint, or is it merely haphazard?'<sup>32</sup> But Faulkner's own defence of the novel is sometimes obscure. He notes that Harry and Charlotte 'sacrificed everything for love, and then lost that', which confusingly leads to the conclusion that their story is entwined with "Old Man" 'by chance, perhaps necessity'.<sup>33</sup> However, Faulkner's characterization of the stories through the musical trope of 'counterpoint', whereby one alternately brings the other up 'to pitch', offers a more productive mode of reading.<sup>34</sup> The turn to this musical trope to describe the effect of each story on the other highlights the significance of sound in the novel. It also helps the reader to see the pattern of images across the stories through which this theme is sustained. Most fully, it helps to focus the relationship between the characters' pleas for autonomy and subservience, allowing the reader to understand that both stories—or rather, that the stories together—are about private selfhood and sovereign authority. The following section explores the novel's form through the rubric of antinomy to understand its effect on ideas of sovereignty.

### 3.3 Counterpoint to Antinomy

Faulkner's 'counterpoint', which is sonic and poetic, opens into a reading of 'antithesis',<sup>35</sup> which can be read as political, and helps the reader to see not just complementary themes but hierarchical tension as a key aspect of the text. If *The Wild Palms* is the story of Charlotte and Harry, as Faulkner suggests, this reading indicates an asymmetrical form in which the "Old Man" sections function as a succession of antitheses to the theses of the "Wild Palms" sections. However, I would argue that *antinomy* provides the most revealing rubric to understand the relationship between the stories. Scholars have variously described the stories as 'two unlikely poles'; 'mirror opposites'; 'antipodal but not irreconcilable modes of fiction'; dual elements of 'a Manichean split'; producers of 'dissonant irony'; and 'dialectical or dramatic opposites', which result in 'echo and re-echo [... and] a

<sup>32</sup> Stein, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

remarkable architecture of sonority'.<sup>36</sup> Mason Golden considers the stories as divided against each other 'antagonistically', insofar as the 'intercut narratives are not merely juxtaposed [and] neither are they reconciled'.<sup>37</sup> These evaluations offer a heuristic for identifying the interplay of the stories, but all, in one way or another, avoid a precise engagement with the imbalance between the stories, which antinomy provides.

Slatoff asserts Faulkner's 'need to move back and forth between the two [stories] as he goes along'.<sup>38</sup> This desire amounts to either 'antithesis, or proliferation', because "Wild Palms" seems 'the dominant and more powerful story'.<sup>39</sup> Slatoff thus offers two explanations for the novel's form: a balance of thesis and antithesis throughout; and a growth and escalation before a denouement. Against Slatoff, I argue the novel is rather all antithesis and no thesis. If this reading is correct, it is more appropriate to consider ideas about antinomy to explicate the text. Antinomies consist of two logical ends or laws that are rendered incompatible when applied together, implying not only opposition but also contradiction and paradox. While W.T. Jewkes insists the novel contains a 'remarkable effect of balance, of mutual criticism, of harmony of opposition',<sup>40</sup> it is more accurate to suggest that the textual harmony is produced by its acknowledgement of its many incongruities, contradictions, and irresolution. For Warren Beck, writing just after the novel's release, Faulkner insists on thematic pairs that include 'escape and surrender, love and suffering, freedom and fate, and basically of reason and passion'.<sup>41</sup> For Richard Gray, these produce 'a series of dualisms that help determine the narrative development', including culture and nature, prison and space, stasis and mobility, routine and escape, language and silence, institution and dissolution, fixity and fluidity.<sup>42</sup> But as presented in

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<sup>36</sup> David Dowling, *Modern Novelists: William Faulkner* (London: Macmillan, 1989) p. 107; Joseph J. Moldenhauer, 'Unity of Theme and Structure in the Wild Palms', in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. by Olga W. Vickery and Frederick J. Hoffman (New York: Harcourt, 1963), pp. 305–22; Jeremy Cagle, "'I Am Now like the Gambler": Erotic Triangles and Game Theory in William Faulkner's *Pylon* and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*', *The Southern Literary Journal*, 43.2 (2011), 32–54 (p. 43); Mary McCarthy, 'Ideas and the Novel: Dostoevsky's "The Possessed"', *London Review of Books*, 17 April 1980, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v02/n07/mary-mccarthy/ideas-and-the-novel-dostoevsky-s-the-possessed>> [accessed 04 July 2021]; Irving Howe, "'The Wild Palms'", in *Modern Critical Views: William Faulkner*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), pp. 93–99; W. T. Jewkes, 'Counterpoint in Faulkner's "the Wild Palms"', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 2.1 (1961), 39–53 (pp. 41, 48).

<sup>37</sup> Mason Golden, "'Fluid Currency": Money and Art in Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*', *Modernism/Modernity*, 20.4 (2013), 729–46 (p. 731).

<sup>38</sup> Slatoff, *Quest for Failure*, p. 258.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Jewkes, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Warren Beck, 'Faulkner's Point of View', *College English*, 2.8 (1941), 736–49 (p. 747).

<sup>42</sup> Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner: Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 249.

the text, these function as Faulkner's antinomies, which underscore the artful conflicts and ambiguities, emphasized by the incongruencies of the stories.

The complicated unity—the antinomic relationship—of the text is demonstrated by Faulkner's use of light, which is literally something that deceives, and his use of shadows, which sometimes tease out the opposite of deception. In the first chapter of "Wild Palms", the household is 'lighted by oil lamps—or an oil lamp' (3), where 'behind the jerking pencil of light' and 'through some alteration of the torch's beam' (11), the doctor ascertains what should be familiar surroundings. His shadow, 'cast by the lamp on the low table by the bed, antic on the wall', is superseded by his wife's shadow, which is 'monstrous, gorgonlike from the rigid paper-wrapped twists of gray hair above the gray face above the high-necked night-dress which also looked gray, as if every garment she owned had partaken of that grim ironcolor of her implacable and invincible morality' (12–13). The wife's grey monochrome silhouette accurately indicates her omniscient anticipation of the forthcoming disaster, Charlotte's death. She asks her husband to blow out the lamp, given he will likely have to wait to be paid. So, the doctor follows:

[...] the torch's dancing beam, trotting while the other walked, across his own somewhat sheltered yard and through the dividing oleander hedge and so into the full sweep of the unimpeded sea-wind which thrashed among the unseen palms and hissed in the harsh salt grass of the unkempt other lot; now he could see a dim light in the other house (13).

Harry, as the temporary neighbour, becomes 'the other' (14), not quite known, yet observed. In 'the dim lamplight' of next door, Harry and the doctor both pause 'as if to allow the shade, the shadow, of the absent outraged rightful husband to precede them' (16–17). As the only certified medical professional and the landlord of the property, the doctor is the authority of the moment, but remains held under the secret authority of someone who is not there, Charlotte's husband, Francis Rittenmeyer (Rat), and so is unable to act until he obtains clarity about whom lays legal claim to Charlotte.

To demonstrate how the alternating form of the novel functions, in Chapter II of "Old Man", the Tall Convict waits on the train, ready to be ordered onto the skiff to travel down the flooded river. When the locomotive stops, the convicted group, of which he is a part, fold together in almost darkness, because:

[...] the car was unlighted and the windows fogged on the outside by rain and on the inside by the engendered heat of the packed bodies. All they could see was a milky and sourceless flick and glare of flashlights. [...] There were more soldiers; the flashlights played on the rifle

barrels and bandolier buckles and flicked and glinted on the ankle chains of the convicts as they stepped gingerly down into knee-deep water and entered the boats. [...] After another hour they began to see lights ahead—a faint wavering row of red pin-pricks extending along the horizon and apparently hanging low in the sky. [...] Flashlights glared and winked along the base, among the tethered skiffs; the launch, silent now, drifted in (60).

The Tall Convict sees displaced people by their ‘eyeballs glinting in the firelight’ (61), as, ‘for the first time he looked at the River within whose shadow he had spent the last seven years of his life but had never seen before’ (62). Under the instructions of the Warden and deputy wardens, the Tall Convict is sent on his rescue mission: ‘Well?’, asks the guard delivering the orders, ‘What are you waiting for?’ (64). The command does not require psychological reflection on the part of the Tall Convict, nor a practical consideration of external circumstances, swamped in either darkness or speckled with light; it only needs the Tall Convict’s capacity for action, and for him to fulfil this capacity. He must do as he told; his agency has been swept away in the prison that has cast a shadow over his autonomy. Whereas, in “Wild Palms”, shadows bring out the truth of characters’ personalities and of forthcoming events, in “Old Man”, shadows swamp the environs, literally keeping the Tall Convict in the dark.

Why is this relationship of darkness and light between the stories particularly antinomic, and in this way, political? Schmitt illuminates the point, because his use of antinomies in his political theory has been characterized as ‘usually artificially resolved into a higher third—a resolution that is unfailingly aesthetic’.<sup>43</sup> Schmitt is ‘sensitive to the antinomies of modernity’,<sup>44</sup> and his ‘cultural thought is [...] replete with conceptual antinomies’, such as ‘myth/history’, ‘Nahme/Name’, ‘land/sea’, and ‘tragedy/play’.<sup>45</sup> These are not only dualisms that contain dialectical oppositions between two foundational ideas, but conflicting and complicated concepts that cannot always be simply reconciled or contrasted. The acceptance of antinomies is at the root of Schmitt’s notion of *realizatio oppositorum*, which he believed gave authority to the Catholic Church, because ‘there appears to be no antithesis it does not embrace. It has long and proudly claimed to have

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<sup>43</sup> Rad Borislavov, ‘Surrealism, The Politics of Friendship: and the Aesthetics of Revolution’, in *Modernist Group Dynamics: the Politics and Poetics of Friendship*, ed. by Fabio A. Durão and Dominic Williams (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 119–44 (p. 121).

<sup>44</sup> John P. McCormick, ‘Dangers of Mythologizing Technology and Politics: Nietzsche, Schmitt and the Antichrist’, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 21.4 (1995), 55–92 (p. 78).

<sup>45</sup> Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons, “‘A Fanatic of Order in an Epoch of Confusing Turmoil’: The Political, Legal, and Cultural Thought of Carl Schmitt”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. by Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 3–70 (p. 18).

united within itself all forms of state and government'.<sup>46</sup> Not only did this idea give credence to the institutional mechanisms of the Catholic Church, but it also lent authority to its images. Schmitt thought that representation 'rests on the absolute realization of authority' that has 'power to assume this or any other form only because it has the power of representation'.<sup>47</sup> According to Duncan Kelly, this perception produces a 'form of personal authority [... that] implies connotations of dignity and value'.<sup>48</sup> For Schmitt, 'a specific, formal superiority over the matter of human life' defines *complexio oppositorum*, constituted by 'a sustaining configuration of historical and social reality that, despite its formal character, retains its concrete existence'.<sup>49</sup> The tension between myth and history most clearly pertains to *The Wild Palms*, which masks these grander conflicts through imagistic interplay, such as that which occurs between darkness and light. The formal relationship of antinomy includes both material textures and wider themes. It is also able to incorporate fictive temporal shifts, which is integral for this chapter's later discussion of the flood and the prison in the novel.

Schmitt writes that 'the ability to create form, which is essential to aesthetics, has its essence in the ability to create the language of a great rhetoric'.<sup>50</sup> This statement describes the institutional power of the Catholic Church. *Complexio oppositorum* produces decisive 'representative discourse, rather than discussion and debate. It moves in antitheses. But these are not contradictions; they are the various and sundry elements molded into a *complexio* and thus give life to discourse'.<sup>51</sup> As Kam Shapiro suggests, Schmitt's praise for *complexio oppositorum* suggests 'a psychic fusion of emotive attachments, the symbolic or rhetorical reproduction of such fusion, and its personification in a "representative" figure'.<sup>52</sup> This concept thus produces an unbreakable link between authority and form, with each part justifying the other. In this sense, 'norm and decision [...] are deeply interconnected in an active process whereby a continuous political form is sustained in a

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<sup>46</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. by G. L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>48</sup> Duncan Kelly, 'Carl Schmitt's Political Theory of Representation', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 65.1 (2004), 113–34 (p. 116). See also Sarah Pourciau, 'Bodily Negation: Carl Schmitt on the Meaning of Meaning', *MLN*, 120.5 (2005), 1060–90.

<sup>49</sup> Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, pp. 22–23

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Kam Shapiro, *Carl Schmitt and the Intensification of Politics* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), pp. 30–31.

temporal unfolding'.<sup>53</sup> This political form is sustained through the epochs by the existential antagonism, in which 'emotionally the enemy is easily treated as being evil and ugly, because every distinction, most of all the political, as the strongest and most intense of the distinctions and categorizations, draws upon other distinctions for support'.<sup>54</sup> For Schmitt, the ultimate political form subsumes aesthetic properties to obtain representative, mythic, even timeless, power.

Faulkner upends Schmitt's understanding of *complexio oppositorum*. In *The Wild Palms*, Faulkner's presentation of two poles of a unified idea is not an attempt at long-lasting purity, rather it acknowledges the contingencies and impurities of modernity by splicing literary modes and genres. "Wild Palms" tragic qualities are offset by "Old Man" comic overtones. Yet I think the broader connection between tragedy and failure in the novel is more interesting and complicated. The relationship between "Wild Palms" and "Old Man" is defined by persistent, irreconcilable antinomies. Identifying these antinomies reveals Faulkner's concern with the relationship between sovereignty and representation. The interplay of light and not-light between and within the stories establishes the general tone and atmosphere of the novel, but it also alludes to the relative authority of the characters, none of whom are sovereign, and who must adapt and react to shifting circumstances. Faulkner's insistent deployment of symbols underscores this central theme that seeks to depict the role of human sovereignty when it is faced with overwhelming, external power. The following section identifies Herman Melville as the key influence on this powerful tension in Faulkner's work, which I read to highlight the extent to which Schmitt's theses on sovereignty are grounded in an anxiety about failure.

### 3.4 Melville and Symbolism

Discussions about modernist failure—with respect to ideas about the text, critical reception, the role of the artist, and the splicing of genres—often turn to Melville.<sup>55</sup> In his famous novel, *Moby-Dick* (1851), Captain Ahab and Moby-Dick produce the definitive

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> See David M. Ball, 'Modernism', in *Herman Melville in Context*, ed. by Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 307–16.

tragicomedy, in the idea of a man's life being at its most vivid and triumphant in its final, vast blowout of failure.<sup>56</sup> Faulkner is often celebrated in a manner akin to Melville: the overwrought and overblown prose functions as a way of comprehending something crucial about human experience, through the demise of the individual in the wake of the forces of the universe. Melville's reputation was obscure at his death. In the 1920s, critics began to recuperate him, offering a style of reading that understood the novel as a great epic of failure.<sup>57</sup> During the years of modernism, Melville quickly came to be recognised as a literary great, and *Moby-Dick* was recognised as "The Great American Novel". This reception is the starkest and most influential example of failure as an intense mode of reading novels, and not just a mode of writing, during what we understand as the high modernist era. While Melville's reputation was thriving and his books were in demand, Faulkner's novels were not selling. The pornographic potboiler, *Sanctuary* (1931), a book that leans less reflexively into genre writing, was his only novel in print at the time Cowley edited *The Portable Faulkner*.

The modernist preoccupation with Shakespearean themes, which sustain themselves through literary cultures, as illustrated in the previous chapter, is also important for drawing out the comparison between Faulkner and Melville. The sense that external, omnipotent orders determine the fate of individuals is common to classic literature, and is famously illustrated in *King Lear* by the blinded Gloucester, who laments the myth of self-reliance apparently afforded to human beings, as he traipses mournfully across the heath.<sup>58</sup> This theme is questioned and ironized in some of the foremost works of Anglophone culture, and the connection between Shakespeare's tragedy and *Moby-Dick* has been widely discussed.<sup>59</sup> This particular connection is relevant given Faulkner's preoccupation with Melville, whose direct influence on the author is well established.<sup>60</sup> Faulkner also claimed that *Moby-Dick* was the one novel he wished he had written, and he owned a

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<sup>56</sup> See Steven Olsen-Smith, ed., *Melville in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2015).

<sup>57</sup> See Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1929).

<sup>58</sup> *King Lear*, IV. 1.

<sup>59</sup> See Julian Markels, 'King Lear and Moby-Dick: The Cultural Connection', *The Massachusetts Review*, 9.1 (1968), 169–76.

<sup>60</sup> See Ronald Wesley Hoag, 'Expanding the Influence: Faulkner and Four Melville Tales', *South Atlantic Review*, 50.4 (1985), 81–92.



framed print of Rockwell Kent's "Captain Ahab", which hung in his living room in Oxford, Mississippi.<sup>61</sup>

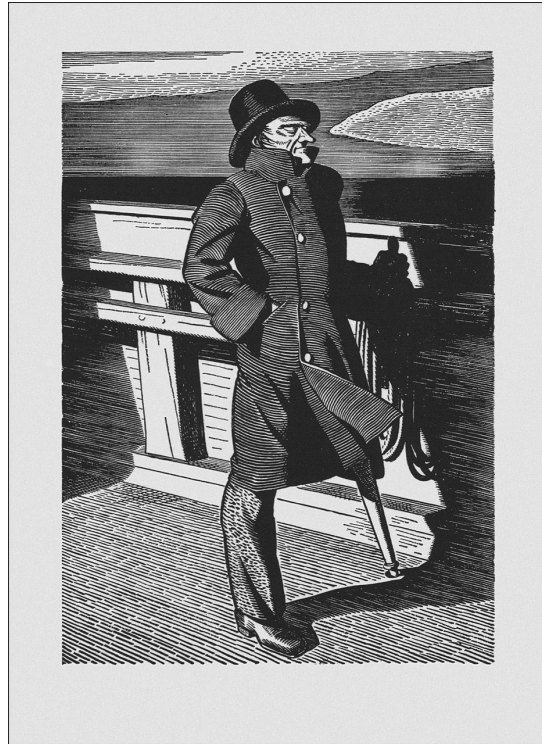


Figure 9: Rockwell Kent, *Captain Ahab*, 1930, woodcut, 30.5 × 21.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Both writers are part of a similar critical and literary tradition, both share a confluence of sensibilities and styles, and both employ a critique against belief systems that assert the possibility of control over the external world, suggesting a common resistance to transcendentalist philosophies that make exaggerated claims about the power and reach of human abilities. The joining of Faulkner's failure to Melville's failure illustrates the valuing of literature that redeems prose through excessive style. Alfred Kazin famously characterizes Faulkner's sentences as containing 'the most elaborate, intermittently

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<sup>61</sup> Nathaniel Philbrick, 'The Road to Melville', *Vanity Fair*, October 20, 2011, <<https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2011/11/moby-dick-201111>> [accessed 28 June 2021]. See also Rockwell Kent, *Captain Ahab*, 1930, woodcut, 30.5 × 21.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

incoherent and ungrammatical, thunderous, polyphonic rhetoric in all American writing'.<sup>62</sup> Perceived as overwrought failures in one sense, Melville and Faulkner make overwrought use of symbolism in their works to question the relationship between individuals and authority.

Within the striking formal combination of the counterposed narratives of *The Wild Palms*, Faulkner's textural form of image-making underscores his nebulous symbolic order, which excavates classic Christian icons of the mother, the child, and the flood, and deposits these in wells of modernist irony and reflexivity. Faulkner widely uses Old Testament and mythological archetypes, drawing on his intellectual kinship with Melville, to produce the sets of symbols that most intensively inform his fiction.<sup>63</sup> Citing the influence of *Moby-Dick* on his novel, *A Fable* (1954), Faulkner notes the broader purpose of symbolism in his writing:

Whatever its symbol—cross or crescent or whatever—that symbol is man's reminder of his duty inside the human race. [...] Writers have always drawn, and always will draw, upon the allegories of moral consciousness, for the reason that the allegories are matchless—the three men in *Moby Dick*, who represent the trinity of conscience: knowing nothing, knowing but not caring, knowing and caring.<sup>64</sup>

Faulkner thus rejects psychoanalytic explanations to articulate the psychology of his characters, instead emphasizing the weight of literary history behind him: 'Everybody talked about Freud [...] but I have never read him. Neither did Shakespeare. I doubt if Melville did either, and I'm sure *Moby Dick* didn't'.<sup>65</sup> Faulkner insists that his varied articulations of the human spirit and its associated obligations need not pander to what he deemed as fashionable cultural criticism, but to the immediacy of granular images and pristine metaphors.

This relationship between image and metaphor is important to *The Wild Palms*. In "Old Man," money had not interested the Tall Convict, because 'the crass loot' would be 'merely a bangle [...] a symbol, a badge to show that he too was the best at his chosen gambit in the living and fluid world of his time' (22). Faulkner is now alluding to the

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<sup>62</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 462.

<sup>63</sup> On the contrary, Owen Elmore argues that Faulkner tends more to use medieval archetypes, in 'William Faulkner and the Mithraic Midwife', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10.2 (2008), 175–85 (p. 184).

<sup>64</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, pp. 46–47.

<sup>65</sup> Faulkner, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, p. 52.

danger of symbols, which he broadens to include the very nature of fiction itself. The Tall Convict's frustration remains 'not at the living men who had put him where he was but at what he did not even know were pen-names, did not even know were not actual men but merely the designations of shades who had written about shades' (22). The authors of these stories constitute hidden figures of authority who set out to deceive readers through pseudonyms, ambiguous craft and indirect imagery. Those untainted by literature survive in the real world, illustrated by the Tall Convict's counterpart, 'the second convict', a minor character in the novel who looks like 'something exposed to light by turning over rotting logs or planks' and 'a hairless and pallid slug' (22). In response to his custodial sentence, and in contrast to the Tall Convict, the second convict's 'outrage was directed at no printed word but at the paradoxical fact that he had been forced to come here of his own free choice and will' (22). For Faulkner, then, the realm of literature is anathema to the realm of choice; the wholesale swallowing of words is that which clouds the ability to choose, because it creates a fog of imposed destiny over the individual's actions and motivations. Better to be a slug than a fool.

The second convict, even though he resembles the unerring spot between a calcified eggshell and a wriggling maggot, understands this point, and had, through his wise sense of liberty, 'chosen the out-of-doors and the sunlight [that] was merely another manifestation of the close-guarded and solitary enigma of his character' (23). Nonetheless, his 199-year sentence constitutes an 'incredible and impossible period of punishment' (23), which he accepts. In his fleeting appearances, this character consolidates many of the ideas about individual will and freedom that are central to the novel. Faulkner gestures to the recent historical context, as the convicts, together, listen to 'stories of men', namely slaves, whose 'pictures [...] emerged from the shorter convict's reading voice' (25). The second convict knows the value of imagery and oratory in a way that eludes the Tall Convict, evoking solidarity among his fellow inmates by invoking the plights of others. On this point, Faulkner, through the second convict, reveals himself as an intensely empathetic observer of otherness; he includes rather than omits black people in his fiction, but does not claim to access their interiority, nor claim to speak for them through pointed symbolism, as he sometimes does for his white characters.

My reading of symbols in *The Wild Palms* shows authorial sovereignty as partly a deception and figures of authority as diffuse, in the sense of being hard to consolidate into

a defined symbol within the American and particularly Southern consciousness. Using Melville as an intertextual reference, I argue that Faulkner records human inadequacy in the wake of omnipotent external orders in America's cultural context. To illuminate these relationships of sovereignty in Faulkner's work, it is important to consult Schmitt, who, like Faulkner, valued Melville as a philosophical influence. Schmitt admired Melville's experiences as a sailor aboard a whaling ship, arguing that this first-hand knowledge was essential to the quality of his writing. Schmitt links the physical and psychic confrontation between Moby-Dick and Captain Ahab to an interpretation of the novel's grander themes, describing 'a personal relationship and an inner, enemy-friend bond between the hunter and his game. Here, the human is driven ever further into the elementary depths of maritime existence, through its battle with the other life-form of the sea'.<sup>66</sup> Whereas Faulkner is attracted to the human contingencies and potent moral allegories in Melville's work, Schmitt is concerned with its essential depiction of the eternal conflict between humanity and the natural world, and between rival political orders.

On several occasions, Schmitt refers to Melville's *Moby-Dick* to articulate his literary conception of sovereignty.<sup>67</sup> Depending on the critic, Schmitt also reads into Melville's novella, "Benito Cereno" (1855), his perceived isolation from the Nazi regime, the rise of the new American demos, and the relative potency of political myths.<sup>68</sup> Schmitt identified with the title character, whom he saw as a noble and failed icon of the lost European political tradition. Cereno's ship, *San Dominick*, which is hijacked by slaves, is, for Schmitt, a metaphor for the deceptions of imitative sovereignty.<sup>69</sup> Schmitt finds in "Benito Cereno", and Melville's writing more generally, a mournful ode to a vanished politics, a warning against images that deceive, and a caution about seeking false representations of sovereignty. Bringing Schmitt's reading of Melville alongside Faulkner's allows me to reveal the extent to which both writers interrogate the breakdown and malfunction of

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<sup>66</sup> Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, p. 29.

<sup>67</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, p. 29; Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> See Thomas O. Beebee, 'Carl Schmitt's Myth of Benito Cereno', *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 42.2 (2006), 114–34; Tracy B. Strong, "'Follow Your Leader': Melville's Benito Cereno and the Case of Two Ships", in *Melville and Political Theory*, ed. by Jason Frank (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), pp. 358–83; Edwin Bikundo, 'Follow Your Leader—I Prefer not to: Slavery, Giorgio Agamben and Herman Melville', *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (2018), 1–16; Harmon Siegel, 'A Solution in Hieroglyphic: Carl Schmitt, Herman Melville, and the Politics of Images', *Telos*, 187 (2019), 51–68; Werner Sollors, "'Better to Die by Them than for Them": Carl Schmitt Reads "Benito Cereno"', *Critical Inquiry*, 46 (2020), 401–20; William E. Scheuerman, *Carl Schmitt: The End of Law*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), pp. 208–11.

<sup>69</sup> Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 60.

representation, which has ramifications for understandings of sovereignty. In *The Wild Palms*, Faulkner's prose style always seeks out, always returns to, and always gets caught up in images of authority, but these are bound first to character and materiality, before insinuating wider themes.

Faulkner's use of call-backs, recurrences, and involutions in fact dominate his fiction. In the first sentence of "Wild Palms", indeed, *The Wild Palms*, Harry's 'discreet and peremptory' (3) knocking supplies a dormant echo, throbbing impudently beneath the surface of the entire novel. The owner of the door, the childless and emasculated doctor, whom Harry demands save Charlotte, needs 'no presentiment, [or] premonition' of the knocking, because he possesses 'that sense of imminence, of being just beyond a veil from something, of groping just without the veil and even touching but not quite, almost seeing but not quite, the shape of truth' (11). The knocking is a repeated and anticipated intrusion, functioning as the scene's main dramatic pivot. For the doctor, the renewed sonic interruption 'merely coincided with the recurrent old stale impasse of the four days' bafflement and groping, capitulant and recapitulant' (11). When Charlotte's desperate condition finally becomes clear to him, 'the veil was going now, dissolving now, it was about to part now and now he did not want to see what was behind it' (14). From Harry's first knock to the second, the doctor's thoughts amount to four days of recollection and eight pages of the novel, the time in which the former has spent grasping at a faint outline of truth, and the latter has demonstrated his signature recursive literary style, the space in between two instances of knocking.

Later in the novel but chronologically before the events of the opening scene, the doomed lovers arrive at the Utah mine, where Harry again knocks, this time on the door of the manager's office, 'with a hand which could not even feel the wood and did not wait for an answer' (153). While evoking dramatic irony for the reader, it functions as a premonition for the character, because Faulkner's temporal gambit in the first chapter spreads a pall over subsequent events in the text. This style is part of a general pattern in the novel: words, phrases and themes are repeated over the space of several pages, advancing towards or receding from the dramatic action, briefly and briskly spun around overlapping parentheses, until the final fragments fall, displaced and dispersed, signalling the characters' proximity to loss or failure. Faulkner's excessive style is partly what ironizes the relationship between tragedy, romance, comedy, and melodrama in the text,

and it is also what dictates the relationships of sovereignty between the characters. Knocking, in every instance outlined above, signals an imbalance of authority between the knocker and the knocked. Harry, whether knocking for the doctor or his boss, is the subordinate actor, so Faulkner sets up his character arc to find agency in the prison, a point to which this chapter will return.

Aside from Faulkner's style, one common way of reading the characters' failures in the novel is through the counterpointing of Harry and the Tall Convict in service of genre. Peter Lurie emphasizes Harry as the tragic hero, and in doing so, side-lines Charlotte's centrality to the book. Lurie identifies the elements of 'domestic tragedy and the melodrama' and 'the classically melodramatic plot of tragic, misguided love' central to "Wild Palms", in which Faulkner offers 'a scene of family tragedy' and an 'image of the scorned husband bearing, tragically and stoically, the loss of his children's mother'.<sup>70</sup> Jewkes describes Harry as 'very like a Greek tragic hero'.<sup>71</sup> John Lewis Longley Jr. calls Harry 'an erotic hero' and states that the Tall Convict is an 'ascetic man [who] has one great failing', which is 'his refusal [...] to accept a commitment to the human condition'.<sup>72</sup> Because of his honesty and determination, the Tall Convict is counterpointed by Harry's 'passive reluctance and ultimate tragic bungling [which] can be explained by his inability or unwillingness to shake off awareness of guilt'.<sup>73</sup> This appraisal of multiple fatal flaws and tragic failings—and their relation to melodrama, family drama, and domestic drama, as well as to mythic and erotic heroism—ignores Charlotte's role in the novel. To address this omission, the following section interrogates the novel's antinomic deployment of specific symbols, namely hands and palms, which illuminate her position in the text.

### 3.5 Hands and Palms

Charlotte, being a talented modernist sculptor and textiles-maker, has 'deft untiring hands' (76), but Harry, as she reminds him after the failed, fatal medical procedure, is a 'bloody

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<sup>70</sup> Charlotte's husband, Rat, is a figure of 'incontrovertible' and 'tragic' rightness. See Peter Lurie, 'Screening Readerly Pleasures: Modernism, Melodrama, and Mass Markets in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*', *Etudes Faulkneriennes*, 3 (2002), 21–32 (pp. 21–25).

<sup>71</sup> Jewkes, p. 52.

<sup>72</sup> Longley Jr., pp. 32–33.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

bungling bastard' (17). In "Old Man", the Tall Convict's dexterity leads to his survival. The Tall Convict, outside of civil society, is very useful with his hands on the water and able to drag 'himself over the stern' (122), which amounts to his grace. He saves the pregnant woman, with whom he begins to fall in love, from a cypress tree on the banks of the river, leaves her in New Orleans, and willingly seeks out re-incarceration, only after submitting himself completely to his salvage operation. That Faulkner's preferred title for the novel was *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* emphasizes the centrality of hands to the novel and provides a critical framing for this section.

Faulkner's title evokes Psalm 137 of the King James Bible, during which the speaker, on behalf of the Israelites exiled in Babylon, exhorts her people to sing, to restore religious faith and encourage memories of their homeland.<sup>74</sup> The Israelites must show fortitude and be able to wait, in expectation, to return. In the meantime, they are to praise the divine sovereign and acknowledge the sacred territory that He has provided. Otherwise, they must surrender a crucial physical appendage, the hands that pluck the lyre, the instrument that accompanies the song of God. The state of collective waiting and anticipated punishment felt by the Israelites pervades *The Wild Palms*, and, as Faulkner's phantom designation suggests, the hand that gains and loses its cunning is a vital recurring image in both stories. This chapter argues that the variously creative and debilitated hand functions as a motif for the loss and reclamation of independent agency in an amoral world. Faulkner's tendency to pitch the efforts and failures of the human spirit against an unforgiving social and legal architecture is exemplified by his literary treatment of hands in the novel.

In "Wild Palms", Charlotte, an assertive bohemian socialite, represents the ideals of the sovereign artist. By elevating herself to a figure of absolute authority, she replaces the traditionally indivisible sovereign with a multiplicitous modern deity who holds the highest office of all, that of the self, the artist, and the romantic. This section considers the effect of this displacement on the hand, and by extension its associations of touch, feeling, tactility, and other somatic experiences. I argue that Faulkner uses the hand as a literary symbol to present conflicting ideas about sovereignty. In constructing a theoretical framework, I draw on Abbie Garrington, who by way of Jacques Derrida, proposes the human hand as 'a synecdochic stand-in for the tactile experiences of the whole body, the most widely

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<sup>74</sup> Psalm 137. 5; V Psalms 107–50.

culturally recognised symbol of skin-to-skin contact [...] a kind of poster boy for the haptic'.<sup>75</sup>

Garrington understands the hand as 'the ultimate indicator of contemporary civilisation, [...] which sees its power wane, set aside by scientific and technological discovery'.<sup>76</sup> If the hand is destined to wither, Garrington implies, this effect is even more heightened when time and progress seem to have sped up. Indicating the hand's physical and metaphorical susceptibility to the processes of modernity allows Garrington to consider two examples, the pianist and the surgeon, both of which, she notes, 'are fundamentally concerned with delicacy and precision of touch, both make use of a positive prosthesis [in that a pianist uses a piano, a surgeon a scalpel] which extrapolates human powers, and both are said to strike their patient/audience to the core'.<sup>77</sup>

In "Wild Palms", Charlotte is not a pianist but a sculptor. To make money while lustfully absconding with Harry, Charlotte hawks her samples and figurines to department stores and assorted audiences. For her, sex and creation are intimate companions, stating: "I like bitching, and making things with my hands. I dont think that's too much to be permitted to like, to want to have and keep" (74). For Charlotte, rightly or wrongly, both compulsions indicate valuable, if unsustainable, forms of liberty and permissiveness, initiating movement from a condition of staid respectability towards an ideal of sexual and artistic freedom. This idea is grounded first in textures throughout the novel, and then, through accumulation, surfaces to form a biblical allegory: that Charlotte seeks a modern form of Jerusalem through these freedoms. Charlotte and Harry finally consummate their affections on the train heading out of New Orleans. She has left her husband Francis, and he has resigned from his position at the hospital. Faulkner sets the scene by having Harry watch Charlotte as she covers 'her hands over her face. Then she removed her hands and he knew it was neither shame nor modesty, he had not expected that, and he saw it was not tears. Then she stepped out of the dress and came and began to unknot his tie, pushing aside his own suddenly clumsy fingers' (51). Charlotte's hands, in contrast to Harry's, are instruments of decision and frank erotic agency.

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<sup>75</sup> Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Garrington, p. 33.

<sup>77</sup> Garrington, p. 176.



In her role as artist and breadwinner, Charlotte stands ‘among the twists of wire and pots of glue and paint and plaster which transformed steadily and endlessly beneath the deft untiring hands into the effigies elegant, bizarre, fantastic and perverse’ (102). The sculptures are as big as small children, satirical renderings of famous literary figures, including Don Quixote, Falstaff, and Cyrano de Bergerac. These are mocking reminders of the doomed artist, driven in futile search for unattainable success by the folly of ambition. Charlotte’s artworks—and she is certain they should be deemed as such even when they enter the marketplace—clutter the apartment, appearing as ‘jointless figures with suave organless bodies and serene almost incredible faces’ (102). These are reminiscent of Hans Bellmer’s emblematically modernist and monstrous dolls, as well as portents of the excavated body.

By some criteria, then, Charlotte’s hands are like those of Garrington’s pianist, delicate and precise, and for the purposes of sculpture able to render complex, lean, epicene constructions using a diverse selection of tools and materials. Harry’s hands, however, have very little resemblance to Garrington’s surgeon. They are uncertain and unqualified, unwieldy and unimaginative. In contrast to Charlotte, Harry attempts a career typing out potboilers, which are devoid of artistic sensibility and the pride of worthy creation. But the most egregious use of his hands is in service of unmonitored abortions. He performs two in the novel. His first procedure, on the mine manager’s wife in Utah, is fraught but ultimately successful. After significant rumination, discussion and delay, his second attempted procedure eventually kills Charlotte.

When Charlotte is taken to hospital, the official asks Harry for an explanation on the botched abortion, questioning what Garrington would term as his ‘positive prosthesis’.<sup>78</sup> Faulkner transforms the suggestive preposition, ‘it’, into the abstract noun, ‘failure’, during the interrogation:

“How do you account for it? Instruments not clean?”

“They were clean.”

“You think so.”

“I know it.”

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<sup>78</sup> Garrington, p. 176.

“Your first attempt?”

“No. Second.”

“Other one come off? But you wouldn’t know.”

“Yes. I know. It did.”

“Then how do you account for this failure?” He could have answered that: I loved her. He could have said it: *A miser would probably bungle the blowing of his own safe too. Should have called in a professional, a cracksman who didn’t care, didn’t love the very iron flanks that held the money* (249–50).

In the end, Harry says nothing, containing his admission—an anomalous monetary metaphor of possession, so out of character for how he thinks of Charlotte—within his thoughts, indicated by Faulkner’s italics. In these lines, Faulkner wedds haptic failure to internalized feeling and private devotion. Harry’s failure is wrung from the fugue of his romantic love and his careless misogyny, and from Charlotte’s desperation to reach some unspecified but no less idealized Jerusalem. Charlotte has talent and desire, metonymized through her hands, and the confidence drawn from this talent and desire constitutes her unyielding worldview and consequent demise.

Learning that Charlotte will not survive, Harry’s hands are rendered almost useless. In an extended scene of fragmentary description, customary of his writing, Faulkner depicts Harry struggling with a cigarette:

[...] his hand was beginning to tremble though not concerned about it yet, laying the sack carefully and blindly aside, watching the tobacco as if he were holding the grains in the paper by the weight of his eyes, putting the other hand to the paper and finding they were both trembling now, the paper parting suddenly between his hands with an almost audible report. His hands were shaking badly now. [...]

He had to hold [the paper] in both hands to lick it [...] It took both hands to hold the match to it too, it not smoke but a single thin lance of heat, of actual fire, which shot into his throat. Nevertheless, the cigarette in his right hand and his left hand gripping his right wrist, he took two more draws before the coal ran too far up the dry side of the paper to draw again and dropped it (260–61).

Harry is a doctor by pretence, and his shaking, unskilled hands, those of false authority, conspire to overwhelm him. The failing of his hands is due punishment for worshipping at the wrong altar, and for pursuing the delusion of artistic and romantic meaning, the plot in which, Faulkner acknowledges, we are all trapped.

The ‘wild palms’ of course denote the whistling trees that ominously border and soundtrack the central tragedy. But as my reading has shown, these ‘wild palms’ also underline the prominence of hands, as both material actors and metaphors, within the novel. Whether hands indicate Charlotte’s dexterous artistry and sexual agency or Harry’s dithering surgical haplessness, they provide illustrations of the relative adequacy of the self-possessed sovereign. Palms, and the associations of palm reading and chiromancy, also draw upon themes and textures of anticipation. Fundamentally, the delay in the operation exacerbates Charlotte’s septicaemia. Just as the condition of waiting risks desiccating the hands of the Israelites, the postponed abortion spoils the hands of Harry and kills Charlotte. The wider desire of the pair to obtain an unachievable romantic and artistic ideal results in a tragedy wrung through anticipation, which falsely valorizes self-ownership as a substitute for clear and supreme sovereign power. These symbols and materialities in the text speak of this wider failure, not exclusive to hands, which permeates so much of the novel’s dialogue. Here are several examples that suggest the antinomic relationship between the stories.

In “Old Man”, the Tall Convict’s acquaintance, the ‘short and plump’ second convict, fails to complete the rudimentary work tasks in his chosen form of detention, the Mississippi State penal farm. His inability to plough fields or render metal fortuitously leaves him with ‘ample leisure’ and the job of cooking, sweeping, and dusting in the deputy warden’s barracks (22). His failure, paradoxically, constitutes success. Conversely, in “Wild Palms”, Harry longs for Charlotte in his fateful, self-excoriating way: *‘It’s comic. It’s more than comic. It rolls you in the aisles. I fail to make the one I love and I make myself a failure toward the one who loves me’* (45). Both these failures are styled within Faulkner’s internalized parentheses, which suggests their private origins: the second convict’s failure is in brackets to suggest third-person irony; Harry’s failure is in brackets and italicized to indicate his unbidden thoughts. These relative failures are portrayed as asides and interruptions that persistently pockmark the lives of the characters.

Rat’s handover of Charlotte to Harry, which Faulkner analogizes as a father passing on the bride, and signals the lovers’ erotic escape through ‘wings, the airy and fragile symbols of love which have failed them once since by universal consent and acceptance they brooded over the very ceremony which, in taking flight, they repudiate’ (37). The mockery within this scene suggests that the flight from civic norms and obligations will

lead them, in the style of Icarus, too near the sun and that their waxy wings will melt. The inherent patriarchy of this original handover is suggested once more after Charlotte's puppet-making business fails abruptly, meaning that Harry and Charlotte must eat austere at home:

She had chops and such, she prepared the meal in a curiously frivolous apron new too like the chintz on the table; he thought how failure, reacting upon her like on a man by investing her with a sort of dignified humility, had yet brought out in her a quality which he had never seen before, a quality not only female but profoundly feminine (69).

They end the night by having sex, initiated by Charlotte, suggesting that the failures of both business and domesticity does not have to encroach on primal urges. This scene provides more the refutation of the apron, patriarchy, and traditional notions of feminine submission: ““Get your clothes off,” [Charlotte] said. “The hell with it. I can still bitch”” (79). At this moment, Harry keeps news of his recent sacking to himself; his failing is now one of deception, known only to the private investigator, a man who Rat employs after Charlotte stops sending him her requisite monthly letters.

In “Wild Palms”, in the Utah mine, Charlotte implores Harry to tell the workers that the bosses have left, and that they will not be paid: ““Yes you can. Someway. They believe you are the boss now and nobody yet ever failed to understand the man he believes is his boss. Try to get them over to the commissary”” (167). Harry, as the shadow and illusory authority, must deliver the hard facts of industry. Later, in San Antonio, Harry offers his services as a doctor in the way he did back in Chicago, where ‘he would think *I imagine I am going to fail* and he would fail; now he knew he was going to fail and he refused to believe it, refused to accept no for an answer until threatened almost with physical violence’ (124). The states and degrees of failure are disconcerting; they are partly real, thought, imaginary, and prescient, wrought both in private denial and external circumstances.

Alternately, in “Old Man”, a doctor is a figure of vague authority, listening to the Tall Convict's recollection of the train robbery, and responding absentmindedly: ““I see,” the doctor said. “But something went wrong. But you've had plenty of time to think about it since. To decide what was wrong, what you failed to do”” (208). The doctor suggests that because he has had time to reflect, the Tall Convict now holds the monopoly on decision

and a sense of what constitutes his failures. The conversation that follows is held at cross-purposes:

“Yes,” the convict said. “I’ve thought about it a right smart since.”

“So next time you are not going to make that mistake.”

“I dont know,” the convict said. “There aint going to be a next time.”

“Why? If you know what you did wrong, they wont catch you next time” (208).

The Tall Convict is now 25 years old and no longer a teenager. To repeat his actions would be impossible. New mistakes and failures, shaded differently, will instead reveal themselves, refracted into the present.

The final chapter of *The Wild Palms* is from “Old Man”. The Governor sends a young man to the Warden. The deputy reports of the convict’s return with boat. The emissary says: ““But he has received an official discharge as being dead. Not a pardon nor a parole either: a discharge. He’s either dead, or free. In either case he doesn’t belong here”” (276). The *ad hoc* committee think about convicting him for the same crime twice but decide against it. They say he attempted escape and sentence him to a further ten years in Parchman. The convict accepts it “if that’s the rule” (280). The Tall Convict is left with the cigar given to him by the Warden, ‘burning smoothly and richly in his clean steady hand, the smoke wreathing upward across his face saturnine, humorless, and calm’ (287). He curses women, his hand a wretched emblem of steadfast resilience. This act shows the antinomic relationship of hands in the text.

Through discussion of Melville, this chapter has introduced the operation of symbols as important to ideas about formal antinomy. This discussion has illuminated the idea of failure in the novel as a more political idea than previously understood. Minor successes, such as Charlotte and Harry’s erotic escape, are overwhelmed. In “Old Man”, small victories, such as the Tall Convict’s release from prison, are subsumed. Individuals have freedom and autonomy until sovereign forces overrule them. In both stories, the natural and social worlds suffocate human choice. Tragic flaws of lust, envy, sloth, and docility suffer in deference to professional authorities. The antinomic operation of symbols finds its most significant locus in the novel through palms and hands. The wild palms provide the foreboding backdrop for the various tragic failures in the text, and the wilderness is a

literary trope in conflict with itself, functioning as a physical reality and a required symbol. This section has argued that hands are as important as palms to the novel: Charlotte's artistic ambitions manifest themselves in strangely crafted figurines, only for the susurrations of the rustling, wind-shaken palms to preface her fateful end. Harry's hands are instrumental to one successful and one failed abortion, during which Faulkner positions the bristling palms within the natural environment, as ominous conduits for the 'black wind' (245), which insinuate past mistakes, present complacency, and forthcoming doom. The following section analyses how this interaction between history and the present is emblemized by Charlotte's disastrous abortion in "Wild Palms" and the disaster of the flood in "Old Man".

### 3.6 The Flood and the Prison

In *The Wild Palms*, the American South is defined by the flood, which is sometimes gothic and sometimes tragic, and operates as an antinomy that inflects Charlotte's abortion as gothic and tragic. The reader is directed away from judging Charlotte as a failed mother, and Harry as a failed father, and this presentation limits Faulkner's exploration of failure, because this allows Faulkner not to make a judgement that he concertedly does not want to make, or he thinks that he does not have the authority to make. Given Faulkner's reputation as a definitive Southern Gothic writer,<sup>79</sup> place—and Faulkner's imaginative possession of place—is crucial to understanding the temporalities of the novel. The descriptions of the flood inform the narrative construction of anticipation. This needs to be understood in the context of Charlotte's failed abortion, because the flood is the antinomic counterpart to the story of the abortion, which makes both stories about anticipation in different ways. What defines Charlotte's failed abortion is that Harry succeeds in performing the previous one, casting another pall over the text. In one ominous scene, Harry is thrown out of a doctor's surgery for offering half-price procedures, which prefaces Charlotte's own fate. The act itself is, according to Irving Howe, representative of 'the moral ugliness of the city', because 'Harry's ineptness at abortion, a technique of civilization [...] causes their catastrophe' and that 'between the city from which they

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<sup>79</sup> See Susan V. Donaldson, 'Making a Spectacle: Welty, Faulkner, and Southern Gothic', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 50.4 (1997), 567–84.

would escape and the natural world they dream of finding, there is no intermediate area of shade and rest'.<sup>80</sup> But the abortion does not take place in the city, and abortions—like sex work, like so many things about women's bodies in Faulkner—represent the constant emergence of the pre-civilized, the archaic and the primal into the civilized.

In "Wild Palms", at the New Orleans coast, the doctor, who features only at the start and near the end of the novel, attempts to save Charlotte after Harry's botched abortion. For his pains, this desperate act invites opprobrium from his wife, who views the two men as part of a perverted alliance: "So you will aid and abet him to the last, wont you? I'm not surprised. I never yet saw one man fail to back up another, provided what they wanted to do was just foolish enough" (244). Even in profound distress, disagreement and antagonism, the doctor's wife reveals how men will unite in whatever dire circumstances. Harry says nothing (again), because he is wrought with despair. In these lines, failure is explicitly wedded to internalized feeling and private devotion, never to be disentangled. Failure, for Harry, is insurmountable; it stems from the fugue of romantic love. At the end of the story, Harry can at least rectify one oversight while pondering his fate. He finally sees 'beyond the flat one-storey border of the river, across the river and toward the sea, the concrete hull of one of the emergency ships built in 1918 and never finished, the hull, the hulk' (264). With the benefit of sunset and half-light, Harry now observes in flecked streaks what was otherwise unmoving and fixed, the incomplete vessel that fell into a preemptive wreckage. Harry's moment of reflection on the loss of Charlotte indicates, too, the types of emergency measures that may have mitigated the flood in "Old Man". These political failings—of the abortion and the flood—are man-made to the extent that the authorities involved are negligent.

Walter Benjamin is a useful interlocutor for teasing out the political nature of the flood that determines so much of the novel. On March 23, 1932, Benjamin, delivered a radio lecture on "The Mississippi Flood of 1927", which detailed the failure of the river's levee system during the flood of that year, the same flood that frames the events of "Old Man".<sup>81</sup> For Lecia Rosenthal, Benjamin reads the flood as 'saturated with a history of politics and power. The horrors that emerge [...] are all the more horrifying for Benjamin as effects of

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<sup>80</sup> Howe, p. 95.

<sup>81</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "The Mississippi Flood, 1927", trans. by Jonathan Lutes, in *Radio Benjamin*, ed. by Lecia Rosenthal (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 176–81.

political failure and racial injustice'.<sup>82</sup> The flood is not an instance where nature has defeated human will, but an event wherein one class of humanity has sacrificed another: 'Its most glaring moment of contradiction is the political decision, enforced by armed troops and maintained through a "state of siege" (effectively martial law), to prevent the inundation of the city of New Orleans by blowing up the levee of its neighbors'.<sup>83</sup> These distinctly political factors, which undermine a clear confrontation with the individual and an amoral nature, open fresh readings of *The Wild Palms*.

This argument comes into even clearer focus through Schmitt's work on tragedy in *Hamlet*, outlined in the previous chapter. The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 conforms to the framework of the intrusion of the time into play, because it alludes to an event which took place at the time of the book's publication, the Ohio River Valley Flood of 1937. It is possible that contemporary readers would have drawn on the current flood and, as such, invested a political quality to Faulkner's novel. For Schmitt, this effect would be more a potent literary effect than 'allusion' or 'mirroring';<sup>84</sup> it would be the intrusion of real life, likely known by the readers and thus transforming their reading of the novel considering this significant event. In this specific sense, Faulkner's use of the flood gives the text immediate power and meaning, which infuses the text with true tragic potential. The intrusion of real events disrupts the reader's grappling with time in the stories—they are set more than ten years apart—which gives much of the work an acute sense of doom, foreboding, anticipation, and tragedy. But whereas Schmitt's theorizing of the intrusion of time into history in *Hamlet* is somewhat literal and limited, Benjamin offers a more subtle exploration of the power of the political interruption into fiction, which bears on my argument about *The Wild Palms*.

In "Old Man", for instance, the Tall Convict's fear of the flood recalls his fear during the train robbery that led to his incarceration. But the train robbery was fleeting, where the flood is encompassing, which teaches the Tall Convict something new: 'that if you just held on long enough a time would come in fear after which it would no longer be agony at all but merely a kind of horrible outrageous itching, as after you have been burned bad'

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<sup>82</sup> Lecia Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and the Politics of Consolation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 85.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*, trans. by David Pan and Jennifer Rust (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2009), pp. 22–25.



(94). When experiencing this threat, the Tall Convict develops a current sense of aftermath and a painful convalescence during the event. He has been sent to pick up a man and a woman, but he has only rescued the latter, because ‘he had lost his partner and failed to find the man, and now all in the world he wanted was something flat to leave the woman on until he could find an officer, a sheriff’ (139). His voyage becomes a threefold failure, as the Tall Convict sits bobbing on the desolate water, faced by a suspicious man with a shotgun. The Tall Convict’s explanation to this man consists of his desire for an authority figure, someone able to resolve not only the immediate situation but to restore him to the prison and the clarity of confinement, which provides the most certain and consistent framing of man as failure. After launching the pregnant woman onto dry land, he falls back down the bank, ‘as if his own failed and spent flesh were attempting to carry out his furious unflagging will for severance at any price, even that of drowning, from the burden with which, unwitting and without choice, he had been doomed’ (149). The Tall Convict’s body collapses rather than enact the decision made on his behalf, that is, to save the woman, which now amounts to his fate. Shrouded in anticipation, he expects, even desires, to sacrifice his liberty once again to the prison. The authorities have put the Tall Convict in this position; he is the political sacrifice they have made in the time of an emergency.

Cynthia Dobbs elaborates on the historical context that frames the Tall Convict’s adventure and which supports Benjamin’s analysis of the flood. Citing John Barry’s text, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (1997), as a model for understanding Faulkner’s rendering of the flood in “Old Man”, Dobbs isolates it as an ‘extraordinary historical event’, during which ‘[w]aters thirty feet deep stretched from Illinois to Louisiana, killing thousands and leaving roughly a million people homeless’.<sup>85</sup> This cultural moment was evocative for Faulkner because it was both ‘a natural event of nearly mythic proportions’ and ‘also a sociopolitical event, resulting as much from corrupt public policy as from the whimsy of nature’.<sup>86</sup> Dobbs argues that the flood provided physical characteristics of ‘a historical event that blurred the boundaries between social control and the forces of Nature’ and ‘a rich source of metaphor’, which was ‘notoriously unpredictable and idiosyncratic in its flows’ and as such could be appropriated in different ways.<sup>87</sup> According to Dobbs, Faulkner variously uses the flood to

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<sup>85</sup> Cynthia Dobbs, ‘Flood: The Excesses of Geography, Gender and Capitalism in Faulkner’s *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*’, *American Literature*, 73.4 (2001), 811–35 (pp. 814–18).

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*

designate ‘a certain conception of Woman, for the dangerous unpredictability of capitalism (revealed so profoundly in the 1930s), and for the structure of the novel itself, whose dual narratives can be read in terms of flows and counter-flows’.<sup>88</sup> The relationship between metaphor and materiality comes to a head for Faulkner, as he ‘makes central a figure from natural history—the Mississippi Flood of 1927—to expand this sense of radical disorientation to include the very landscape on which his characters attempt to ground themselves’.<sup>89</sup> It is thus essential to juxtapose the fluidities of the flood with the solidities of the prison, because each setting functions as the antinomic counterpart to other, and each reveals political peculiarities to the Southern consciousness and the Gothic literary mode, which subsequently opens discussion on the role of sovereignty in the novel.

This question on the nature of flood and the prison can be posed at a purely symbolic level. Patrick McHugh suggests that Faulkner ‘dramatizes the tragedy confronting the [Edenic] tradition in the twentieth century: the effort to create Eden out of the wilderness leads to a repressive patriarchy whose model is the prison’.<sup>90</sup> In this case, ‘a man can choose the prison out of fear and hatred to achieve an ignoble triumph, or he can choose the prison in the shame and disgrace of romantic failure’.<sup>91</sup> The prison is often read as crucial to reading sovereignty, as both a concept and actualization of sovereignty. The paradox of exercising personal sovereignty is to choose the prison, but this is not a choice in any clear sense. McHugh states ‘the teleological perspective of *The Wild Palms*—with its view of a man-made yet inalterable world, and its consequent lack of alternatives to the Edenic tradition of tragic success or failure’.<sup>92</sup> In this reading, the man-made world is overwhelmed by nature and flooded out. But McHugh’s biblical focus ignores the more material, even political aspects of the flood, which are, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, more useful for opening discussion on the text, and span Faulkner to Melville, whose water is also intensely material, biblical, and symbolic.

On a more granular level, but remaining within the historical and cultural context, Daniel Aaron states that ‘Faulkner’s South, for all of its authentic particularity, is a space larger than life in which a magnified cast of performers carry out fated acts. His stores,

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Patrick McHugh, ‘William Faulkner and the American New Jerusalem’, *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 48.1 (1992), 25–43 (p. 38).

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*

work-places, forests, houses, monuments, jails and churches are the setting for a sprawling historical spectacle that violently unfolds to the accompaniment of rhetorical music'.<sup>93</sup> In Faulkner's writings, the construct of the prison as immutable, unchanging, offers its inmates the chance for social order and private redemption.<sup>94</sup> In the play-prose hybrid, *Requiem of a Nun* (1951), the fate of Nancy, the sacrificial prostitute, who finds spiritual solace in suffering while she awaits execution for murder, is exemplary of this trend in his work.<sup>95</sup> In the more narratively straightforward, *The Mansion* (1959), Faulkner sketches another murderer, Mink, whose impending, lifelong stint in the jailhouse is described as 'his destination, doom', which is noteworthy not least for how it frames the author's attempts to perform private moral rescues on his incarcerated characters, whom he habitually puts in dire predicaments and hopeless circumstances.<sup>96</sup> By renouncing a level of human agency, Faulkner's prisoner tends to embrace the virtues of a structured existence, seeking the consequential meaning derived from hard labour and limited freedoms, the sort of meaning found in routine and resilience. The option to succumb to a higher, punitive authority is always available to the Faulknerian individual, functioning as an ever-present last resort. In Faulkner's fictional worlds, though the judge decides, the convict often appears minded to accept the sentence.

The male characters in *The Wild Palms* go willingly into imprisonment: Harry makes little fuss in the courtroom that asserts his guilt; the Tall Convict accedes to the ten extra years passed down by the Warden for supposed desertion. The Southern Gothic rubric is also useful for understanding these instances of acquiescence. The process of mourning is the most potent and unresolved element in the text, because, as Richard Moreland notes, 'the novel ends before [Harry] can articulate the work of mourning he has decided to undertake'.<sup>97</sup> The final scene inaugurates 'that process of mourning but in the same stroke also prematurely resolve it into something less resembling mourning than melancholia, a retrospective, imprisoning, self-flagellating repetition of his loss'.<sup>98</sup> According to this reading, the setting of the prison perpetuates Harry's melancholy as rooted in the conflict

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<sup>93</sup> Daniel Aaron, 'Clytie's Legs', *London Review of Books*, 2 May 1985, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v07/n08/daniel-aaron/clytie-s-legs>> [accessed 04 July 2021].

<sup>94</sup> For a discussion on Faulkner's depiction of prisons, see Noel Polk, 'Faulkner's "The Jail" and the Meaning of Cecilia Farmer', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 25.3 (1972), 305–25.

<sup>95</sup> See William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage International, 2012).

<sup>96</sup> William Faulkner, *The Mansion* (New York: Vintage International, 2011), p. 53.

<sup>97</sup> Richard C. Moreland, *Faulkner and Modernism: Rereading and Rewriting* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 237–38.

<sup>98</sup> Moreland, p. 128.

between his love for Charlotte and the external forces of the universe that thwarted this love. Moreland alludes to the lovers' agency, however, stating that the 'willful innocence of Charlotte and Harry' is juxtaposed with the 'willful irony of the Tall Convict'.<sup>99</sup> This view suggests the antinomic relationship between the two stories but misreads it. One of the Tall Convict's defining features, for instance, is rather his lack of irony, which is why his story is so ironic. The idea of willfulness returns often to describe the characters actions, as if they were propelled forward by their capacity for decision, but they are not.

Charlotte offers the principal antinomy to the Tall Convict, not Harry, because she negotiates the masculine agon of the South in remarkably parallel ways to the Tall Convict. That both characters *appear* willful in their actions and decisions is a product of Faulkner's temporal representational strategy. As David Dowling notes, the 'recognition of the importance of time, reality, meat (the flesh) comes too late for poor Charlotte', associating Charlotte's body with her incomprehension of temporal movement, because, when pregnant, she had 'already fallen into someone else's time'.<sup>100</sup> The Tall Convict could be plausibly this someone else, because he 'has learnt that love can take a man into a different kind of timelessness, the timelessness of prison'.<sup>101</sup> This antinomic relationship can be expressed through Faulkner's conception of literary time, where 'there is only the present moment in which I include the past and the future and that is eternity'.<sup>102</sup> For O'Faolain, this theorizing of time embeds 'an active present in an unending continuum that drowns it and us in timeless fate; [it] castrates human potency; [and] means that in our sense nothing ever happens, things merely recur'.<sup>103</sup> This description of time is partly illustrated by Faulkner's recursive narrative style in *The Wild Palms*, outlined earlier in the chapter. But I would not characterize Faulkner's temporal creation as one composed of an entirely forlorn limbo; in fact, Faulkner's characters find some value in their lack of willfulness and inability to decide. This indecision is shown through their actions in the formally political settings throughout the novel, the prison and the courthouse.

Aside from Faulkner's effortful weave of themes and rhythms, the final setting of Parchman Farm, the state penitentiary of Mississippi, unites the storylines. That this is a

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Dowling, pp. 107–08

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Faulkner, quoted in O'Faolain.

<sup>103</sup> O'Faolain.

real establishment is unusual for Faulkner, who otherwise placed great value on mapping the imagined geographies of his art, producing elegant geometric drawings of his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, wherein all but four of his novels are situated. The particularity of Parchman is resonant within the plot. In “Wild Palms”, Harry, after being sentenced to 50 years hard labour for killing Charlotte, rejects a cyanide pill from Charlotte’s husband, Rat, in one of Parchman’s cells, famously taking grief over nothing. In “Old Man”, the Tall Convict acquiesces to increased jail time on his voluntary return to Parchman, content with life in a regulated institution. Faulkner suggests in both instances that these characters only possess limited choices, and that the line between free will and determinism is necessarily blurred. Within the security of confinement, where physical liberty is contained or withheld, the mind devises its own limits and freedoms.

According to Jay Watson, the courtroom in “Wild Palms” resembles ‘judicial theater’, but ‘a morality play is what this trial is not, what it refuses to become’, even though ‘the community intends to stage [it as such]’.<sup>104</sup> The metaphor of the theatre extends is expansive, because the characters placed in ‘the leading roles, preassigned by consensus, are conventional and allegorical’:

[...] the morality play, however, is subverted from the outset. [Harry], for instance, won’t play his assigned role. He admits his guilt freely and forthrightly to the court. Nor does he offer his plea in hope and receiving a lenient sentence. He is prepared to face the consequences of his actions [...] he undermines, and humanizes, the community’s image of him.<sup>105</sup>

Watson emphasizes the role of Charlotte’s husband, Rat, because ‘the effect of [his] appearance at the trial is to render [Harry] even more human and thus to expose the community’s allegorizing practices as implausible and strained’.<sup>106</sup> As well as presenting another “role”, Faulkner’s characterization of Rat is the most sympathetic depiction of authority in the novel. He is not the archetypal vengeful and jealous husband; he is rather possessed by apparently infinite levels of mercy and tranquility. His pernicious dominion over Charlotte is shown not as a product of his personality but of a patriarchal society.

Returning to the courtroom, Watson argues that the fictive effects of the trial have material consequences, because ‘as the allegory continues to unravel, there is a

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<sup>104</sup> Jay Watson, *Forensic Fictions: The Lawyer Figure in Faulkner* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), pp. 29–31.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

corresponding breakdown of social order in the courtroom. [...] Deprived of its tidy moral categories, the gallery grows incapable of channeling its indignation or even making sense of the trial'.<sup>107</sup> This incomprehension collapses the 'distinction between victim and villain. Soon all social distinctions collapse, and the gallery becomes a mob', which 'increasingly resembles the lynching parties [...] and even as the judge frantically attempts to restore order, the sound of outrage and chaos beats on outside the courtroom, like the sound of the wind in the palms'.<sup>108</sup> The nature of fictionality is defined by the intense allegorizing and symbolism of the courtroom, and then subsequently exposed by the visceral human responses from the public and the jury at the end of the trial. This scene forms a locus for Faulkner's concern with the powers of artifice and literature in the novel. In "Old Man", he ironizes the tenets of adventure; in "Wild Palms", he explores and undercuts the tropes of romance. The theme of rule and order is central to both stories in *The Wild Palms*. I have complemented the critical summaries on the prison with a more intensive reading of the courtroom setting, which determines both Harry and the Tall Convict's fate.

The influence of Melville, the antinomic use of symbols, and the complicating and splicing of genre forms are also essential to Faulkner's recapitulation of myth as a particular form of the fictive. Faulkner seeks to articulate the conditions of the sovereign individual, who retools failure as a contingent measure to be used against external orders of sovereign authority. In the following section, I suggest that *The Wild Palms* is more than a self-reflexive exercise about the failure of fictions and the self-deceptions of the artist.<sup>109</sup> I read the book as interested in the capitulation to romance, and the meaning this theme has for individual sovereignty and its relationship to the power of myth. Faulkner presents a triumph of the individual's will to accept failure in the present moment. I will demonstrate in the final section how Schmitt's work allows me to embed and inflect the arguments put in place through my close reading of *The Wild Palms*.

### 3.7 Romance and Myth

The problem of aesthetics, and literary aesthetics specifically, begins for Schmitt in his

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> See Vincent Allan King, 'The Wages of Pulp: The Use and Abuse of Fiction in William Faulkner's "The Wild Palms"', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 51.3 (1998), 503–25.

first book *Political Romanticism* (1919), which informs discussions of his political and legal theory. In it, Schmitt criticizes the romantic desire to uphold ‘the exclusively aesthetic’ approach to intellectual life. This desire causes a peculiar affliction. Romantics suffer from ‘subjectified occasionalism’, which entails the ability to think but not act. This psychological state contributes to the general Romantic attitude, which serves ‘to privatize through the medium of the aesthetic the other domains of intellectual life as well’. He argues that if ‘the hierarchy of the intellectual sphere disintegrates, then everything can become the center of intellectual life’, and fears the aesthetic subverts order and diminishes meaning, because it upends traditional intellectual hierarchies and wrestles for the dominant domain of thought.<sup>110</sup>

For Schmitt, Kierkegaard provides one of the most striking illustrations of the Romantic attitude in ‘The Seducer’s Diary’.<sup>111</sup> The story emphasizes romanticism not as an identifiable collection of cultural objects, movements, or legible styles, but an attitude that necessarily treats individual experience as the primary mode of value and knowledge. The story is about Johannes, a young man who chances upon a young girl and concocts a byzantine and calculated amorous pursuit. These are components of a game, to be undertaken for his own amusement. He passes it off as aesthetic experience, superficially stimulating, sensual and imaginative. Without concrete meaning or moral grounding, actions are defined by equivocation, fortune, and caprice. This attitude Schmitt equates with romanticism. The Romantic privileges his subjectivity above all else. There are no consequences, only the occasion upon which to perform. Scholars have identified Schmitt’s critique of romanticism and advocacy of politics as itself a form of romanticism, which brings Schmitt into conversation with not only Kierkegaard, but foundational theorists such as Machiavelli.<sup>112</sup>

This reading suggests that Schmitt illuminates as political the attitude of romance and the effects of romance on intellectual life, which assists the reader in understanding Faulkner’s novels as political. Faulkner’s characters choose failure as a contingent measure to be deployed against the narrative tropes of romance fiction. By doing so, Faulkner

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<sup>110</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>111</sup> Guy Oakes, ‘The Romantic Attitude’, in *Political Romanticism*, pp. xiv–xx. See also Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 243–376.

<sup>112</sup> See F. R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 125–30; Avanesian, ‘Anti-Ironic Politics?’, pp. 199–220.

resists the romance genre through appeals to myth, because, at its heart, the narrative of *The Wild Palms* is concerned with people making myths. Schmitt's rejection of romance and broader interest in myth helps to view the broader ramifications of this story, as one which is about two people who wanted to create something mythic, beyond the ideas and rules of romance. The rejection of fiction that the book portrays, which I have illustrated throughout this chapter, makes this connection between Harry and Charlotte's mythic will and the political implications of this story that eschews romantic fiction for myth.

Dobbs classifies the novel's key modernist tropes as 'the slippery relationships among memory, history, and myth; the agonizing yet aesthetically energizing task of constructing a narrative of history and self in a world where objectivity is clearly impossible and the grounds of subjectivity are always in question'.<sup>113</sup> Dobbs argues that "Old Man" 'begins like a mythic fairy tale' and 'pits the forces of history against the power of myth'. This view offers a key argument to work with, because the fabular quality of both stories insinuates a sort of predestiny for the characters, depicting conditions of determined fate that Faulkner thought governed human behaviour. At the chronological opening of "Wild Palms" (Chapter III), Faulkner reintroduces his central pair as if they were figures from a fairy tale: 'When the man called Harry met Charlotte Rittenmeyer, he was an intern in a New Orleans hospital' (27). Employing a likewise sensibility, "Old Man" begins: 'Once (it was in Mississippi, in May, in the flood year 1927) there were two convicts' (20). These reflexive scene-setters imply forthcoming moral assessments of the characters, but Faulkner offers consistently wry, empathetic presentations of their foolhardy pursuits.

These depictions strike the reader as crucial to Faulkner's literary exercise. His ironizing of myth paradoxically argues for its contemporary potency. As Dobbs argues it:

[...] the ways in which historical particularity insists its way into the attempted seamlessness of myth; Faulkner's delineation of location, season, and year disrupts the mythic, fairy-tale rhetoric. [...] Faulkner appears to want to tell (at least) two discrete yet inextricable stories at once—one mythic, one more historically circumscribed. Indeed, in their very namelessness, and in their struggles against the primal forces of the flood, the Tall Convict and the nameless pregnant woman of "Old Man" take on mythic dimensions.<sup>114</sup>

These appeals to myth find their diluted form in the literary pursuits of the characters. In "Wild Palms", Harry writes and sells fiction about accidental trysts and unplanned

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<sup>113</sup> Dobbs, p. 811.

<sup>114</sup> Dobbs, p. 815.



maternity ‘to the confession magazines’, a process of creation and transaction that ominously prefaces Charlotte’s fateful abortion. When money is short, Harry, who is far from a natural writer, works in an ugly and tedious labour ritual that culminates in him ‘staring at but not seeing the two or three current visible lines of his latest primer-bald moronic fable’ (104). In contrast to Charlotte’s sophisticated crafted figurines, Harry formulates, in uncertain pursuit of some vague enthusiasm, a tale that starts with the line: ‘At sixteen I was an unwed mother’. Harry’s crass genre work functions as a soft allusion to Faulkner’s own pornographic potboiler, *Sanctuary*.

In “Old Man”, the Tall Convict is caught, aged 19, trying to rob a train, and has since rationalized his plight as one determined by the pernicious effects of literature. His ‘china-colored outraged eyes’ are ‘directed not at the men who had foiled his crime, not even the lawyers and judges who had sent him here, but at the writers, the uncorporeal names attached to the stories, the paper novels—the Diamond Dicks and Jesse Jameses and such’ (20). His imagination fired by the apparent ‘stamp of verisimilitude and authenticity’ offered by these tales of the Old West, he is lulled into a costly juvenile error. Fiction, then, is at the root of his ills and becomes the target of his ire, leaving him not in a ‘walled penitentiary’ but ‘a cotton plantation which the convicts work under the rifles and shotguns of guards and trustees’ (21). This deceptive state of captivity suggests the possibility of unlicensed freedom through the tantalizing panorama of the American frontier. Instead, the Tall Convict, who is now 25 years old, find himself ‘fumbling among the rubbish left him by his once and only experience with courts and law, fumbling until the meaningless and verbose shibboleth took form at last’ (21). His mental scrabbling in the wake of the implacable legal system is of an introspective rather than prehensile kind, and Faulkner’s deployment of ‘shibboleth’, taken from the Hebrew for ‘stream in flood’, provides the first premonition of the task the Tall Convict must undertake, during which he is able to put his hands to steady, and potentially redemptive, use.

The influence of fables has actual consequences for the characters, who desire either to imitate their methods or to absorb their supposed teachings. Faulkner’s novel thus can be read as a critique of the romance of fiction and the romanticization of social life. The purported sovereignty of the author is the source of much merciless satirical criticism. Harry’s laughable attempts at writing potboiler fiction and the Tall Convict’s naïve efforts to hold up a carriage both constitute follies that end in tragedy; both are the product of

romantic delusions. The Tall Convict's botched robbery is a failure of his intellectual application and an example of his misguided deference to the utility of storytelling:

He had laid his plans in advance; he had followed his printed (and false) authority to the letter; he had saved the paper-backs for two years, reading and rereading them, memorising them, comparing and weighing story and method against story and method, taking the good from each and discarding the dross as a workable plan emerged' (21).

The Tall Convict realises that by placing faith in literature as a blueprint for living, he has sentenced himself to his fate. Because it led to his capture, he must admit to the District Attorney that the idea for the pistol, lantern and face-covering handkerchief had come to him 'by peddling among his pine-hill neighbors subscriptions to *Detectives' Gazette*' (22).

In the novel, the aspiration to myth is ironized through the romance and adventure genres, which illuminates a reading of Schmitt's critique of romanticism. As McHugh states,

[...] the narrative romance of a failed attempt to escape the confines of an oppressive society that leads back to the most oppressive and confining of all social institutions. Thus the romance reverberates through the myth, so that the hero's triumph is undercut by an exposure of his basic cowardice and the high cost of victory. Likewise, the myth reverberates through the romance to show not only the oppressiveness of sanctified social values, norms, and laws, but more particularly the reckless immaturity of trying to escape destiny.<sup>115</sup>

That "Old Man" is 'a myth is all but unmistakable; that it is also the satire of that myth is perhaps more subtle'.<sup>116</sup> McHugh is identifying a crucial aspect the text, which shows how Faulkner can ironize and complicate Schmitt's view on romanticism. Faulkner has an acute metatextual awareness of how literature can defeat the authorial sovereign, accompanied by a sense that literary defeat is not so bad, morally speaking, because it signals the end of false hope and romantic delusion, and because it is the source of intellectual pride and validation. Importantly, his work also ironizes this perspective, eschewing genre for a reflexive literary modernist stance, which interrogates the relationship between freedom and romance in fiction. The psychology of Faulkner's characters provides an illustration and critique of the romantic attitude, which invites a fresh understanding of Schmitt, whose work anxiously and insistently outlines the perils of romanticization on social life.

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<sup>115</sup> McHugh, p. 31.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*

### 3.8 Conclusion

Faulkner's complicated critique of the romance genre allows me to show the paradoxes within Schmitt's ideas about the romantic and mythic. Because of his own insistence, Schmitt's critique of romanticism, which he designates as a historical and cultural period, is often conflated with his critique of aesthetics and aestheticism. Schmitt counterposes the power of myth against the frivolities of romance. However, Faulkner uses aesthetic and representational techniques in *The Wild Palms* to produce a critique of the romance genre through its engagement with myth, which reveals two perspectives on Schmitt: one, that it is productive to separate Schmitt's intellectual treatments of romanticism and aesthetics; and two, that Schmitt's apparent rejection of romanticism and forms of the romantic attitude are not final statements, but sometimes slippery rhetorical assertions that require further interrogation.

Others have recognised that the anxiety of Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophical influence places Faulkner in conversation with Melville.<sup>117</sup> These readings have often helped to make it clear that Faulkner's characters are not necessarily overwhelmed by the power of bad choices and natural disasters, but by the negligence and malice of those in authority: doctors, judges, lawyers, wardens, and officers. My overall contention is that failure *as* contingency—understood as a voluntary and therefore noble abdication of self-reliance to an external, liberty-depriving institution—is a major and more complex theme of *The Wild Palms*. The act of failure is one of revelation for the main characters. This understanding marks the text as decidedly political. Faulkner's characters relinquish personal sovereignty as a form of preservation and obligation. The characters' sovereignty, as it slides away from the individual and towards the institution, is depicted as essentially contingent in *The Wild Palms*, the result of unpredictable events for which they nonetheless prepare.

This chapter is a contribution to Faulkner studies in its greater and more thorough concentration on the relationship of Charlotte and the Tall Convict, and not least in privileging the antinomic movements between these characters—not just the men—in reading masculinity in the text. In contrast to the common scholarly view, Charlotte and

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<sup>117</sup> For analysis of the thematic connections between Emerson, Faulkner and Melville, see William E.H. Meyer, Jr., 'Faulkner, Hemingway, et al.: The Emersonian Test of American Authorship', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 51.3 (1998), 557–71 (pp. 567–70); James E. Caron, 'Emerson's Sublime Pastoralism, Parody, and Second Sight in Faulkner's As "I Lay Dying"', *The Faulkner Journal*, 29.1 (2015), 71–99 (p. 94).

the Tall Convict, instead of Harry and the Tall Convict, are more productively read as the two key characters presented in antinomy. Paying attention to this antinomy as it bears upon the novel's critique of the romance genre helps me to reach farther reading conclusions about the mythic nature of authorship and sovereignty. But the novel's dual structure also highlights antinomies between all of the stories' protagonists: Charlotte and Harry in "Wild Palms"; the unnamed pregnant woman (to a lesser extent) and the Tall Convict in "Old Man". These characters exhibit tendencies towards both autonomy and subservience; all at different times enact decisions and withhold his or her agency; all bring into relief the contingent and diffuse nature of the sovereign self and of sovereign authority. In all these instances, divine and revelatory sovereignty is brought into the sullied and malformed secular world.

It is notable that one of the most high-profile commentators on the nature of power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century engages directly with *The Wild Palms*, and with Faulkner's work more generally. Simone de Beauvoir reads the "Wild Palms" story as an unequivocal success. In her correspondence with Nelson Algren, de Beauvoir writes about the difficulty 'to speak frankly, genuinely, about sex and sexual love [...] in a convincing way', arguing that 'maybe the best thing is to speak of it in an incidental way, as Faulkner in *Wild Palms*; there you feel physical love; it makes you gasp, yet very little is said'.<sup>118</sup> Faulkner articulates the pursuit of failed creative attempts and failure as artistic striving inherent to literary expression, which lent itself to post-war developments across artistic media.

The formal and thematic legacy of *The Wild Palms* stretches across French culture,<sup>119</sup> exemplified by its direct influence on Agnes Varda's *La Pointe Courte* (1955) and its sedimentary appearance in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960).<sup>120</sup> Its jump cuts and discontinuities, common to characterizations of the French New Wave, hold echoes of

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<sup>118</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, quoted in Michael Rogin, 'More than ever, and for ever', *London Review of Books*, 17 September 1998, <[www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v20/n18/michael-rogin/more-than-ever-and-for-ever](http://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v20/n18/michael-rogin/more-than-ever-and-for-ever)> [accessed 19 June 2022].

<sup>119</sup> For Faulkner's more general influence on French culture, see Peter Lurie, 'The French Faulkner: Vision, Instrumentality, and Sanctuary's "Lake of Ink"', in *Transatlantic Visions: The American South in Europe, Europe in the American South*, ed. by Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and Richard Grey (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2007), pp. 51–67; François Pitavy, 'The Making of a French Faulkner: A Reflection on Translation', *The Faulkner Journal*, 24.1 (2008), 83–97; Gisèle Sapiro, 'Faulkner in France Or How to Introduce a Peripheral Unknown Author in the Center of the World Republic of Letters', *Journal of World Literature*, 1 (2016), 391–411; Frédérique Spill, 'France's Encounter with Faulkner', *The Faulkner Journal*, 32.1 (2018), 9–32.

<sup>120</sup> See Lauren Du Graf, 'The Wild Palms in a New Wave: Adaptive Gleaning and the Birth of the *Nouvelle Vague*', *Adaptation*, 10.1 (2017), 34–50.

Faulkner's writing. The reference to *The Wild Palms* in the film is even more explicit. In a scene of entwined lovers, Patricia (Jean Seberg) quotes in wistful cadence the immortal line about grief and nothing to budding felon, Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo). His fair rejoinder, which discards guilt for volition, undercuts the logical fallacies of Harry and the Tall Convict, and the ethical conundrums disputed by Charlotte and her husband. Why embrace incarceration and, in doing so, shoulder an eternal burden of despair? Michel does not consider this decision to be particularly tricky: 'Grief is stupid. I'd choose nothing. It's no better but grief is a compromise. You have to go for all or nothing'.<sup>121</sup> Godard's existential modification of Faulkner's moralism invites rereading of Harry's decision in the original text, which has implications for understanding the role of sovereignty in the novel.



Figure 10: *À bout de souffle*, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (UGC, 1960)

In the penultimate chapter of *The Wild Palms*, naïve and idealistic Harry Wilbourne famously takes grief over nothing. Having accidentally killed his lover, Charlotte, Harry reconciles himself to his fate. He is confronted by Charlotte's husband, Rat, who offers

<sup>121</sup> Michel, in *À bout de souffle*, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (UGC, 1960).

him a cyanide capsule in his prison cell. Harry can decide whether to live or die. To choose grief means existence and failure; to choose nothing would mean suicide and defeat. Grief, understood as the product of an autonomous decision, is definitively embraced. Nothing, understood as the imposition of a separate authority, is stoically rejected. Grief starts from within; nothing bears down on him as an external force. As correspondents to grief and nothing, failure and defeat in the novel are bound intimately and crucially. Nonetheless, the novel articulates a clear hierarchy that positions the value of failure over defeat. Failure and defeat are endpoints: the former is internal and self-determining, the latter external and prescribed. By choosing grief, Harry is choosing the mode of agency and, consequently, decision. His embrace of grief, existence and failure constitutes his final, hapless act of sovereignty.

Faulkner's maximalist approach may bear little immediate relation to Beckett's pared down writing, but both authors contend with the role of failure in literature. As the next chapter demonstrates, "Ping" is concerned with the more formal implications of this failure, reproduced as the abstracted state of anticipation, which encourages new forms of engagement with Schmitt's thought.



## CHAPTER FOUR

## Anticipatory Images: The Human and Humanity in “Ping”

The “human” [...] is a word that returns today with an unequal fury.  
One might say, like a dum-dum bullet.

—SAMUEL BECKETT<sup>1</sup>

Humanity and reason are not names.

—CARL SCHMITT<sup>2</sup>

[H]umanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one’s own battered state.

—THEODOR ADORNO<sup>3</sup>

What is it that gives rise to Beckett’s laughter and Beckett’s tears, which are sometimes hard to tell apart: the human condition, or philosophical dualism as an account of the human condition?

—J. M. COETZEE<sup>4</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

Throughout their lives, but particularly in the period after World War II, Carl Schmitt and Samuel Beckett formulated states of anticipation. Schmitt forecast an era of *Großraum* [great spaces] in his treatise, *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950), which redefined his concept

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘La Peinture des van Velde: ou le Monde et le Pantalon’, in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), pp. 118–32 (p. 131).

<sup>2</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth: in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. by G. L. Ulmen (Cantor, NY: Telos Press, 2003), p. 349.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand Endgame’, trans. by Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique*, 26 (1982), 119–50 (p. 122).

<sup>4</sup> J. M. Coetzee, ‘Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett’, in *Late Essays, 2006–2017* (London: Vintage, 2018), pp. 202–17 (p. 202).



of sovereignty as determined by large, competing territorial groupings.<sup>5</sup> Fifteen years later, Beckett began his series of formally compressed prose shorts, gathered in the informal trilogy of “Imagination Dead Imagine”, “Ping”, and “Lessness” (1965–70), which rearticulated his preoccupation with waiting, reducing his fictions to an elemental and insistent arrangement of words. Beckett depicts anticipation as necessarily spatial and focuses on desiccated figures of inaction in these depictions. They appear not-quite human and so partake in his concern with the human. For Schmitt, the theorizing of spatial orders challenges humanity as the dominant organizing principle of world politics. From a philosophical perspective, both writers were cautious to offer clear characterizations of human nature; from the perspective of politics, both were wary of a normative world-system predicated on the universalistic language of humanity. Both intend to provide a distinction between the human, understood as an ethical account of the human condition, and humanity, understood as an operative moral and political category.<sup>6</sup>

For Schmitt, the anticipatory condition is open to ridicule. His first creative attempt to represent and satirize the state of anticipation—a sort of inversion of his state of exception—appeared before he had published any of his major works. “The Buribunks” (1918) is the product of his experiences as a young man working in the legal academy and under military command. At 17 pages, it is a dense, repetitive fiction that speculates on a world obsessively recorded by quasi-human diary-keepers, the Buribunks. These compulsive labourers, physically malformed and bizarre figurations, must perpetually document the present, recording all events in history as they occur to them. The Buribunks are subjects that become nonhuman by virtue of their incessant activity.<sup>7</sup> Beckett’s “Ping” is likewise dense and repetitive, albeit at only 1030 words. In this story, a barely visible subject (to the reader) struggles through what appears to be its final moments of consciousness. He/she/it (the reader does not know) exists in a small box, where the surrounding white walls trigger glimpsed memories. The subject uses rudimentary sense perception to process and articulate the immediate situation, during which it is disturbed by

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<sup>5</sup> See also Carl Schmitt, ‘The Großraum Order of International Law with a Ban on Intervention for Spatially Foreign Powers: A Contribution to the Concept of Reich in International Law (1939–41)’, in *Writings on War*, trans. and ed. by Timothy Nunan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), pp. 75–124.

<sup>6</sup> Confusingly, both writers at times use these terms synonymously.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Schmitt, ‘The Buribunks. An essay on the philosophy of history’, trans. by Gert Reifarth and Laura Petersen, *Griffith Law Review*, 28.2 (2019), 99–112. Hereafter I will use in-text citations.

the infrequent sound of ‘ping’.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the Buribunks, this subject becomes nonhuman by virtue of its paralytic stasis, its surrendering to inactivity and pure thought.

In “The Buribunks” and “Ping”, Schmitt and Beckett approach the problem of anticipation, and its effect on ideas of the human and of humanity. Beckett’s understanding of anticipation is like Schmitt’s, but it also entails a very different stance and affective relationship to who counts as human. Bringing the two texts side-by-side helps illuminate more starkly and precisely two observations: one, the relation between anticipation and both writers’ ideas of the human; two, the value of the human as less and as more than a political category. Whereas “The Buribunks” marks Schmitt’s decisive shift from a cultural to political thinker, “Ping” is central, both chronologically and aesthetically, to Beckett’s late prose shorts, which are even more concerned with the formal processes of anticipation as they are with depicting a fully rendered and realized anticipatory state.

Further, this chapter uses the case study of “Ping” to advance a reading of sovereignty in which demarcated space is articulated through fractured and percussive time, and, in conjunction, successive time is articulated through confined and overwhelming space. The analysis draws comparisons with Schmitt’s lifelong intellectual treatment of anticipation, which begins with “The Buribunks” and continues through to his work on *Raum* and *nomos*. While appearing to demonstrate a wry capsizing of the state of exception, Schmitt’s state of anticipation is rather a way of working through the critical implications of thwarted representations of sovereignty. By taking a view of Schmitt that includes his incipient works and post-war ruminations on anticipation, this chapter seeks to understand the human and humanity with recourse to Beckett’s short prose.

According to Beckett, “Ping” was wrung from two other works, ‘the result or miniaturization of *Le Dépeupleur* abandoned because of its intractable complexities’ and ‘a separate work written after and in reaction to *The Lost Ones*’.<sup>9</sup> The textual process of “Ping” appears to have been physically arduous for Beckett, who had pared down his writing to its most essential form:

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Ping’, in *First Love and Other Shorts* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974), pp. 69–72. I use in-text citations only for extended quotations, not select words or phrases, because these are repeated throughout the story.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett, quoted in David Watson, ‘The Fictional Body: *Le Dépeupleur*, *Bing*, *Imagination morte imaginez*’, in *Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 2000), pp. 163–81 (pp. 165–66).

I succeed in hanging on here trying to squeeze a last wheeze from the old bag and pipes. Seem to have got something suitably brief and outrageous all whiteness and silence and finishedness. Hardly publishable which matters not at all. [...] All the verbs have perished [...] months of misguided work have boiled down to 1000 words.<sup>10</sup>

Originally written in French and titled, “Bing”, “Ping” underwent ten revisions before Beckett translated it into English. C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski note that the multiple manuscripts show the ‘division of the text into a tablature. [...] Meters are changed to yards, indicative of a shift of sensibility. [...] Olympian hauteur abandoned for the obsessive repetition of limited sounds’.<sup>11</sup> In the French versions, ‘ping’ consists of two sounds, ‘bing’ and ‘hop’. Beckett merged these into a single onomatopoeia for the English translation.<sup>12</sup> Some changes were phonetic; others pertained to the story’s limited content. As Brian Finney states, ‘the first text shows similar atmospheric variations’ and ‘[b]y the tenth and final draft [...] light and heat have become static, ladder and niches have disappeared, and the body is left in its coffin-like box in silence and stasis’.<sup>13</sup> There are few discernible objects remaining in Beckett’s final arrangement, which favours unconventional syntax, mostly omitting prepositions and conjunctions. The first-time reader (and I think there *is* some semblance of narrative progression in the text) finds immediate comprehension difficult and cogent interpretation hard to sustain.

Beckett’s prose shorts are residual, both the cast-offs and reformulations of longer pieces. They are discrete in isolation but offer refractions of the human condition when viewed together. Using the shorter form, Beckett maintains the state of anticipation through distorted movements that are difficult to discern. These literary moves may be extended, quick, sparse, and frantic, but they always suggest linearity. Paralysis does not necessitate stasis; to be fixed in time is not a moral preference, or a source of inherent value, or a desirable method of representation. These pieces retain movement but also try to replicate artworks, sketches, and compositions. As in abstract painting, Beckett evokes stillness and chronology, something over which the eye might roam, but without anything teleological about its progress. He proposes that the reader looks around and across the text just as the viewer looks around and across a painting. As in music, Beckett offers

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Beckett, quoted in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 542.

<sup>11</sup> *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. by C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 2004), p. 438.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Brian Finney, ‘Assumption to Lessness: Beckett’s Short Fiction’, in *Beckett: The Shape Changer, A Symposium*, ed. by Katharine Worth (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 61–84 (p. 75).

permutations, repetitions, modulations, and deviations. He keeps the reader's ear to a metronome before producing onomatopoeic interruptions, a twang or, in this instance, a 'ping'.

"Ping" is part of a creative lineage: more fragmentary than "Imagination Dead Imagine" (1965), its predecessor, but not so apparently randomized and mathematical as "Lessness" (1970), its successor. These works are fundamentally concerned with the nature of literary representation, how it deceives, and how it can be pared back to its essence, revealing new meanings while ironizing conventional telling. Susan Brienza and Peggy Knapp note that together, the fictions 'offer glimpses of traditional myths in ironic, parodied, or aborted form'.<sup>14</sup> For them, "Ping" is 'a strange prose poem' that contains a 'doll-like' entity, which is at once odd and familiar, its existence presented to the reader as if 'sterilized through the mind of a third-person, detached narrator [who] acts as a jerky camera eye, shifting to view and record his subjects from different angles'.<sup>15</sup> This is not an identifiable world inhabited by moving bodies and human characters but a 'grotesque, inhuman enclosure in which the creatures are trapped both physically and psychologically'.<sup>16</sup> These descriptions suggest that in "Ping", the nature of the subject, and the space in which it is contained, remain fundamentally uncertain: human, but not. The minimalist sequence of events is absorbed into a form, genre and perspective that cannot be precisely designated, in a style which leads the reader to confuse prose as poetry, fiction as trickery, and narrator as subject, which the following close reading seeks to demonstrate.

"Ping" first appeared in the British literary magazine, *Encounter* (1953–91), and its subsequent reception has been heavily influenced by the contemporary criticism surrounding its initial publication in the journal.<sup>17</sup> "The Literature of Silence" (1967), Ihab Hassan's overview of anti-literary tendencies among leading fiction writers, preceded Beckett's story by a month but foresaw its experimental method and approach.<sup>18</sup> Hassan's immediately satisfied prediction was likely the result of some editorial decision-making,

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<sup>14</sup> Susan D. Brienza and Peggy A. Knapp, 'Imagination Lost and Found: Beckett's Fiction and Frye's Anatomy', *MLN*, 95.4 (1980), 980–94 (pp. 981–85).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See Samuel Beckett, 'Ping', *Encounter*, February 1967, 25–26, <<https://www.unz.com/print/Encounter-1967feb-00025/>> [accessed 27 May 2021].

<sup>18</sup> See Ihab Hassan, 'The Literature of Silence: From Henry Miller to Beckett & Burroughs', *Encounter*, January 1967, 74–82, <<https://www.unz.com/print/Encounter-1967jan-00074/>> [accessed 27 May 2021].

and David Lodge's more straightforward review, "Some Ping Understood" (1968), concluded February's edition the following year.<sup>19</sup> Scholarship on "Ping" is often positioned in relation to these two pieces. Lodge's retrospective view is that the story meets the conditions of a traditionally referential, meaningful work of literary art; Hassan's prophesying account suggests that the story functions not as a story at all, but as an exquisite exemplar of anti-literature, the grand sum of several avant-garde tendencies prevalent in the period. Beyond the critical debates framed by Hassan and Lodge, I wonder how thinking about both the compressed form of "Ping" and its appeal to reduced images brings into relief ideas of sovereign representation. The story is distinctively placed to consider spatial and temporal effects on images of sovereignty, because of its rendering of anticipation through moments of 'one second', contained within a space of 'one yard' (about the extent to which an average human adult can reach).

While readings have been influenced by this bracketing derived from Hassan and Lodge, this chapter's reading of "Ping" (1967) is indebted to J. M. Coetzee, whose essay, "Eights Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett" (2008), identifies the most significant attribute of the late-prose Beckettian subject: 'It is trying to be understood (language creaks under the strain) how the universe works, what the laws are'.<sup>20</sup> This state of anticipation is constituted by the sovereign authority (who makes the laws) and the subject (who tries, forlornly, to abide by them). The sovereign thinks it gleans knowledge about the subject through the subject's ability to follow the rules, but the sovereign cannot exactly fathom the relationship between the subject's body and mind, and nor, probably, can the subject. Coetzee illustrates his reading of Beckett through the idea of the subject as a 'creature, It, I, the laboratory animal'.<sup>21</sup> Coetzee does not specify the exact nature of his subject: only that it lives to consume nuts and so must understand an always toggled system of nut dispensing to survive. The subject wants to locate and eat the nut, but the organization of tubes keeps shifting, so it does not know where the nut will land. In its game, the sovereign thinks itself omniscient, but it cannot perceive the true workings of the subject it has created, just as the subject is perpetually doomed to be tricked by the ever-evolving maze of chutes. The subject may be composed of body and mind, but it does not know for certain, and, according to Beckett, there may not be much use in knowing it,

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<sup>19</sup> See David Lodge, 'Some Ping Understood', *Encounter*, February 1968, 85–89 <https://www.unz.com/print/Encounter-1968feb-00085/> [accessed 27 May 2021].

<sup>20</sup> Coetzee, pp. 212–14.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

anyway. For Beckett, the state of anticipation is as grim for the subject as it is comic for the sovereign, but even if both their existences are meaningful, the certitude that knowledge precedes action eludes the pair of them. Coetzee's meditation on the nonhuman 'It' reveals Beckett's suspicion of sure, stable philosophical accounts of the human in intellectual life. In sum, Coetzee's reading of the nonhuman condition, as illustrated through "Ping", moralizes about human nature, while Schmitt's criticism of the inhuman category, beginning in "The Buribunks", performs a moralizing refusal of morality as a political category.

My reading of "Ping" is inspired by Coetzee and gains power through comparative analysis with Schmitt. In the first section, I offer a close, sentence-by-sentence reading of "Ping". In the second, I collect Schmitt and Beckett's competing conceptions of the human and humanity. The third section articulates Schmitt's interpretation of *Raum* against Beckett's rendering of the white cell setting. The fourth section pursues a reading of "The Buribunks" as a critique of liberalism, which follows from Schmitt's conception of humanity. The fifth section synthesizes readings of anticipation across a broader modernist corpus. The final section argues that Schmitt's theorizing of the katechon locates anticipatory qualities of Beckett's text. Beckett's irony, amplified by Coetzee's reading, brings into relief Schmitt's sardonic approach, highlighting the extreme tones in the latter's performance of the self-regarding, self-pitying truth-teller.

## 4.2 Reading "Ping"

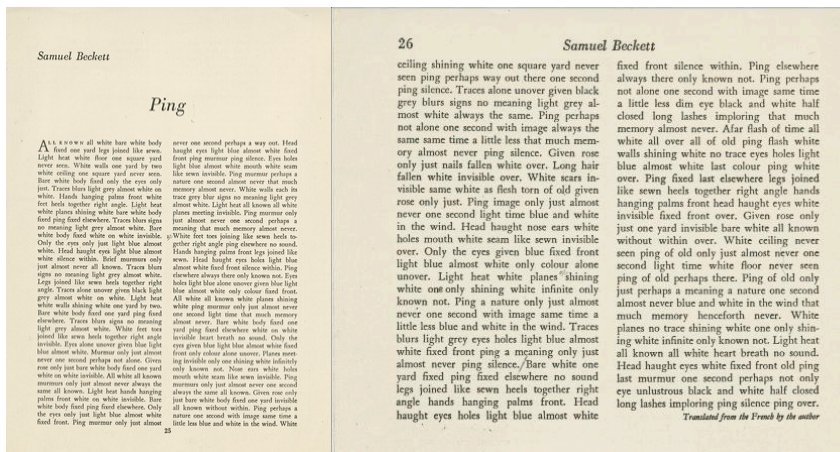


Figure 11: Samuel Beckett, 'Ping', *Encounter*, February 1967, 25–26

“Ping” begins:

All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn. Light heat white floor one square yard never seen. White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen. Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just (69).

In the first sentence, Beckett moves from the subject’s consciousness to the space it inhabits, onto the subject’s body and its positioning relative to this space. The ‘sewn’ simile is grammatically striking. The introduction of the subject’s limited sensory perception, ‘light heat’, reveals that it cannot see the floor. The omniscient narrator emphasizes whiteness. The wall dimensions suggest a cuboid, double the height of the subject, who cannot look upwards. The entire cuboid is white, too, and is almost indistinguishable from the subject, whose eyes can move only slightly, explaining its inability to see upwards and downwards. The body is overwhelmed within a two-yards-by-one-yard white box, which can be variously understood as a simple cuboid, coffin, refuge, or, in a more abstract sense, what Beckett termed of van Velde’s work, as the ‘art of confinement’.<sup>22</sup> As John Pilling notes, ‘dimensions are measurable, data are quantifiable. From this point of view, the cube [...] represents an ideal’.<sup>23</sup>

The text moves on to considers fresh instances of colour:

Traces blurs light grey almost white on white. Hands hanging palms front white feet heels together right angle. Light heat white planes shining white bare white body fixed ping fixed elsewhere. Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white. Bare white body fixed white on white invisible. Only the eyes only just light blue almost white (69).

The eyes see hints of grey in the white setting. The subject’s hands are by its side, palms outward, heels together at a right angle, and the legs, if indeed legs, are bent to the side and hunched in symmetry. This passage could be a reference to Christ on the cross. ‘Shining planes’ contains the first adjective that modifies a noun; ‘ping’ provides the first interruption, coming from outside of the box. The signs appear to hold no meaning. As Beckett states at the end of *Watt* (1953), ‘no symbol where none intended’.<sup>24</sup> The white

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Beckett, quoted in John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Pilling, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 223.

setting makes the white body appear invisible. There is light blue in the eye, which itself sees traces of light blue.

The text introduces a new paradigm of sound, from ‘silence’ to ‘murmurs’:

Head haught eyes light blue almost white silence within. Brief murmurs only just almost never all known. Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white. Legs joined like sewn heels together right angle. Traces alone uncover given black light grey almost white on white (69).

‘Haught’ is a peculiar word that means either obsolete or upright. The sound and feel of this word, too, elicits the expiration of breath instantiated in its enunciation, and the resulting dryness. Even in the mind’s ear and mouth, it is odd, jarring, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable. The body murmurs, losing consciousness. The text provides its first combination of previous material with nothing itself new but the ordering. Grey appears now as light and faintly blue. The legs combine with the heels. ‘Right angle’ speaks to the importance of geometry. ‘Uncover’ draws attention to the nearing point of ‘over’. ‘Given’ suggests another agency in control of events.

The text resituates itself:

Light heat white walls shining white one yard by two. Bare white body fixed one yard ping fixed elsewhere. Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white. White feet toes joined like sewn heels together right angle invisible. Eyes alone uncover given blue light blue almost white (69).

This passage is a reminder of the setting, the atmosphere, and the precise measurements of the walls. The eyes look at the walls. A ping comes from outside the box. There is the first complete repetition of a previous sentence. Then, the first mention of toes, which are also ‘joined like sewn’. There are degrees of blue and blue interspersed with light. ‘Light’ is separated from noun phrase, ‘light blue’.

The text introduces the concept of time through ‘one second’, the clearest temporal expression of shortness:

Murmur only just almost never one second perhaps not alone. Given rose only just bare white body fixed one yard white on white invisible. All white all known murmurs only just almost never always the same all known. Light heat hands hanging palms front white on white invisible (69).

Perhaps another subject is there. Rose, the colour of blood, or the pinkness of flesh. In either case, its entrance is conspicuously, newly organic, and provides a sharp textural



change. The first immediate repetition of a word in a sentence, ‘known’, draws the reader back to epistemic questions of knowledge. ‘Always’ functions as the antonym to ‘never’. Sameness is introduced and the reordering of words grows increasingly distinctive.

The reader begins to obtain a grasp of the text:

Bare white body fixed ping fixed elsewhere. Only the eyes only just light blue almost white fixed front. Ping murmur only just almost never one second perhaps a way out. Head haught eyes light blue almost white fixed front ping murmur ping silence. Eyes holes light blue almost white mouth white seam like sewn invisible (69–70).

The idea of fixedness interjects the use of ‘ping’. The first deployment of an article, ‘the’, is significant, a gesture of identification. But that there is ‘a way out’ indicates a mocking hopelessness. ‘Perhaps’ offers the possibility of this dream. Several associations feature quickly: the head and eyes, blue and white, and pings that bring murmur to silence. Holes and a mouth appear, linked to a seam and what has been ‘sewn’, suggesting a ragdoll or marionette.

The introduction of memory follows:

Ping murmur perhaps a nature one second almost never that much memory almost never. White walls each its trace grey blur signs no meaning light grey almost white. Light heat all known all white planes meeting invisible. Ping murmur only just almost never one second perhaps a meaning that much memory almost never. White feet toes joining like sewn heels together right angle ping elsewhere no sound. Hands hanging palms front legs joined like sewn. Head haught eyes holes light blue almost white fixed front silence within. Ping elsewhere always there only known not (70).

This passage suggests a second narrative through new images. ‘Each’ and ‘its’ are added to the mosaic of words. Colour and images remain intangible. The lines between planes cannot be seen. All the setting merges into an overwhelming fugue. Rhythm and cadence begin to assert themselves. ‘That much’ suggests degree. ‘No sound’ is offered as an alternative to silence. Parts of the body are listed in succession. ‘Silence within’ emphasises that the ping is external, from elsewhere. ‘Ping’ is ‘known not’, immanent and unknowable.

Light attaches itself to the preceding and subsequent ‘blue’, which complicates the syntactic connection:

Eyes holes light blue alone uncover given blue light blue almost white only colour fixed front. All white all known white planes shining white ping murmur only just almost never one

second light time that much memory almost never. Bare white body fixed one yard ping fixed elsewhere white on white invisible heart breath no sound. Only the eyes given blue light blue almost white fixed front only colour alone uncover. Planes meeting invisible only one shining white infinitely only known not (70).

White may not be the only colour. Ping interferes with both the colours and sounds, linking the space and the time to memory. Heart and breath are introduced, suggesting a body in its final state of living. Eyes are the most prominent sensory organ. The use of ‘infinitely’ suggests a reading founded in God and the Second Coming.

A nose. Ears. The facial features begin to be articulated:

Nose ears white holes mouth white seam like sewn invisible. Ping murmurs only just almost never one second always the same all known. Given rose only just bare white body fixed one yard invisible all known without within. Ping perhaps a nature one second with image same time a little less blue and white in the wind. White ceiling shining white one square yard never seen ping perhaps way out there one second ping silence (70).

Parts of the body are variously mentioned: head, hair, eyes, hands, palms, legs sewn together. The ping appears to initiate sound in the subject, only a murmur. ‘Without within’ offers a sense of bereavement in the space. The generic invoking of ‘image’ comes with several degrees of colour and the first mention of external atmospheric conditions, ‘wind’. This weather suggests a form of memory. The subject experiences some element of the previously invoked ‘shining’, suggesting the possibility of sonic escape, quashed through silence.

The introduction of ‘black’ blurs into grey, stating ‘no meaning’ and oppressive sameness despite the apparent variations in colour.

Traces alone uncover given black grey blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white always the same. Ping perhaps not alone one second with image always the same same time a little less that much memory almost never ping silence. Given rose only just nails fallen white over. Long hair fallen white invisible over. White scars invisible same white as flesh torn of old given rose only just (70–71).

The ‘ping’ interrupts but it also starts sentences. The repetition of words, ‘same same’, suggests, momentarily, that time as nonlinear. Memory is fading. ‘Rose’ is associated with ‘nails’ and ‘fallen’. ‘Over’ appears instead of ‘uncover’. An extra part of the subject is revealed. Now the reader observes the nails, palms, and hands. ‘Long hair’ shocks the reader through its frank, conventional descriptiveness. A Christ figure is suggested through

‘white scars’ of possible stigmata. ‘Flesh torn’ evokes the Passion. ‘Of old’ suggests temporal movement, or at least memory.

There is almost a line of conventional syntax: ‘blue and white in the wind’:

Ping image only just almost never one second light time blue and white in the wind. Head haught nose ears white holes mouth white seam like sewn invisible over. Only the eyes given blue fixed front light blue almost white only colour alone uncover. Light heat white planes shining white on only shining white infinite only known not (71).

The head and face are almost entirely described. Blue is regularly piercing through but white remains the ‘only colour’. Memory fights permanence. The preposition ‘on’ enters, insinuating some sort of relational perspective. Echoes in syntax open space within the text. Infinity appears to be unknowable.

The nature of the subject is shown to be decrepit, set against its weightless memory:

Ping a nature only just almost never one second with image same time a little less blue and white in the wind. Traces blurs light grey eyes holes light blue almost white fixed front ping a meaning only just almost never ping silence. Bare white one yard fixed ping fixed elsewhere no sound legs joined like sewn heels together right angle hands hanging palms front. Head haught eyes holes light blue almost white fixed front silence within. Ping elsewhere always there only known not (71).

A kaleidoscope of weak colours is described. Eyes are as good as holes. A relatively full image of the body and its positioning is given. Perspective returns to the head. No sound is rendered as silence dominates the setting.

The sentences increase in length.

Ping perhaps not alone one second with image same time a little less dim eye black and white half closed long lashes imploring that much memory almost never. Afar flash of time all white all over all of old ping flash white walls shining white no trace eyes holes light blue almost white last colour ping white over. Ping fixed last elsewhere legs joined like sewn heels together right angle hands hanging palms front head haught eyes white invisible fixed front over. Given rose only just one yard invisible bare white all known without within over (71).

Eyes appear half closed and ‘long lashes imploring’. A fuller description of the face is followed by the ‘dim eye’, which contributes a further modifying detail, provoking a final burst of memory. Something exists from afar, as ‘a flash of time’, which is overwhelmed by whiteness. The flash finally adds to the ‘shining’. It is not the only colour but the ‘last colour’. All is now white, the ultimate metaphor for succumbing to over-knowledge and failed representation.

The ‘Ping of old’ suggests a form of recollection, a variety of ping, or a qualitatively distinct ping:

White ceiling never seen ping of old only just almost never one second light time white floor never seen ping of old perhaps there. Ping of old only just perhaps a meaning a nature one second almost never blue and white in the wind that much memory henceforth never. White planes no trace shining white one only shining white infinite only known not. Light heat all known all white heart breath no sound (71–72).

Sense perception of time is connected through cluttered lexical choices. ‘Perhaps’ is a curious modal auxiliary and ‘henceforth’ suggests an impossible ‘never’ future. The memory is of the wind, and of little else. There is ‘no trace’ after several traces. White has taken over. There is no knowledge but the sense of heat and light. Heart and breath are close to ceasing.

The longest sentence is the last sentence: ‘Head haught eyes white fixed front old ping last murmur one second perhaps not only eye unlustrous black and white half closed long lashes imploring ping silence ping over’ (72). Unlustrous now, bereft of life, the eyes close. It ends with, ‘ping over’. This phrase may amount to the dying breath of the debilitated subject and a merciful end. Nonetheless, as Nicky Marsh states, the image of the unlustrous eye is ‘too full of sudden bathos to be expected to emotionally engage the reader at the very end of a text that resisted such a relationship’.<sup>25</sup> Along these lines, the reader should find the final proposition in the text, ‘ping over’, to be a joke of some kind, because the last gasp of the anticipatory human condition is transformed into a punchline by Beckett’s strictly modulated, compacted and ironic short prose. If the story pertains to the human, is the reader’s interpretation laughably hopeless, in their desperate reach for images, in their seeking of representative authority? The following section seeks to explore these questions through Beckett’s writing on the human and not-quite human subject, via a comparative reading with Schmitt.

### 4.3 The Human and Humanity

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<sup>25</sup> Nicky Marsh, “‘All Known—Never Seen’”: Susan Howe, Samuel Beckett and an Indeterminate Tradition’, in *Samuel Beckett: Today/Aujourd’hui 9*, ed. by Marius Burning, Matthijs Engelberts and Onno Kusters (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 239–54 (p. 246).

Beckett did not look for grand narratives of history; he rather sifted through the details of disorder, accumulating names and dates, finding depositories of items that could constitute a record of human existence. He was drawn in ‘not [by] the wave, but the corks upon it’.<sup>26</sup> Beckett’s investment in bobbing debris characterizes his claims to existence, providing a matter-of-fact illustration of what he thought to be human knowledge and resilience. Living in Germany in 1936, he wrote in his diary:

I say I am not interested in a “unification” of the historical chaos any more than I am in the “clarification” of the individual chaos, + still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births & deaths, because that is all I can know.<sup>27</sup>

Beckett settled in Paris the following year, and in the post-war period, the cultural and social conditions in France encouraged disquiet.<sup>28</sup> In an essay on the Dutch painters, brothers Geer and Bram van Velde, published in 1946, Beckett references the instrumentalizing of the human category in the political domain, writing that the human is ‘a word, and doubtless a concept too, that is reserved for times of great massacres’.<sup>29</sup>

Beckett references the ‘dum-dum bullet’ to describe the secret malice of the human as a political category, particularly in times when violence is enacted in its name.<sup>30</sup> This is apt comparison for the pernicious semantics of humanity, because, though the projectile appears to be like any normal bullet, it discreetly expands on impact, forging a devastating wound in the recipient. The surreptitious, exploding shell apes the use of weasel words about a common, universal standard of humanity. For him, the post-war individual invokes the human and humanity to obfuscate the facts. Beckett shares Schmitt’s anxieties about the framing of history as one of ceaseless human development, but is more ironic in identifying, as Lyndsey Stonebridge puts it, ‘the contingency of moral language’ and the ‘consensual humanism’ of the post-war linguistic terrain.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Beckett, quoted in Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010, p. 82..

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> See Kevin Brazil, ‘Beckett, Painting and the Question of “the human”’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.3 (2013), 81–99.

<sup>29</sup> The essay was originally published in French in *Cahiers d'Art*, 20–21 (1945–46). I am grateful to the English translation of the relevant passage in Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writings, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

Beckett and Schmitt expressed fundamental concerns about the language of humanity and its rhetorical deployment in the political domain. For both, the multiple misuse of words under liberal auspices is symptomatic of a deceitful political culture. From different perspectives, both fret over the nullification of honest language in the public realm. Schmitt maintained concerns that liberal forms of talkative, normative, and consensus-driven politics create spurious notions of the human and humanity, which come to be deemed as legitimate ethical and political categories. In the essay, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations” (1929), Schmitt warns about the increasing use of technical classifications of humanity in the political domain, desiring to ‘recognize the secret law of this vocabulary and know that most terrible war is pursued only in the name of peace, the most terrible oppression only in the name of freedom, the most terrible inhumanity only in the name of humanity’.<sup>32</sup> Schmitt sees evil ends in the apparently neutral language of technology and international ethics.

Universalism, as a political strategy, made Schmitt anxious because invocations of humanity obscure and seek to denature the friend/enemy distinction. Schmitt thinks that political life is only vivid and real if this distinction is maintained and *made* real. In *The Concept of the Political* (1932), Schmitt identifies the consequences of the linguistic infestation of humanity in politics: ‘The adversary is thus no longer called an enemy but a disturber of peace and is thereby designated to be an outlaw of humanity’.<sup>33</sup> In his view, common moral principles risk turning international relations and domestic politics into conflicts between the human and the inhuman, rather than between legitimate competing actors who, on traditional terms, would merely win or lose. Eliminating these crucial differences erases clear and distinct political identities, making a defeated actor not only a loser, but an illegitimate adversary. As Schmitt notes, ‘the absolute last war of humanity’ will be ‘inhuman because, by transcending the limits of the political frameworks, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categories and is forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed’.<sup>34</sup> For Schmitt, characterizing a political opponent as inhuman makes the conflict itself inhuman.

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<sup>32</sup> Carl Schmitt, ‘The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations’, trans. by John P. McCormick, in *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 80–96 (p. 95).

<sup>33</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 79.

<sup>34</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 36.

Schmitt argues that the state harnesses the concept of humanity as a political category to increase its power and capacity for expansion:

At the expense of its opponent, [the state] tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress and civilization order to claim these one's own and to deny the same to the enemy. [...] The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism.<sup>35</sup>

In *The Nomos of the Earth*, Schmitt maintains this deeply held apprehension, cautioning his readers about the consequences of a certain type of politics underpinned by and entwined with law, warning of the 'fate of legality and the purely legalistic state'.<sup>36</sup> Developing the concept of *Großraum* [great spaces] is Schmitt's attempt to deal with the change in the structure of international politics after World War II. For him, the surrender of political representation and discursive clarity to the terminology and mechanisms of liberal technocracies produces deleterious effects on intellectual life, because what defines the language of liberalism is its plenitude and tendency to foster insidious, subterranean meanings.

Schmitt sees the manifestations of liberal legality everywhere, not just in politics, and draws connections between the rhetoric of universalism and prevailing techniques of contemporaneous art practices: 'What began as the message of the gods of reason has ended in the gangster slogan of Bertolt Brecht'.<sup>37</sup> For Schmitt, neither law nor humanity nor reason—the constituent elements of liberalism—function as a name, because each does not possess the symbolic power required of effective political representation. Schmitt argues that Brecht's didactic dramaturgy forms the natural analogue and endpoint of Enlightenment rationality, which undermines the ability to isolate and define decisive terms of existence.<sup>38</sup> Schmitt later derides the 'political experiences and popular-

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<sup>35</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 54.

<sup>36</sup> Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, p. 349.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Brecht mockingly namechecks Schmitt in his learning play *The Measures Taken* (1930): 'Then be yourselves no longer: you no longer Karl Schmidt from Berlin; you no longer Anna Kjersk from Kazan; and you no longer Peter Sawitch from Moscow. You are nameless and without past, empty pages on which the revolution may write its instructions'. See *The Measures Taken and other Lehrstücke*, trans. by Carl R. Müller (London: Methuen Drama, 1989), p. 12. For critical comparisons of Brecht and Schmitt, see David Pan, 'Developing a Theater of the Collective: Brecht's *Lehrstücke* and the Nazi *Thingspiele*', *Colloquia Germanica*, 42.4 (2009), 307-26; David Pan, 'Sacrifice as Political Representation in Bertolt Brecht's *Lehrstücke*', *Germanic Review*, 84.3 (2009), 222-50; Oliver Simons, 'Theater of Revolution and the Law of Genre—Bertolt Brecht's *The Measures Taken (Die Maßnahme)*', *Germanic Review*, 84.4 (2009), 327-52; Paul Haacke, 'The Brechtian Exception: From Weimar to the Cold War', *Diacritics*, 40.3 (2012), 56-85.

pedagogical enlightenments, given expression by Bert Brecht, [which] have contributed to the fact that legality is nothing more than a synonym for mob rule'.<sup>39</sup> In this instance, the aesthetic domain has poisoned the language of politics, and *vice versa*. For Schmitt, the fixation on legal processes as a substitute for political action obscures the visibility of the sovereign and illegitimately delegates authority to an excited cohort of voices.

Beckett's internalized and elusive absurdist works are the antithesis of Brecht's externalized and instructional epic theatre, even though both sought to capture and undercut dramatic assertions of the self.<sup>40</sup> Beckett's essay on the van Veldes concerns itself with the internal nature of the art object, but is focused on problems associated with externalized modes of critique.<sup>41</sup> His argument is as follows: neither referential nor impressionistic criticism does full justice to the relevant art object under scrutiny. Any context provided is likely too much context to adequately illuminate the art object. Critics remain overly reliant on a literary vocabulary, transposed onto the artistic realm, which overall obscures the true nature of painting. In the hope of naming and explaining, the words of criticism often deceive, regardless of whether they appear to be in good or bad faith.<sup>42</sup> For Beckett, the inability to comprehend the nature of painting extends to the inability to aesthetically represent the self. That the individual is comprised of a mind and body is absurd, so it follows that humanity, as a collective noun for these individuals, for all these minds and bodies, is a derisory conceit. Beckett's view of contemporary art criticism has this in common with Schmitt's view of Brecht's writing: both forms overload their subjects with too much direction, too many words, and a set of misjudged meanings.

The subtitle of Beckett's essay, 'ou le Monde et le Pantalon', predates by more than a decade Nagg's story about the tailor in *Endgame* (1958), in which the character compares the world to a pair of trousers, and, in doing so, emphasizes the absurdity of critical

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<sup>39</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, trans. by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 119.

<sup>40</sup> See Charles R. Lyons, 'Some Analogies Between the Epic Brecht and the Absurdist Beckett', *Comparative Drama*, 1.4 (1967–68), 297–304.

<sup>41</sup> From 1946 to 1949, Beckett wrote three essays on van Velde. For a close reading of their artistic and intellectual relationship, see Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram Van Velde* (Funks Grove, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2009). See also, Peter Fifield, 'Introduction to Samuel Beckett, "The New Object"', *Modernism/modernity*, 18.4 (2011), 873–77.

<sup>42</sup> See John P. Harrington, 'Samuel Beckett's Art Criticism and the Literary Uses of Critical Circumstance', *Contemporary Literature*, 21.3 (1980), 331–48 (pp. 339–42).



traditions that rely solely on metaphor and analogy to articulate their analyses.<sup>43</sup> In the play, Beckett addresses the nature of humanity through heightened comic dialogue:

CLOV (anguished, scratching himself): I have a flea!

HAMM: A flea! Are there still fleas?

CLOV: On me there's one. (Scratching.) Unless it's a crab louse.

HAMM (very perturbed): But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!<sup>44</sup>

Humanity is a punchline, the source of a despondent joke. Hamm worries that the human race may repeat itself; that it may begin over. This anxiety about repetition finds its formal conclusion in “Ping”, in which the words of the text literally repeat themselves, recontextualized again and again through shifting semantic associations. Beckett's representations of repeated and absurd humanity also ground Theodor Adorno's influential critical approach to his work.

The events of World War II inspired Adorno's famous, if often misunderstood evaluation of the practice of post-war cultural criticism, that ‘[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’.<sup>45</sup> Barbaric, but importantly not impossible, and, for Adorno, much of Beckett's written output wrestles with the central absurdity of existence after the traumas of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century. This critical stance challenges the view of Beckett as an author of abstraction and the non-political, concerned only with the space and time of pure aesthetics and of pure thought. Adorno's more political reading is now prevalent.<sup>46</sup> Adorno believes that Beckett is working within a strict set of social and historical conditions, which is why his characters often comically and forlornly discuss conceptions of humanity, and why they often consist of debilitated subjects, functioning as mere echoes and traces of the human in real life. Adorno's critique of Beckett is summarized in his 1961 lecture, “Notes on *Endgame*”, which has influenced Anglophone critical discussion on the play since its translation into English in 1982.<sup>47</sup> Adorno committed basic errors in his readings,

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<sup>43</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), pp. 21–22.

<sup>44</sup> Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> Theodor Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 17–34 (p. 34).

<sup>46</sup> For a persuasive account that suggests Beckett uses abstraction as a political procedure, see Slavoj Žižek, ‘Beckett as the Writer of Abstraction’, *Continental Thought & Theory*, 2.3 (2019), 28–36 (pp. 31–34).

<sup>47</sup> For a set of diverse readings on the relationship between Adorno and Beckett, see Tyrus Miller, ‘Dismantling authenticity: Beckett, Adorno, and the “postwar”’, *Textual Practice*, 8.1 (1994), 43–57; Philippe Birgy, “‘No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we’: *Endgame* According to Adorno”, *Miranda*, 4 (2011) <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/2006> [accessed 25 April 2021]; Michal Kobialka, ‘Of Adorno's Beckett’, in *Adorno and Performance*, ed. by W. Daddario and K. Gritzner (London: Palgrave

though, interpreting the name of Hamm to be an abridged version of Hamlet, a claim that Beckett contradicted.<sup>48</sup>

Adorno is working in a tradition that acknowledges the events of the Holocaust as the end of the promise of Enlightenment thinking, and his aesthetic theory elaborates on the social and historical significance of autonomous art. Adorno's understanding of the autonomous work of art runs contrary to Schmitt's insistence on naming things correctly, so that such things obtain supreme representation among competing formulations. David Pan states the difference between the two thinkers: 'whereas Adorno tries to maintain, hidden in the work of art, the hope of a universal humanity, Schmitt takes the opposite tack of identifying the ideal aspect imbedded in every political form [... and] while Adorno sees the autonomy of art as the place where ideals have sought refuge in a modern age, Schmitt argues that such ideals are contained in political forms'.<sup>49</sup> For Schmitt, visibility is crucial to representation and supreme images must supersede their material, technical and rational imitations. The alternative systems consist only of vague and abstract appeals to humanity, which have malignant consequences for the political domain. As Pan concludes: 'If ideals such as law, reason, and humanity are posited as general and universal, they no longer refer to any specific set of principles and traditions but in fact become placeholders for the rule of a hidden sovereign'.<sup>50</sup>

For Schmitt, the epistemic regimes of liberal politics, positivist jurisprudence and neutral technology converge to produce an aesthetic mirage, which serves to cloak true power in darkness and malforms the human subject. For Schmitt, there is a peculiar potency to forms of art that define the spatial arrangements of a given epoch. As he states in *Land and Sea* (1942):

The painting of the Renaissance [that] laid aside the space of medieval Gothic painting; the painters now painted humans and things placed in a space, which perspectively generates an

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Macmillan, 2014), pp. 22–37; Natalie Leeder, *Freedom and Negativity in Beckett and Adorno: Something or Nothing* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of Adorno's uncertain address of *Hamlet*, see George Oppitz-Trotman, 'Adorno's *Hamlet*', *New German Critique*, 43.3 (2016), 175–201.

<sup>49</sup> David Pan, 'Afterword: Historical Event and Mythic Meaning in Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba*', in Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play* (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2009), pp. 69–119 (pp. 73–86).

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

empty depth. Humans and things now stand and move within a space. In comparison with the space of a Gothic image, this signifies, in fact, another world.<sup>51</sup>

Schmitt's startling engagement with the relationship between art and space persists and transforms his concerns about the relationship between humans and space. In "Dialogue on Power and Access to the Holder of Power" (1954) and "Dialogue on New Space" (1958), Schmitt advocates for a self-evident and terrestrial conception of the human that disavows the dominance of false epistemologies: 'The human is a human to the human' and 'the son of the firmly grounded earth'.<sup>52</sup> These statements underpin his view that the human is intrinsically connected to the land while aesthetic truth, like law, is situational. Schmitt's characterization provides, according to Russell Berman, 'the mythic repetition of the irrepressible conflict between terrestrial and maritime worlds, between the order and stability of solid earth and its chaotic, disorderly, and threateningly anarchic opposite, the sea'.<sup>53</sup> The battle between land and sea exemplifies, in Schmitt's words, '[t]he impress of the epoch, which proceeds from the historical call and the right answer'.<sup>54</sup> As I will demonstrate, Schmitt illustrates his understanding of the human relationship to spatial epochs through a language of art and architecture in his work on *Raum*.

#### 4.4 Lines and Cells

The line is understood through multiple spatial and temporal configurations. Sybille Krämer states the existence of lines as that which broadly 'depends on the phenomenon of the plane', and their drawing incorporates 'the temporal succession of a gesture [which] becomes the spatial simultaneity of a mark'.<sup>55</sup> In Schmitt's theory of sovereignty, the imposition of the borderline produces the symbolic space that surrounds it, which destabilizes the symbolic order. This space suggests the phenomenon of the plane, while the temporal succession of norms creates the conditions against which the exceptional

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<sup>51</sup> Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> Schmitt, *Dialogues on Power and Space*, pp. 49, 82.

<sup>53</sup> Russell A. Berman, 'Geography, Warfare, and the Critique of Liberalism in Carl Schmitt's *Land and Sea*', in *Land and Sea*, pp. xiii–xxviii (p. xv).

<sup>54</sup> Schmitt, *Dialogues on Power and Space*, p. 79. For a recent discussion on the human and space in Schmitt, see Bruno Latour, 'How to Remain Human in the Wrong Space?', *Critical Inquiry*, 47 (2021), 699–718.

<sup>55</sup> Sybille Krämer, 'Graphism and Flatness: The Line as Mediator between Time and Space, Intuition and Concept', in *The Power of Line: Linea III*, ed. by Marzia Faietti and Gerhard Wolf (Munich: Hirmer, 2016), pp. 10–17.

mark of the borderline appears. When it arrives, Schmitt's borderline is deliberately visible and Janus-faced. It works simultaneously as an act of inscription and of erasure; a single firm stroke that effaces innumerable faint etchings. Despite its appearance of clarity, the borderline remains a complicated idea, because it suggests both distinction and motion. For comparison, Krämer argues that the outline of a silhouette likewise functions as 'an instrument of metamorphosis' and as 'a medium of transmission and transgression'.<sup>56</sup> So, to formulate the borderline as a purely political entity—one of legal norms and exceptions, only—is to ignore its irreducibly aesthetic sensibilities.

Throughout his writings, Schmitt simultaneously critiques liberalism and advocates decisive sovereignty by evoking lines and spaces between the lines. This view echoes contemporaneous modernist theory. In Paul Klee's pedagogical sketches, for example, medial lines pertain to a work of art. They also delineate areas on a map, showing terrain, territories and land mass. Necessarily free, abstract and meandering, the movement of the active line gives birth to space. When hardened, the active is inscribed as the medial line, constructing boundaries and borders. These limits mark both figurative and literal planes, generating geometric and representational areas.<sup>57</sup> The transformation of the line, moving from the purely aesthetic to the potentially political, from play to utility, is significant for Schmitt through to his thinking on *nomos*, *Raum*, land, and sea. This work, mostly published during and after World War II, considers manifestations of sovereignty through mythopoetic criteria of names, places and sounds.<sup>58</sup>

Schmitt is fascinated by *Raum*, for instance, at the level of lexis and etymology, noting that the first and last letters 'do not constitute incisive or decisive borderlines. Such liquids cannot be considered beginning and ending points; they are not striations nor are they lines of demarcation'.<sup>59</sup> For him, the letters R and M fail as graphical and phonetic limits for establishing material spaces and physical boundaries. This whimsical and sensual attention to letters and sounds potently illustrates his aesthetic cravings and inchoate poetic

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, trans. by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), pp. 16–20. See also Erich C.H. de Bruyn, 'Beyond the Line, or a Political Geometry of Contemporary Art', *Grey Room*, 57 (2014), 24–49.

<sup>58</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth: in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. by G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2003); *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation*, trans. by Samuel Garret Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2015). See also 'Raum and Rome: The Phonetics of the Word *Raum*', in *Three Untimely Pieces*, trans. by James L. Kelley (Norman, OK: Romanity Press, 2019), pp. 7–16; 'Sea Versus Land', in *Three Untimely Pieces*, pp. 17–25.

<sup>59</sup> Schmitt, 'Raum and Rome', p. 11.

sensibilities. Thus, *Raum* does not sufficiently connote borders. Rather, the roots of law and justice lie in the ‘mythical language’ of the earth:

[S]oil that is cleared and worked by human hands manifests firm lines, whereby definite divisions become apparent. Through the demarcation of fields, pastures, and forests, these lines are engraved and embedded. [...] In these lines, the standards and rules of human cultivation of the earth become discernible. [T]he solid ground of the earth is delineated by fences, enclosures, boundaries, walls, houses, and other constructs. Then, the orders and orientations of human social life become apparent. Then, obviously, families, clans, tribes, estates, forms of ownership and human proximity, also forms of power and domination, become visible.<sup>60</sup>

Schmitt understands the problem of sovereignty and of philosophical inquiry as the problem of mutually agreed definitions. How do we name something? How do we clarify its spatial limits? What subsequent images and symbols do these acts of naming and clarification produce?<sup>61</sup>

Schmitt thought that the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, best illustrated the contested nature of *Raum*, which ‘resounded metaphorically and metaphysically in [his] beautiful verses’.<sup>62</sup> Rilke also contributes to Schmitt’s fraught genealogy of the spatial image, wrought by contiguous conflicts between technical and rational characterizations: ‘*Räume* [spaces] were birthed only by poetic beings [...], those sensitive of palette found it congenial to conceive of *Raum* as a neutral sphere of physicomathematical abstraction in which the concrete is positioned’.<sup>63</sup> Schmitt compares Rilke to the Roman poet, Virgil, whose ‘ideological progeny of a purely terrestrial existence’ manifests itself in Rilke’s ‘fantasies of shepherds and peasants’, which Schmitt encapsulates in his cryptic theory of space as ‘myth—pardon me—poetry, poesy—Rilke’.<sup>64</sup> In the denouement to his 1929 essay, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations”, Schmitt abridges Virgil’s words in the Fourth Eclogue to form the phrase: ‘*Ab integro nascitur ordo*’. John P. McCormick interprets this elision as meaning to state that: ‘from integrity order is born’ or ‘an order is born from renewal’.<sup>65</sup> Both translations insinuate that Schmitt sought poetic adornments

<sup>60</sup> Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, p. 42.

<sup>61</sup> See Carl Schmitt, ‘Nomos—Nahme—Name’, in *The Nomos of the Earth*, pp. 336–50. For a discussion on Schmitt’s philological exercises, see Katerina Stergiopoulou, ‘Taking “Nomos”’: Carl Schmitt’s Philology Unbound’, *October*, 149 (2014), 95–122.

<sup>62</sup> Carl Schmitt, ‘*Raum* and Rome: The Phonetics of the Word *Raum*’, in *Three Untimely Pieces*, trans. by James L. Kelley (Norman, OK: Romanity Press, 2019), pp. 7–16 (p. 14).

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Dialogues on Power and Space*, ed. by Andreas Kalyvas and Federico Finchelstein, trans. by Samuel Garret Zeitlin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> Carl Schmitt, ‘The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations’, p. 96.

for his views on social hierarchies and political orders. Moreover, Schmitt's deployment of Rilke and Virgil illustrates the conceptual intersection of his dominant concerns, space and order, which are significant to his work on *Großraum*.

For his secularization thesis, Schmitt cannot resist what he calls 'systematic analogy'. He states that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts'. For him, less valuable metaphors merely 'yield colourful symbols and pictures', while 'socio-psychological "portraits"' offer little more than 'brilliant literary criticism'.<sup>66</sup> About contemporary analogies of the state, he writes in *The Concept of the Political*:

It may be left open what the state is in its essence—a machine or an organism, a person or an institution, a society or a community, an enterprise or a beehive, or perhaps even a basic procedural order. These definitions and images anticipate too much meaning, interpretation, illustration, and construction [...]<sup>67</sup>

Sceptical of imagistic political representation, he eschews reading the construction of the state as an act of mimesis, through which citizens seek to replicate the machinery of government that allows them to survive, function and pursue social progression. To figure the political community in the image of the sovereign, as an act of either tacit consent or public utility, is to misunderstand the nature of supreme authority. What perturbs him is the rise of the modern sovereign subject as the undisputed figure of humanity and progress. For him, this is one of many successive fictions and mythologies that have been deployed to legitimize governance throughout history, but Schmitt does recognise some more lasting, meaningful theological analogies that exceed the series of more directly secular analogies. He mostly ignores the psychological complexity and possible duality of the sovereign, nor does he much consider the creaturely habits and corporeal energies of the citizens over which the sovereign reigns. All that is permanent is the borderline which separates the space of sovereignty from the space outside sovereignty.

But Schmitt cannot escape the problem of representation, which is the symbolic connection between sovereign authority and those who consent to it. He seeks an almost prelapsarian account of sovereignty, in which representation is understood through '[t]he

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<sup>66</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 36–37, 45.

<sup>67</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 19. For a discussion of Schmitt and the beehive metaphor, see Teresa M. Vilarós, 'The Spirit of the Beehive: On Carl Schmitt's "The New Nomos of the Earth"', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 104.2 (2005), 359–70.

metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world'.<sup>68</sup> His contempt for anticipatory, illustrative images is undermined by his own frequent rhetorical turns to mechanical metaphors about the state and technology. These have encouraged various scholars to compare his work to Friedrich Nietzsche's vitalist philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism, and Max Weber's ideas of modern charismatic authority.<sup>69</sup> According to Schmitt, at unpredictable times, 'the power of real life breaks through the crust of mechanism that has become torpid by repetition'.<sup>70</sup> This formulation, one of disputably Nietzschean provenance, does not preclude anticipation of the decisive event. The crusting of the mechanism, which suppresses or undoes some vital element of human life, functions as a dulled anticipatory image. Visible through their density and accumulation, the excess of rules and norms reveals the melancholy torpor of parliamentary liberalism. Within the mass of procedures, little can be discerned or clarified because of the surplus of lines. This is what the exception acts against: details, details, details. Schmitt craves the elimination of these details, which paradoxically articulates their visibility. To transpose these details into lines—into the torpid repetitions that reveal the crusted mechanism—is to anticipate, through the formation of a dense image, the apparently unanticipated exception.

In one of his final published works, "The Tyranny of Values" (1979), Schmitt states that in 'music and paintings the *valeurs* have esthetical significance. They can "unfetter", that is to say, they become absolute fertile colours no longer confined by the frame, or as music, no longer bound to words'.<sup>71</sup> Schmitt evokes the uninhibited possibilities of painting and composition to illustrate that indeterminacy regulates the conditions of authority in law and politics. This location of indeterminacy through aesthetics brings us back to Beckett, who was influenced, too, by the spatial and figurative challenges posed by

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<sup>68</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 46.

<sup>69</sup> See Richard Wolin, 'Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State', *Theory and Society*, 19 (1990), 389–416 (p. 394); Richard Wolin, 'Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror', *Political Theory*, 20 (1992), 424–47 (pp. 430–35). For a reading of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's combined influence on Schmitt, see Jef Huysmans, 'Know your Schmitt: A Godfather of Truth and the Spectre of Nazism', *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), 323–28 (pp. 325–27). For two chapters on Nietzsche and Weber's influence on Schmitt's thought, see John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) (pp. 31–119). For analyses of Weber's influence on Schmitt, see John P. McCormick, 'Transcending Weber's Categories of Modernity? The Early Lukács and Schmitt on the Rationalization Thesis', *New German Critique*, 75 (1998), 133–77 (pp. 135–41); William Rasch, 'Conflict as a Vocation: Carl Schmitt and the Possibility of Politics', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17.6 (2000), 1–32 (pp. 6–7).

<sup>70</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 15.

<sup>71</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Tyranny of Values*, trans. and ed. by Simona Draghici (Washington, DC: Plutarch Press, 1996), p. 4.

visual art, reformulating these concerns in “Ping”. Beckett’s white cells parallel Schmitt’s attraction to clean lines without the messy lines inside. Both present indeterminacy through the shared sense of the paradox that apparently strict, clean lines reveal the mess of indeterminacy. And Beckett’s preference for rendering settings that resemble white cells derived from his enthusiasm for nonrepresentational forms of painting.

When he lived in Germany, Beckett often visited galleries, finding a late self-portrait of Cézanne to be ‘overwhelmingly sad. A blind broken old man’.<sup>72</sup> He sees in Andre Masson’s paintings the desire to thwart ‘the servitude of space’.<sup>73</sup> He also encountered de Chirico’s mannequins, which conjure the isolated subject depicted in “Ping”, possibly construed as a ragdoll, puppet or marionette. Whatever its exact physical nature, the subject of “Ping” perceives images presumably derived from memory, childhood, a faint consciousness, or vicariously through a myopic observer. A dying imagination of some kind observes its physical body, which produces a complex state of sightlessness and invisibility that undercuts the identity of the sovereign narrator. The subject has been variously read as representative of a Christ figure or Christ himself, a ‘Cartesian centaur’, a ‘victimized god-man’, and a ‘hospital patient’ after surgery.<sup>74</sup> For Steven Rosen, the representative figures in Beckett amount to ‘quasi-holy images of people caught in utterly strange situations, literally trapped, repeating futile gestures, and engaging in meaningless rituals’.<sup>75</sup> The subject in “Ping” has human characteristics but is reduced in the space of the white cell, wherein body and box merge into something not-human.

Whiteness figures heavily in Beckett’s writing. Daniel Soutif describes van Velde’s treatment of whiteness, which was an influence on Beckett, as ‘the white of the void’:

These voids carry the weight of the painting in its totality, and there clings to them a sense of the arbitrariness, the existential contingency, of the very gesture of painting. Surely this white

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<sup>72</sup> Samuel Beckett, quoted in Christopher Prendergast, ‘Il n’y a pas de Beckett’, *London Review of Books*, 14 November 1996, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v18/n22/christopher-prendergast/il-n-y-a-pas-de-beckett>> [accessed 22 April 2021].

<sup>73</sup> James Acheson, *Samuel Beckett’s Artistic Theory and Practice* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 96, 98.

<sup>74</sup> See Lodge, p. 88; Hugh Kenner, ‘The Cartesian Centaur’, in *Samuel Beckett: Twentieth Century Views* ed. by Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 52–61 (p. 61); Laura Barge, “‘Coloured Images’ in the “Black Dark”: Samuel Beckett’s Later Fiction”, *PMLA*, 92.2 (1977), 273–84 (p. 278); Dan O’Hara, ‘The Metronome of Consciousness’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 22 (2010), 435–47 (p. 440);

<sup>75</sup> Steven J. Rosen, *Samuel Beckett and the Pessimistic Tradition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976), p. 219.



has been left there to signify, without words, what Van Velde was seeing when he said, “To paint is a way for me to approach the nothing, the void”.<sup>76</sup>

Coetzee teases out this reading of whiteness in “Imagination Dead Imagine” and “Ping”, in which ‘Beckett’s selves, his intelligences, his creatures, whatever one prefers to call them, wait and watch and observe and notate’.<sup>77</sup> Invoking Captain Ahab, Coetzee asks: ‘Why do these creatures not grasp their harpoon and hurl it through the white wall?’ And he answers it: ‘Because they are impotent, invalid, crippled, bedridden. Because they are brains imprisoned in pots without arms or legs. Because they are worms. Because they do not have harpoons, only pencils at most’.<sup>78</sup> Coetzee’s playful disambiguation lends cogent thinking to the subject in “Ping” and imitates Beckett’s ironic mantra of failure, which ironizes the supposed utility and wisdom of introspection. Coetzee’s irony, piled onto Beckett’s own irony, is in stark contrast to Schmitt’s relationship to the cell as a scene of introspection and the search for wisdom.

In “Wisdom of the Cell”, Schmitt’s failure of irony limits his thinking. He produces a set of reflections on his time spent at Nuremberg, leaning into the common tropes of thoughtful incarceration, but in a manner almost reminiscent of the Beckettian late subject. For Schmitt, the conditions of the incarcerated human are determined by the imbalances of power:

At his most naked is the person unclothed before someone clothed, disarmed before someone armed, powerless before someone in power. [...] On whom must the definition of the human be modelled, on the naked or on the dressed person? On the disarmed or on the armed? On the powerless or on the powerful? [...] It is immediately clear to me that I am naked. [...] In the desolate expanses of a narrow cell. The articles of clothing left for me confirm only the objective nakedness.<sup>79</sup>

Schmitt dramatically retells his custody and subsequent questioning at the hands of the US authorities after World War II, transforming his private condition, one of an imprisoned human subject, into a broader categorical distinction between the powerful and the powerless of humanity. The image of the individual of questionable humanity, sitting in his cell, asks broader questions about the nature of humanity.

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<sup>76</sup> Daniel Soutif, ‘Flight into Whiteness: Bram van Velde’, trans. by Hanna Hannah, *Artforum* (1990), 150–58, <<https://www.artforum.com/print/199006/flight-into-whiteness-bram-van-velde-34069>> [accessed 22 April 2021].

<sup>77</sup> Coetzee, pp. 207–08.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 63.

As Coetzee highlights, “Ping” is also a text that offers the image of the not-quite human in a bare cell as a scene that challenges the notion of humanity through a questioning of image-making. Coetzee begins with and elaborates on Hugh Kenner’s characterization of Beckett as a ‘philosophical dualist’, who must offer endless comic takedowns of this dualism to be honest about the nature of human experience. In the essay, Coetzee writes about the intellectual tug-of-war between dualism and monism in Beckett, using the examples of the whale in *Moby-Dick*, and the creaturely subject in “Ping”, to illustrate the perils of image-making under the conditions of pure thought. Coetzee reads the symbol of whiteness as speaking to, or rather, as failing to speak to, the crucial distinction between the human and the non-human. Reading Beckett through Schmitt discovers a reading of a different distinction: that between the human and the inhuman. “Ping” yields thinking about human sovereignty when read in relation to the human as a category defined by both the distinction from the nonhuman, provided by Coetzee, and the distinction from the inhuman, provided by Schmitt.

Drawing comparisons with the work of Beckett, Coetzee states that the essential philosophical question in *Moby-Dick* pertains to whether there is an imperceptible order of things, or rather there is no grand plan at all. For Coetzee, Melville ‘presents the question not in abstract form but in images, in representations. He can do it no other way, since the question offers itself to him in a singular image, the image of blankness, of no-image’.<sup>80</sup> This is the white whale in the case of Captain Ahab, and the white wall in the case of the Beckettian late figure. Coetzee’s reading of “Ping” as a text about image-making works on the famous chapter from *Moby-Dick* on “The Whiteness of the Whale”, which Melville describes as ‘the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind’, eliciting a ‘dumb blankness, full of meaning’.<sup>81</sup> Coetzee identifies Melville and Beckett’s shared ironizing of symbol and meaning, as the constituent parts of representation, which undercuts the notion of effective myth.

This reading is why Schmitt’s literal reading of Melville is so interesting to consider, because it reveals his desire to pursue an understanding of the human as rooted in the epochal image, but which is denied to him by the complex literary quality of Melville’s work, which is illustrated in Beckett’s work, too. For Schmitt, the need to fill up the

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<sup>80</sup> Coetzee, p. 206.

<sup>81</sup> Herman Melville, quoted in Coetzee, p. 206.

whiteness—understood as the white wall, or the white whale, or the white void—with a grand sum of words, lines and details is the preoccupation of liberalism, which negates the human in a real sense by insisting on anticipating the problems of politics and by establishing the category of humanity in political life. This critique is first and most curiously worked through his own exercise in what at times feels like a faint, amateurly rendered precursor to Beckett’s work, “The Buribunks”.

#### 4.5 The Details of Liberalism

As it is commonly understood, for Schmitt, the unanticipated wins the day. His sovereign decision takes its unique authority from the fact that ‘the precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated, nor can one spell out what may take place in such a case, especially when it is truly a matter of an extreme emergency of how it is to be eliminated’.<sup>82</sup> The unanticipated emergency thus requires the unanticipated decision, which eliminates the emergency. Its authority is predicated on suddenness, absolute insight and pure revelation, which transcends hopeful fortune-telling and prescient formulae, as well as endless chatter and line-making. Schmitt acts against what he sees as the essence of parliamentary liberalism: the ineffective institutional *modus operandi* that runs contrary to natural political behaviour. In his view, what defines much of liberal democratic politics is the temporal desire for pre-emptive policies and the overriding ability to anticipate. The obsessive need for planning and precision produces suffused and complicated procedures that amount to vague, gestural, and meaningless politics. This is Schmitt’s most cherished argument—on the right and the left of politics—and it emerges across the books. I will now unpick this broad perspective through a close reading of “The Buribunks”.

Schmitt develops his satirical approach in “The Buribunks”, which has recently undergone renewed scholarly appraisal and a full translation in English.<sup>83</sup> Originally published in 1918 in the journal, *SUMMA*, and edited by the essayist, Franz Blei, “The Buribunks” is about perpetual diary-keepers whose sole purpose is to obsessively document the present, to preclude the uncertain future. Schmitt’s manifold targets include

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<sup>82</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>83</sup> See ‘Special Issue: Buribunks’, ed. by Edwin Bikundo and Kieran Tranter, *Griffith Law Review*, 28.2 (2019).

bohemians, positivists, rationalists, and machine utopians. Buribunks denote figures who transcribe notes and submit entries to the extent they become physically transformed, absorbing the tools of their labour. Pen and ink become body and blood. Every Buribunk is alienated from the other; each suffers from an isolated and corrupted identity. Schmitt's despair towards the contemporary sovereign subject finds its form in this speculative fiction, which confronts the modernist tendency to define consciousness as that which must perceive and account for everything, all the time.

Gertrude Stein offers a suggestive stylistic comparison with "The Buribunks". Stein's literary portraiture is often bracketed into phases.<sup>84</sup> Ulla Haselstein notes that 'all of her portraits share the general tendency of avant-garde art to combine or fuse the modes of different media of words, sounds, and images'.<sup>85</sup> Stein's contribution to the genre of literary portraits was that of modernist reinvention, for 'she altogether refuses mimetic representation, but retains the most fundamental feature of the genre, namely its referentiality'.<sup>86</sup> For Stein, repetition is rather 'insistence',<sup>87</sup> which creates meaning through emphasis on word presentation in subtly varying syntaxes. Stein's circular method of description tries to defy the temporalities of traditional literary forms and her restricted use of words and punctuation contributes to the disorientating rhythms of her writing. Schmitt's philosophy of the Buribunks is reminiscent of these literary portraits:

I write, therefore I am; I am, therefore I write. What do I write? I write myself. Who writes me? I myself write myself. What is the content of my writing? I write that I write myself. What is the big engine lifting me above this self-sufficient circle of I-ness? History!

I am therefore a letter on the typewriter of history. I am a letter writing itself. But strictly speaking I do not write that I write myself but only the letter that I am. But, writing, the World Spirit captures itself in me – so that I, capturing myself, at the same time capture the World Spirit. In fact I do not capture myself and it through thinking, but writing – for in the beginning there is the deed and not the thought. That means: I am not only the reader of world history but also its writer (110).

Neglecting the service of external portraiture, Buribunks are rather fixated with documenting the self. Schmitt focuses on those who value autobiography over reality,

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<sup>84</sup> See Michael J. Hoffman, 'Gertrude Stein's "Portraits"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 11.3 (1965), 115–22; Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 64–130.

<sup>85</sup> Ulla Haselstein, 'Gertrude Stein's Portraits of Matisse and Picasso', *New Literary History*, 34.4 (2003), 723–43 (p. 724).

<sup>86</sup> Haselstein, p. 727.

<sup>87</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'Portraits and Repetition', in *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 165–206.

because he was anxious that for such a person autobiography is, in fact, reality. Schmitt delineates this section of his critique by creating an imagined genealogy of biographers, beginning with Don Juan, who lives only in the moment, his servant Leporello, and the fictionalized Ferker and Schnekke, all failed portraitists, who each develops the medium and paves the way for the ultimate biographers, the Buribunks.

Scholars variously describe “The Buribunks” as ‘surrealistic’, ‘a dystopia’, a mockery of ‘the secular ritual of confession’, ‘a satire of detached intellectualism’, an ironic ‘world history of inscription’, ‘a critique of modern subjectivity’, and a ‘biting caricature of the boheme and of positivism’.<sup>88</sup> Such characterizations suggest and subvert its classification as a modernist text, hinting at modes and genres of modernism while remaining contemptuous of the putative aesthetic subjectivities modernisms desired to represent. Through techniques of extended irony and self-reflexive footnotes, Schmitt challenges the Wilhelmine culture that had failed to respond to a call for political clarity and visibility. He sought to critique an age that venerated rules and norms, celebrated scientific arrogance, idolized the podium of selfhood and valorized technological advance. Published on the cusp of two eras, as the desultory *Kaiserreich* made way for the democratic promise of the Weimar republic, “The Buribunks” satirizes and ironizes the putatively liberal tendency of the historical moment: futile anticipation of the political event. This tendency is what the sovereign decision on the exception, theorised four years later in *Political Theology*, negates and overwhelms. In “The Buribunks”, Schmitt ridicules the process of accumulating details, which he assigns to the world of legal positivism, the juridical landscape with which he was closely acquainted. In *Political Theology*, he theorizes sovereignty as the borderline, which satisfies his cravings for political clarity and visibility; it provides the effective counterpoint to the liberal politics of dense accumulation and hazy pluralism.

For Schmitt, the world of the Buribunks is one in which institutions are conspicuous and unwieldy, the practice of historicism is self-important and futile, and the individual is devitalized and detached from value. Although fictionalized diaries are common to literary dystopias, Reinhart Koselleck argues that these conditions of institutionalism, historicism and the cult of the individual form a ‘negative utopia’, in which the diary-keeping

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<sup>88</sup> Bredekamp, p. 251; Balke, pp. 633, 644; Meierhenrich and Simons, p. 7; Kittler, p. 231; Mehring, p. 86; Kennedy, p. 44.

Buribunks represent ‘the interior [...] turned outward’.<sup>89</sup> The public accumulation of interiority constitutes a project of surveillance, which he calls ‘a mode of the performance of perfected terror’.<sup>90</sup> More accurately, ‘The Buribunks’ is a twofold dissection, which argues that obsessive accumulation of details devalues the nature of interiority, and that constant documentation of events obscures the experience of reality. Schmitt renders the mind as a hard surface, or as another unit of measurement, to critique the belief that selfhood can be understood, interrogated and articulated, insofar as history can be mastered, coerced and anticipated.

In “The Buribunks”, the obsessive process of anticipation debilitates the body. The Buribunks undergo physiological changes because of their diary keeping. Their growing intellect correlates with ‘an enlarged mouth’ (101). Consciousness and selfhood produce corporeal effects on anatomical surfaces. Schmitt creates an alternative rendering of the human body, comprised of deformed faces, creaturely habits and machine-like tendencies. He further invokes the body to outline the sense of uncertainty that provokes extreme anticipation. The dread with which the Buribunks view the future is described as ‘the dark body’ (110)—imposing, fearful, racialized—which is precluded by an obsessive, anticipatory present. The Buribunks ignore the sovereign decision, as Schmitt understands it, in favour of the accumulative detail that generates outward order. The Buribunks are biophysically transformed through their vast data production and bureaucratic surveillance. Their deification of communal processes thwarts the pursuit of human meaningfulness. For Schmitt, the desire to produce excessive temporal proximity leads to psychological indulgence, not physical vitality.

As established, repetitive actions and peculiar countenances define the Buribunks. Schmitt suggests tackling ‘the problem at its central, most interesting point’ (101), comparing the study of the Buribunks to popular contemporary anthropological assessments. According to Schmitt’s dubiously constructed narrator, ‘it is the intellect that designs the body’ (101), and by stating this, he blurs the mind/body distinction. This emphasis on the relationship between interiority and corporeal imagery is one of the most insistent aspects of the text. ‘It would therefore be careless, to say the least, to simply deem the diary to be the decisive fact in an intellectual sense rather than the enlarged mouth’

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<sup>89</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. by Todd Presner, Kerstin Behnke and Jobst Welge (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p 93.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*

(101), Schmitt writes, before illustrating the correlation between intellect and physiognomy by using the example of tribes and employing a form of ironic racism. Given the anthropology of the period, in which large lips were taken as a serious indicator of primitiveness, it is not entirely clear whether Schmitt, a notable future Nazi, is satirizing forms of social Darwinism. The pompous narrator lists ‘lesser peoples [...] and other tribes incapable of an education, [who] have a relatively small mouth, even though they are cannibals’ (101). These initiate a probable ‘close connection between the enlarged mouth and a higher intellect’ (101). This excerpt prefaces his writings in *Political Romanticism* (1919), published the following year:

Primitive peoples—humanity as childlike—are also bearers of these unlimited possibilities. The contradiction between rational limitation and the irrational profusion of possibilities is romantically eliminated because another equally real but still unlimited reality is played off against limited reality: in opposition to the rationalistic, mechanized state, the childlike people; in opposition to the man already limited by his profession and accomplishments, the child who plays with all possibilities; in opposition to the clear line of the classical, the primitive in its infinity of meanings.<sup>91</sup>

Schmitt traduces infinite possibilities and valorizes the delimiting power of the borderline. This passage uses racial anthropology as shorthand for illustrating his anxieties about lineal excess. Through literary techniques, Schmitt’s racist thought emerges. These passages function as portents for his antisemitic characterizations of Jews in his 1938 book on the Leviathan and in texts such as *Land and Sea* (1942).

The defining message of “The Buribunks” is that to excessively quantify and repeat is to perpetually anticipate. Within this fictive state, the commitment to research means that the study of the Buribunks is valued more than the Buribunks themselves. Schmitt calls this mode of enquiry ‘scientific buribunkology’ (100), which amounts to a chronically aware self-justifying meta-sphere of learning. It is smug, circular, overly referential and ever inwardly expanding. This continued expansion leads to indelibility. To create, to manufacture, and to multiply constitutes success and supremacy. This economy functions at maximum output and at optimum delineation. Its functioning holds innate value because quantity is made into quality by virtue of its facticity. This conception predates Schmitt’s critique of liberalism, which he thinks ‘discusses and negotiates every political detail [...] in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in everlasting

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<sup>91</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, p. 69.

discussion'.<sup>92</sup> Schmitt polemically dramatized parliamentary democracy as a mode of government made up exclusively of discussion. His ironic appraisal of scientific buribunkology presages his appraisal of political liberalism, both of which are clouded in an ironic racism.

Schmitt complicates the self-proclaimed values of the liberal Enlightenment, which he would later taunt for its belief:

[...] in a clear and simple upward line of human progress. Progress would above all result in the intellectual and moral perfection of humanity. The line moved between two points: from religious fanaticism to intellectual liberty, from dogma to criticism, from superstition to enlightenment, from darkness to light.<sup>93</sup>

Schmitt suggests that the Enlightenment was more accurately a part of the 'successive stages of the changing central domains [which] are conceived neither as a continuous line of "progress" upwards nor the opposite'.<sup>94</sup> In "The Buribunks", constant documentation is a source of fact beyond mere science. This sense of superiority and of the supreme idea of fact makes scientific buribunkology the overwhelming and most conclusive sphere of knowledge and understanding, even 'more than theology, jurisprudence or philosophy' (101). Any refusal to keep a diary must be 'justified and described in detail' (109); the disobedient Buribunks will otherwise face elimination to the lowest class in the system. For them, elimination is a fate worse than death. With echoes of Beckett, Schmitt states that '[t]he wheel of progress passes silently over the silent one' (109). Such a punitive measure enforces a simple idea: that in this world, even nothing must be reproduced in detail.

Schmitt sardonically expresses the oversaturated and falsely unifying nature of the Buribunks' project: '[w]hat would all research be without the secret weaving of the spirit which transforms life-less details into a living organism and for the purpose of repeated comprehension elevates every act of perception to a process of re-membrance' (100). The study of scientific buribunkology forms the logical endgame for an academy obsessed with both organisation and transformation, which is inscribed through both quantitative and qualitative output. Schmitt remains sceptical of details that are rationalized, contextualized and historicized. He ironically scolds the inchoate and prototypical Leporello, who has

<sup>92</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 63.

<sup>93</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 73.

<sup>94</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 82.



‘less of an urge to gather reliable research into details—nowhere does he trace the deeper connections of the specific conquest’ (103). As a sign of intellectual progress in scientific buribunkology, ‘entries of an erotic, demonic, satirical, political and so on nature are grouped together (under the strictest observation of the copyright law pertaining to each entry)’ (108). Life is sterile, relative to the mode of scientific inquiry that seeks to understand it. Memory, otherwise clipped and intangible, is solidified and certified on repeat. This writing predates Schmitt’s metaphor of the crusted mechanism, consisting of rules and norms that have grown torpid by repetition, which his exception seeks to overcome.

Schmitt wishes to ‘trace the outlines of [the] sociological architecture’ and provide an ‘[o]utline of a philosophy of the Buribunks’ (110). The central claim in the Buribunks’ manifesto is: ‘thinking is nothing other than soundless speech; speaking nothing but scriptless writing; writing nothing but anticipated publishing and therefore publishing is identical with writing, with such minor differences that they may safely be disregarded’ (110). The Buribunks write and publish simultaneously, and by doing so, they distort notions of time and of the body. Through their extreme efforts to anticipate, they merge their commodity with their labour. As Schmitt notes while in post-war detention, ‘[o]ur life acquires furrows and lines through our labors, through our productivity in work and profession’.<sup>95</sup>

In the biophysical imperative to transform themselves, the Buribunks face a process which makes it impossible to discern between I, the typewriter, and history. Historical reality denotes the past, the midwife the present, and the dark body the future. This use of language precipitates Schmitt’s full embrace of legal and political solutions to the problem of sovereignty. His satirically loose use of metaphor in “The Buribunks” illustrates his resistance to claims that a mere image could anticipate the exception. In *Political Theology*, he resorts to the crusted mechanism and the torpor of repetition for dulled anticipatory symbolism. His use of metaphor concedes to aesthetic sensibilities in his theory of sovereignty. His cravings for the borderline concept produce a distorted silhouette, a phantasm of the immediate sovereign decision. It is a reminder of how he

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<sup>95</sup> Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 46.

chides ‘the rationalist’, who should know ‘that the legal system itself can anticipate the exception and can “suspend itself”’.<sup>96</sup>

Ellen Kennedy notes that Schmitt’s early literary efforts assume ‘a world in which there are no definitions, where everything is possible’. These works ‘explore nominalism, the irrational, the apparent (but not real)’.<sup>97</sup> In his short story, ‘The Mirror’ (1912), Schmitt narrates the life of a young man who falls into a narcissus-like state, his life defined by the projection of his selfhood, entering literally into his reflection:

The mirror was determined to stop anything from happening. The young man wanted to kiss Rosalie Blöing. The mirror strained himself to his highest point of tension in an effort to scream, but he was not able to convert his agitation into movement. His senses receded; his heart leaped forth. A second later, the young man pushed his elbow into the mirror, so that no one wondered about the broken mirror, and the rationalists seemed to have been proven correct. But what do such rationalists know about real life?<sup>98</sup>

Kennedy describes this section as ‘a Kafkaesque evocation of things transformed—or realized’.<sup>99</sup> Schmitt personifies the mirrors within the story as knowing the ‘nullity of the world and of all things, even the nullity of their own selves. They abandoned the spurious self-evidence of the “I am.” The mercury coating fell away, the transparent glass remained, and the souls rose to the world soul, where all individuality vanishes’.<sup>100</sup> This satirizing of the ‘world soul’, which becomes the ‘World-Spirit’ in “The Buribunks”, underpins Schmitt’s critique of humanity as a political category.

Reading Beckett with Schmitt’s work, from his early fiction to his late work on *Raum* and *nomos*, emphasizes the value of thinking about how their similar critiques lead to different aesthetics and political beliefs. Beckett’s attempts to reconcile ideas of sovereignty and anticipation illuminate Schmitt’s permanent anxieties about the liberal, technocratic desire to record, document and accumulate details. These processes undermine the visibility of the sovereign decision and the clarity of political life. Beckett depicts the futility of too much meaning, interpretation, illustration and construction, gesturing towards the unknowable qualities of the future. Whereas Schmitt offers the

<sup>96</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 14.

<sup>97</sup> Kennedy, p. 43.

<sup>98</sup> Carl Schmitt, ‘The Mirror’, in *Three Untimely Pieces*, pp. 26–35. Kelley introduces his translation with the claim that the story is ‘a screed that manages to marry the extravagance of Dada and Expressionism to the journalistic narrative realism of a Poe or a Kafka’, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> Kennedy, p. 43.

<sup>100</sup> Schmitt, ‘The Mirror’, p. 35.

image of the mirror as a literary metaphor for mimesis and to mock rationalist egoism, Beckett rather invokes the desolate subject and bare setting to articulate the anticipatory condition. As demonstrated by the following reading of “Ping”, Beckett tried to reproduce the void of human experience through techniques of spatial reduction and temporal compression.

#### **4.6 Time Spent Anticipating**

“Ping” suggests that what remains between knowledge and the unknown is ‘perhaps a nature’ (70). The uncertainty of anticipation is constituted by a suggestion of knowledge and a conditional view of humanity. This characterization of human nature follows from the ‘ping’ that opens the story. This ‘Ping’ is capitalized and authoritative, God secularized. The subject takes its cue from authority because it cannot be certain of its autonomy. Where once it could muster a ‘murmur’, it later falls silent. Its efforts to perceive time dissolve into a rudimentary method of counting. ‘One second’ is inextricable from three literary units: the sovereign sound of ‘ping’, the debilitated subject that must hear it, and the reader’s uncertain appraisal of the relationship between the sound and the subject. Time does not flow; it is miniaturised, numerical, rendered as clock time. It is formed by accumulated interruptions and not considered as psychological duration. If it is music, it is merely a succession of discrete notes. If it is visual art, it is a series of static photographs without cinematic flow.

The frictions between the analogue and the digital interpret the role of both the author and the debilitated subject. For Beckett, ‘one second’ provides a refuge of digital discontinuity, a set of intervals upon and around which his literary consciousness can assert itself. His narration is necessarily a form of analogue consciousness, a stream of sensory impressions that appear past the subject’s apprehension of one-second intervals. These impressions also appear past the audibly disjointed interventions of ping, the recurrent sound of the sovereign, which invokes the solace of binary: there is ‘one second’ or there is zero, the relentless motion of sense experience. The mental imperative of the subject is to retain basic comprehension among the lines of its life. It is also to brace oneself in the descent of consciousness, by isolating rudimentary details and noting traces

of body parts, colours, temperatures, proximities, and sounds. These constitute the final attempts at individual comprehension and autonomy from the paralytic sovereign subject.

In “Ping”, here is neither machine nor organism; neither society nor community; neither enterprise nor beehive. Beckett does not depict a procedural order. But there remain efforts at meaning, interpretation, illustration, and construction. Beckett’s efforts are compressed and distilled, trading on symbol while questioning its value. Anticipating too much meaning is acknowledged as futile and yet deliberately pursued. This reading describes what everyone who works on anticipation in Beckett gets at in the end. General Beckettian futility is one way into Schmitt’s idea of sovereignty; another is the specificity of the techniques in “Ping” as a way into the specific nature of Schmitt’s tones, symbols, and strategies. Schmitt resists the liberal political tendency to pursue details, but this action is destined to fail because, as Beckett shows, the pursuit of details and, indeed, symbols, is innate to the meaningful social condition, however debilitated.

Beckett resorts to clock time to articulate the debilitated condition of the subject, interpenetrating ‘traces’ of memory, the lines parsed by a faltering consciousness. Through the habit of repetition, debilitated memory and debilitated perception are coterminous. The memories of colours are as vivid as the consuming white box. Neither memory nor perception is privileged in this exceptional space. Both past and present are as real as the future remains unreal. Whereas for Schmitt emotions must be reduced to degrees and intensities, Beckett shows the alternative mode of feeling, one fluid and fractured, of duration represented through flickering memories. This aspect is how “Ping” exceeds the possibilities of painting: stillness and chronology are presented as antagonisms rather than reconciled. Brushstrokes disappear and reappear through the linearity of prose against the spatiality of painting. The reader encounters the stroke and the non-stroke sequentially, over and over, in a context without knowable time.

“Ping” likewise transcends musical composition. The recurrent ‘ping’ is not only a sound; it is an actor, an agent, a source of authority and decision. The subject anticipates the ‘ping’ feebly and inadequately, with its full force of effort. If it possesses agency, the ‘ping’ exerts its strength and effect on the subject’s condition through the periods of delay between its soundings. The subject is debilitated by its waiting, anticipating the sound of the sovereign. In “Ping”, anticipation is a state of silence and a period of *being subjected to*, an oppression wrought by putatively non-coercive aesthetic subjectivities. These are the

details, however vague or obscured, which aid anticipation of the political event. Beckett's 'ping' is the death knell, and "Ping" suggests the futility of rendering details that anticipate the political event. The preamble to the sovereign decision, then, is one of silence and of *being subjected to*.

To borrow a phrase from Sara Crangle, "Ping" is a story of 'backward glances and ablated desires'.<sup>101</sup> Anticipation emerges as something different from hope and yearning; it is entropy. Crangle features anticipation as one of the 'prosaic desires' found within literary modernism, where affirmations are met by immediate denials: 'the anticipation of a deific figure, an anticipation just as significant when the arrival never comes to pass'.<sup>102</sup> Through Heidegger and Levinas, Crangle cites 'being-toward-death' to suggest that 'awareness and anticipation of death characterize fully authentic existence'.<sup>103</sup> Crangle states that 'while his high modernist forebears endlessly affirm endless desires, Beckett engages in an explicit negation of human longing',<sup>104</sup> citing *Waiting for Godot* and "Lessness", the subsequent short fiction to "Ping", as literary examples. I think that "Lessness" stands against philosophical haughtiness, but "Ping" is not an account of the negation of knowing. Uncertainty and indeterminacy are not anguished states by necessity. In "Ping", consciousness weakens; the mind struggles in a gradual state of dilapidation. Time passes: the body is erased and reconstituted. There is a permanent sense of waiting, but treatment of the temporal ailment is more mordant than morose.

Schmitt states that the precise details of the emergency cannot be anticipated. Michael Wood notes that in Beckett, 'the future is not a place, and not much of a time; it is a guess, a possibility, a threat'.<sup>105</sup> The future is both temporal and spatial, and Beckett's works lack easy markers and delineations. To paraphrase Wood, these gestures suggest guesses, form possibilities, and indicate ominous threats. Together, these elements constitute an inhibited epistemological effort, an attempt of literary detail, and a distinctive aesthetic method, which renders anticipation within symbolic spaces while destabilizing their surrounding contours. Wood's assessment of the future in Beckett is relevant for reading many of

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<sup>101</sup> Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter, and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 180

<sup>102</sup> Crangle, p. 175.

<sup>103</sup> Crangle, p. 144.

<sup>104</sup> Crangle, p. 24.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Wood, 'Comedy of Ignorance', *New York Review of Books*, April 30 1981, <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1981/04/30/comedy-of-ignorance/>> [accessed 02 June 2021].

Beckett's plays, including *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), a one-act dramaticule set in and during '[a] late evening in the future'. This late evening is Krapp's source of memory, a place in which the present, already deemed to be the future, merges into the past, in which the 'last tape' interpenetrates with the old tape.

Setting, time, and consciousness traduce one another in the play, engaged in a simultaneous reduction. The sparse setting contains 'a small table, the two drawers of which open towards the audience'. Krapp is 'very near-sighted' and '[h]ard of hearing'. His debilitated condition is figured through weakened senses and deteriorating consciousness. In mumbled utterances, Krapp cites the '[e]quinox, memorable equinox', the biannual moment in which the equator—the line and the border—faces towards the centre of the sun. Krapp repeats: 'Memorable equinox?'<sup>106</sup> The question of comic self-doubt undercuts the appeal to memory, the ability to establish demarcation and clarity. In Beckett, memory is always diminishing, flickering into embers and dissolving into traces. Delineations that were once certain become abstract guesses, possibilities, and threats. The enervation of place, time, body and mind form the protagonist's condition. Krapp is rendered bare.

As Stanley Cavell argues, waiting and ending are central to Beckett.<sup>107</sup> Progress is difficult to pinpoint in his work: when time continues, life does not always develop. While anticipatory thinking drives conventional narrative and plot, Beckett discards the expectation of anticipation, hurtling the anticipatory mode past itself into a double compression of place and time. This effect produces a peculiar withering. The future exists, but it is a difficult task to discern it. Beckett imbues time with a sense of absurdity and waste. These are the details of waiting, which anticipate rupture and emergency. These details are nevertheless rendered unclear. Beckett ridicules and endorses the political conception of time that suggests order as a basis of waiting, not just in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, in which the passing of time is relatively lucid, but in his most reduced, compressed suffocations, in the shortest short fictions, of which "Ping" is emblematic.

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<sup>106</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Shorter Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), pp. 3–5.

<sup>107</sup> See Stanley Cavell, 'Ending the Waiting Game: A reading of Beckett's Endgame', in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, by Stanley Cavell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 107–50.

“Ping” adds to this thwarted sensibility by being so pared back, compressed and more obtuse than *Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

For Beckett, the moment of birth ignites his anticipatory mode of thought. He contorts his origin myth into equal parts, half sullen and half ludicrous:

Even before the foetus can draw breath it is in a state of barrenness and of pain. I have a clear memory of my own foetal existence. It was an existence where no voice, no possible movement could free me from the agony and darkness I was subjected to.<sup>108</sup>

The small, cramped, overwhelming space defines much of his later fictions, which are transferred onto his impressions of *in utero* existence. Peggy Guggenheim wrote that Beckett ‘retained a terrible memory of life in his mother’s womb [and] was constantly suffering from this and had awful crises, when he felt he was suffocating’.<sup>109</sup> These impressions and memories influenced Beckett’s prose; or his prose produced these thoughts retrospectively. Suffocating is the dying moment; birth and death start to look similar for Beckett. The tragedy of birth brings about unbearable expectations, impossible obligations and the inability to grasp the ungraspable. These elements constitute Beckett’s state of anticipation. His work is a remedy that claims no cure.

Philosophical interpretations of Beckett suggest how his work articulates human finitude, and how this finitude is tragic, absurd, and ridiculous. Humans seek to understand their inevitable descent through inadequate machinery, perception foremost, followed by misarticulation, and eventually silence. All methods encounter difficulty until each becomes impossible. Ramona Cormier and Janis L. Pallister break into component parts Beckett’s existential conundrum. The human faces a world where:

All efforts at systemization fall into disorder. His memory, which entails, his sense of time and identity, is defective and chaotic. His body, the vehicle of these activities, is not only unreliable and in a state of constant decomposition but even makes demands upon him that interfere with his effectiveness. Social institutions, products of his own faulty nature, are no better as mechanisms for dealing with the problems with which his life confronts him.<sup>110</sup>

The systemizing mode of understanding produces chaos. Temporal certainties are upended. The body is in a crucial state of decay. Institutions, the product of human endeavours, are

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<sup>108</sup> Samuel Beckett, quoted in Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> Cronin, p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> Ramona Cormier and Janis L. Pallister, *Waiting for Death: The Philosophical Significance of Beckett’s *En Attendant Godot** (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979), p. 2.

necessarily tarnished. Existential vitality is instead sought through continuation, through actions, through doing.

Beckett's mixture of wit and despondency is variously connected to nihilism, the suffering of birth, the will to combine the tragic and absurd, to render the anguish of existence, and to acknowledge faulty human faculties that fail to communicate. These perils of existence necessarily lead to external chaos, disorder and decay. Meanwhile, the human is trapped, caught in meaningless struggle, waiting for death. Beckett's tendency to negation is neither nihilism nor affirmation. Affirmation is not necessarily positive, neither for the human nor the apocalypse. His apparent anthropological pessimism is squared with a desire for the yet-to-come. Beckett's celebration of nothingness forms his will to articulate meaning in something groundless. Protracted melancholy is a source of decisive action, not merely of memory and nostalgia.

Beckett's literary rendering of anticipation can be read as the anticipation of politics. For Schmitt, knowledge of the sovereign decision is not knowledge of the precise details against which the sovereign acts. In "Ping", Beckett indirectly articulates this lack of precision by suggesting details, which although existing as concrete and independent units, together form a perplexing whole. Through details that are necessarily obscured, anticipation of the sovereign decision—transformed into death, the end, or the final judgement—exists in fragments, repeated and refigured to the point of delirium. To live under the unanticipated sovereign decision is to be necessarily debilitated. Beckett's "Ping", in which a barely conscious subject expires within a small box, gives us a staccato, stuttering attempt to anticipate. Anticipation overwhelms the subject; it becomes an ontological force, a force of being that destroys before even as it defines the self. Beckett depicts the end with blots of colours on white, glimpsed traces of memory, just-discerned human features, and pizzicato twangs and murmurs, the suggestions of an outline. Beckett's perverse, ironic rendering of the paralyzing wait for decision illuminates Schmitt's desperate search for the representative image to articulate this waiting. While Schmitt could accept that the state possessed no image, and that the political decision was pure and revelatory, the wait for this decision required a form of illustration, which, for him, took several forms.



## 4.7 Waiting for the Katechon

Following “The Buribunks”, Schmitt pursues abstractions, symbols, and figures of political anticipation throughout his work, citing at various points Melville’s “Benito Cereno”, the katechon and Epimetheus. Beckett, on the other hand, indicates the comic pointlessness of such a search, rendering the anticipatory “Ping” figure as an incomprehensible and overwhelming set of sense impressions, whose negative meaning can be—via my comparative reading—identified as a rejection of Schmitt’s self-regarding search for anticipatory symbolism and post-war redemption. In this section, I take in turn Schmitt’s attempts to find an appropriate image to anticipate the moment of the sovereign exception, finding parallels with Beckett’s much less overburdened approach to the problem of anticipation.

The symbol or figure of the katechon, originating from St. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, denotes the great restrainer that can hold back the Anti-Christ. It could be a figure, person, or institution. Schmitt’s post-war development of the katechon concept, which he retrospectively applies to his early theories of sovereignty, illuminates discussions of Beckett’s works, which contain comic and forlorn undertakings of presumed authorities and messiahs. For Mary Bryden, apocalyptic expression offers Beckett ‘a method of reading disastrous events as foreshadowings of a much greater upheaval, a catastrophic eschatology in which a definitive break in history occurs’.<sup>111</sup> As an illustration, Beckett’s narrator in *Molloy* (1951) poses the suggestive query: ‘How much longer are we to hang about waiting for the antechrist?’<sup>112</sup> The vowel substitution transforms the Anti-Christ, literally a figure of negation, into a temporal and physical proximation.

David Kleinberg-Levin combines thinking on Schmitt and Beckett, writing about ‘the persistent afterlife of the justice that once ruled in a world framed by political theology’ and ‘the ghosts of political theology [that] continue to murmur’ in Beckett’s work, which are ‘never indulged or appeased’.<sup>113</sup> So, how does Beckett offer a secularized alternative to

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<sup>111</sup> Mary Bryden, ““History Is Done””: Thomas Merton’s Figures of Apocalypse”, in *Modernism, Christianity and Apocalypse*, ed. by Eric Topping, Matthew Feldman and David Addyman (Boston, MA: Brill, 2014), pp. 321–28 (p. 325).

<sup>112</sup> Samuel Beckett, quoted in Bryden, p. 325.

<sup>113</sup> David Kleinberg-Levin, *Beckett’s Words: The Promise of Happiness in a Time of Mourning* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 112–14.

the theological framework? Not through metaphor, fable, or allegory, but through reduction, because he works in a ‘time of emptiness and destitution, when the madness of theodicy is finished but a justice founded in humanity has not yet been realized’.<sup>114</sup> Beckett alludes to theological metaphors in his fictions to address, in Kleinberg Levin’s words, ‘the existential nihilism of his time, witnessing and expressing the longing, the mourning, and the despair’.<sup>115</sup> Ambiguities of modern cultural life redefine the sovereign decision, which comes to include the decision to do nothing. Paralysis is key for Schmitt’s understanding of the katechon, particularly ‘[t]he belief that someone or something restrains the end of the world is the only explanation which reconciles the eschatological paralysis of all human efforts with the historical greatness like that of the Christian Empire of the German kings’.<sup>116</sup> The purpose of Schmitt’s amorphous katechon is to delay and engender anticipation of the Second Coming. This reading suggests the innate value of ostensibly melancholic waiting; the katechon lends agency to what appears to be stasis.

One of Schmitt’s final published works, *Political Theology II* (1970), which cites negative influences ranging from Goethe to Brecht, also ‘presents a certain literary obscurantism with references made to arcane sources, oblique hints, suggestive undertones, double meanings, crafted ironies and symbolic figurations’.<sup>117</sup> Schmitt illuminates the political implications of Beckett via Hoelzl on *Waiting for Godot*, which, for the latter, is ‘a truly political book’ because the decision not to act, as depicted through Vladimir and Estragon, is fundamentally political.<sup>118</sup> In turn, the time that occurs between inaction and action is defined by anticipation, which can be theorized by the katechon concept. As Hoelzl notes, ‘[t]he katechon is the only possible explanation to bridge the gap between the paralysis of all human efforts and innerworldly ambition. The katechon defines the space between the radically spiritual and the purely political’.<sup>119</sup> How do Beckett’s aesthetic sensibilities in “Ping” function within this polarized symbolic space?

In “Ping”, the katechon is the ‘ping’ sound that accompanies a barely visible subject struggling through what appears to be its final moments of consciousness. The subject

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<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, p. 60.

<sup>117</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> Michael Hoelzl, ‘Before the Anti-Christ is Revealed: On the Katechontic Structure of Messianic Time’, in *The Politics to Come: Power, Modernity and the Messianic*, ed. by Arthur Bradley and Paul Fletcher (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 98–110 (p. 99).

<sup>119</sup> Hoelzl, p. 108.

exists in a small box bordered with white walls that trigger glimpsed traces of memories, that is, the lines of the past. The story begins with '[a]ll known', and for the following 1028 words, the narrator, the subject, and the reader fall into a condition of 'known not'. As stated, the repetitious, anticipatory form is broken by punctures of silence and the sound of 'ping'. It ends on something definitive, 'Ping over'. The movements between beginning and ending, between acknowledgement and the event, constitute anticipation in the text.

Schmitt's katechon is eventually superseded by his use of the figure, Epimetheus, whom Schmitt likens to himself. While his brother, Prometheus, is known for his prescience, Epimetheus is, rather, the god of hindsight. Giorgio Agamben writes that:

Like Epimetheus, Schmitt's Christian must react to an action that has, in fact, no possibility of affecting history and always occurs, so to speak, *post festum*. [...] in Schmitt the historical activity of humankind can have no redemptive value whatsoever. Instead, Schmitt's vision obliges humankind to respond to that which is not so much done as carried out. Like the anticipatory decision of the Heideggerian being-toward-death, the Schmittian decision decides something ineluctable; it anticipates something already decided. That is, strictly speaking it decides nothing.<sup>120</sup>

Through the figure of Epimetheus, Schmitt crafts the belated sovereign decision. Beckett, in "Ping", shows the absurdity of such a pursuit. Putting Schmitt and Beckett into the context of broader discussions of anticipation helps to illuminate and clarify the argument of the chapter. As Jacob Taubes notes, Schmitt 'thinks apocalyptically, but from above, from the powers' and that 'as far as the jurist is concerned, as long as it is possible to find even one juridical form, by whatever hairsplitting ingenuity, this must absolutely be done, for otherwise chaos reigns'.<sup>121</sup> This reasoning is why Schmitt deploys the katechon, which, as Taubes put it, 'holds down the chaos that pushes up from below'.<sup>122</sup> In contrast, Beckett, in "Ping", shows how the deployment of blunt representative images are often futile gestures, destined to be caught up in the cavalcade of instant sense impressions.

Schmitt then interprets Melville's novella, "Benito Cereno" (1855), as an exemplary fable of sovereign façade, a tragedy wrought by intimacy and deception, one without

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<sup>120</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'A Jurist Confronting Himself: Carl Schmitt's Jurisprudential Thought', in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. by Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 457–91 (p. 462).

<sup>121</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 142.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

obvious villains. Emblematic of what Schmitt calls its ‘unintended, cryptic symbolism’,<sup>123</sup> Melville gives these words to the title character, the displaced captain of the ship, *San Dominick*:

[...] you were with me all day; stood with me, talked with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me; and yet, your last act was to clutch for a villain, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose. So far may even the best man err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted. But you were forced to it; and you were in time undeceived. Would that, in both respects, it was so ever, and with all men.<sup>124</sup>

Benito Cereno addresses his rescuer, Amasa Delano, who has been deceived by a series of extravagant performances. Slaves, led by the manipulative Babo, have taken control of the ship and, to avoid detection, retained Cereno as their leader, a silhouette of authority. Cereno’s position is rendered into a pretence, and his erratic behaviour arouses Delano’s suspicions until the truth aches to be let out. It is the seminal tale of intimacy and deception, how often one arises from the other, and how difficult it is to locate good and evil in desperate circumstances. Melville’s tragedy of both failed and false sovereigns spoke powerfully to Schmitt in his post-war thinking. Breakdowns of and dysfunctions within sovereign representation caused him concern. The ever-present possibility of symbolic failure is central to his thought on space and image.

## 4.8 Conclusion

Schmitt has most often entered literary studies to buttress philosophical analysis of Franz Kafka.<sup>125</sup> Both Agamben and Derrida include readings of Schmitt in their respective analyses of Kafka’s famous parable, ‘Before the Law’.<sup>126</sup> The law, in Kafka’s story,

<sup>123</sup> Carl Schmitt, quoted and translated in Siegel, p. 52.

<sup>124</sup> Herman Melville, ‘Benito Cereno’, in *Billy Budd & Other Stories* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1998), pp. 85–160 (p. 158).

<sup>125</sup> See Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, “Wichtig zu lernen vor allem ist Einverständnis” Brecht zwischen Kafka und Carl Schmitt’, *MLN*, 119.3 (2004), 506–24; Christopher Conti, ‘Justice for Josef K.: Bringing Myth to an End in Kafka’s Trial’, *New German Critique*, 42.1 (2015), 99–128; Daniel McLoughlin, ‘The Fiction of Sovereignty and the Real State of Exception: Giorgio Agamben’s Critique of Carl Schmitt’, *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 12.3 (2016), 509–28..

<sup>126</sup> Lorenzo Fabbri, ‘Chronotologies of the Exception: Agamben and Derrida before the Camps’, *Diacritics*, 39.3 (2009), 77–95; Christian Huber, ‘Kafka’s “Before the Law”’: The participation of the subject in its subjectification’, *Organization Studies*, 40.12 (2019), 1823–40; Carlo Salzani, ‘The Sentence is the Goal: Agamben’s Notion of Law’, in *Law, Morality and Power: Global Perspectives on Violence and the State*, ed. by Stephen King, Carlo Salzani and Owen Staley (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 1–9.

functions as an arbitrary, unknowable and unanticipated force. The failure of the melancholic traveller to enter past the first gatekeeper is a product of his false expectations of the legal system.<sup>127</sup> In these works, Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is masterfully abstracted into a singular formalism. In this chapter, I, in some sense, reverse the order of this style of reading, bringing Schmitt's own complicated literary writings into conversation with a famously pared back text. I suggest that Schmitt's excessive, maximalist literary style in "The Buribunks" provides a formal inversion of Beckett's reduced fiction in "Ping", even though both works formulate concerns about the excess of information and the anticipation of images.

This chapter has argued how Schmitt's critique of the accumulation of detail and of the anticipation of the event reveals tendencies towards modernism in his ideological anti-liberalism. It has outlined the aesthetic sensibilities of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty and how these express kinship to contemporary literary modernisms. This chapter proposes that in "The Buribunks", Schmitt employs a modernist critique to comprehend the inherent follies of political liberalism. For Schmitt, the forlorn accumulation of details, understood as the excess of lines, produces a foolhardy state of anticipation. His theory of sovereignty, understood as the borderline, intends to eliminate this state. I have sought to amplify the modernist impulses in Schmitt via Beckett's extreme fictions, but also more fully identify the quality and relation of anticipation to sovereignty by reading Beckett via Schmitt.

In "The Buribunks", Schmitt renders what-is-to-come as the imperceptible abyss, in which 'the future lies there as dull and indifferent as the keyboard of a typewriter, like a dark rat hole from which one second after another (like one rat after another) emerges into the light of the past' (110). This anticipates Beckett's desolate and repeat pronouncements within "Ping", the moments of history that are smothered by quantified one-second intervals. Schmitt notes that the Buribunks capture blinking rats to record one second of clock time. By doing this, 'the fearful anticipation of the future loses its horror (111)'. Death is no longer a source of anxiety because it is obsessively anticipated. The final judgement is a mere rat-second of neutral value, observed through complete and earnest clarity. Writing history as it writes them, the Buribunks extinguish the 'illusion of singularity' and 'deceive world history's deceitfulness' (111). In "Ping", Beckett imbues

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<sup>127</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, trans. by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 119.

the repetitious form of words—a limited pool of mostly basic nouns and adjectives—with a rhythmic, not quite lyrical sense of something-to-come and through a visible accumulation of overcrowded text. The reader’s processing of anticipation is broken only by the material instances of the word, ‘silence’, and the assumed sound of ‘ping’, which interrupts the debilitated subject’s vague stream of sensory perception. Approaching the text through visual, sonic and syntactic analyses illuminates different aspects of the politics of anticipation. This chapter argues that Beckett’s story both fills the empty-line drawing and apes the dissonant form that constitutes Schmitt’s anticipation of the sovereign decision on the exception.

In “The Buribunks”, Schmitt laughs at the tendency to accumulate details when in a state of anticipation, prefacing his mockery of the legal and political aim ‘to regulate the exception as precisely as possible [...] to spell out in detail the case in which the law suspends itself’.<sup>128</sup> For Schmitt, to spell out the sovereign decision is impossible and undesirable. The active cannot become the medial: in envisioning the exception, he sees only the borderline. Yet, the symbolic spaces that the borderline generates do not simply constitute pure political forms or systematic analogies but offer vast planes within which aesthetic sensibilities can be, and indeed are, articulated.

Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty attempts to preclude anticipation, and in doing so, it aims to establish a meaningful political identity as the essence of human life. Thus, Schmitt wishes to eliminate the lines and frictions of political liberalism. This craving is illustrated, somewhat innocuously, by his shifting attitude towards two of his contemporaries. After his early infatuation, leading to an effusive monograph, he ended his friendship with the poet, Theodor Däubler. In his post-war diaries, Schmitt is instead drawn to the language, symbolism and companionship of Konrad Weiß, whose poem Schmitt places at the end of “Two Graves”, functioning as the ultimate form of self-justification: ‘Accomplish what you must, it is already | Always achieved and you may only answer’.<sup>129</sup> Only in retrospect did Schmitt understand the breakdown and the blossoming of these relationships. Akin to Hegel’s interpretation of the owl of Minerva, Schmitt states that ‘just as the grain of wood grows in a tree’, this change ‘belongs to the lines of our life, which we can trace later but not foresee or determine in the midst of its

<sup>128</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 15.

<sup>129</sup> Konrad Weiß, quoted in Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 45.

development'.<sup>130</sup> These words evoke much that is central to his theory of sovereignty. In the moment of decision, the sovereign is made visible, but the immediate image does not precipitate knowledge and understanding, just as it cannot be anticipated. Instead, the capacity to judge through hindsight colours Schmitt's method of political diagnosis, which sought to minimise the value and desirability of anticipation in politics, to render pointless and inhuman the lines of prediction that define political liberalism.

This political diagnosis has literary origins. To recall, Schmitt reads "Benito Cereno" both as a noble tragedy of reminiscence and as a forlorn fable of human obligation. Following 'the voiceless end' of his usurper Babo, Cereno, the erstwhile sovereign, reconciles himself with his own imminent demise. Delano, his rescuer, urges him to observe the unlimited possibilities of the future. He implores the captain to prepare for the sun to rise, for the sea and sky to turn blue, and for the leaves to turn over. The response is one of gloom, melancholy and debilitation. Why does Benito Cereno not seek solace in these accumulated details, in tracing the lines of his life, and in recognising the apparently perpetual truths of the natural world?

"Because they have no memory," he dejectedly replied; "because they are not human".<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, p. 44.

<sup>131</sup> Melville, 'Benito Cereno', p. 158.







## CHAPTER FIVE

## Conclusion: Who Decides?

I thought:

I own a little city

Awful pretty

Can't help people

Can hurt them though

Shoot their dogs

Mess 'em up

Be imaginative

Plant trees

Best to leave 'em alone?

Who decides?

Sam's wife is Sam's wife  
and coveting

Is not nice.

—DONALD BARTHELME<sup>1</sup>

## 5.1 Originality and Significance

'Who decides?' is the question of sovereignty. In Donald Barthelme's short story, "I Bought a Little City" (1974), an unnamed narrator, who has newly acquired Galveston, Texas, has therefore acquired the power to decide over the city and its inhabitants. Near the end of the story, the narrator employs halting poetic verse to reveal his private thoughts,

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Barthelme, 'I Bought a Little City', in *Sixty Stories*, pp. 290–96 (p. 295).

which amount to a wider revelation: that his monopoly on decision, matched to his determined lack of imagination, fails to give him all he desires, that is, Sam's wife. In giving narratorial sovereignty to the city sovereign, Barthelme conflates authorial with political sovereignty. The narrator exterminates 6000 of the city's canine population, before he attempts to steal Sam's wife, illustrating the potential problem of the sovereign: the position of authority corrupts its incumbent, and ownership slides into dictatorship. Barthelme returns to the formulation of 'who decides?' in his fictions because the question of sovereignty, for him, is transformed through the nature of fiction. This concern is illustrated by the many questions I have raised on the tone, exercise, theorization, and representation of sovereignty throughout this thesis.

Barthelme is often thought about as a postmodern writer, but underlining his interest in the relationship between authorial and political sovereignty joins him to the history of modernist writing.<sup>2</sup> This relationship is emphasized in work that traces his debt to Beckett.<sup>3</sup> For my own symbolic purposes, my opening and closing engagement with Barthelme disrupts the narrative of Beckett as 'the last modernist',<sup>4</sup> and indicates a broader scope for thinking about Schmitt in relation to literary modernisms beyond the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. By addressing the early European avant-gardes in the introduction, and by identifying diverse case studies of literary modernism in the main chapters—Woolf, Faulkner and Beckett provide examples of various aesthetic and representational strategies within the range of modernism—I have sought to show the extent to which Schmitt's thought on sovereignty can be used to illuminate these traditions. These authors all produce defining works of literary modernism during the period in which Schmitt is producing influential works about sovereignty. The ambition of this thesis has been to move beyond an ahistorical and summary use of Schmitt's headline ideas to frame literary analyses, and to demonstrate the potential of a more intricate and historically embedded engagement with the literary aspects of Schmitt's work—his own fiction, his literary criticism, the literary aspects of his legal and political writings—as an approach to a *longue durée* of literary modernism.

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<sup>2</sup> For a deeper interrogation of Barthelme's relationship to the modernist canon, see John Domini, 'The Modernist Uprising', *Southwest Review*, 75.1 (1990), 95–112.

<sup>3</sup> See Charles McGrath, 'Introduction', in *Donald Barthelme: Collected Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> See Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Harper Collins, 1996).

The relationship between rival forms of sovereignty, and between different domains of intellectual life, has driven much of the literary analysis in this thesis. Using a law and literature methodology, the thesis draws on Schmitt's work on sovereignty to bring new readings to contemporaneous examples of modernist literature. This process is partly to test Schmitt against nonfascist writers, such as Woolf, Faulkner, and Beckett, with whom he is less often brought into discussion. This thesis eschews further engagement with the likes of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, and Wyndham Lewis because it seeks to surpass the types of literary reading that can be easily swamped in discussions of political programmes and individual ideologies. This thesis instead provides a sustained focus on Schmitt in a literary critical project, considering various modernist forms, attitudes and sensibilities. Importantly, understanding the relationship between the influence and the ironic deployment of Schmitt's ideas has emerged forcefully across the chapters. Woolf, Faulkner and Beckett ironically invoke key terms, systems and concepts used by Schmitt; these literary acts contort and enhance the lines of connection between these writers. My chosen authors use irony to refigure definite ideas about the political, of which Schmitt is emblematic. They further ironize melancholy, failure and anticipation in such ways that challenge Schmitt's unyielding conceptual apparatus in his major writings, but which also evoke his early literary experiments with form, style and genre. The chapters show the failure of irony in his early writings, and how this is important to understanding his later work. Schmitt's understanding of politics is brought into relief by the creative ironies of my chosen authors and the ironies identified within my chosen texts.

By analysing key texts by key authors in relation to Schmitt, I have suggested that a thematic nexus of melancholy, failure and anticipation is a defining feature of the representation of sovereignty within Anglophone modernism. Melancholy states, so evident in *Orlando*, are also depicted in Faulkner and Beckett, transformed through their respectively maximalist and minimalist approaches to literature. Questions of failure, which are very common to scholarly appraisals of *The Wild Palms*, appear forcefully in the work of Woolf and Beckett, whose work is so often read as quintessentially about failure. As Anthony Cronin outlines,

[Beckett] had more false starts and false beginnings than most. The principal failing of his earlier work, so knowing but also so self-revealing in all the wrong ways, is the failure to achieve a form and a tone of voice which would allow him to express his particular truths. Perhaps this repeated failure made him feel more acutely than most the torment of marred utterance, of false utterance, of would-be significant utterance;

and to feel also more intensely than others that the object of true, achieved and necessary utterance is silence—in some sense or other, a permission to be silent, whether granted by one’s daemon or by one’s creator.<sup>5</sup>

It is curious, then, to analyse one of Beckett’s later works, “Ping”, and to find the failings of literature in evidence but subsumed by a more immediate and abiding concern with anticipation; a concern which is dealt with in a more realist and less abstract way in the writings of Woolf and Faulkner. Through their various—but always ironic—narratives of melancholy, failure, and anticipation, my chosen texts reckon with the relationship between representation and authority. Further, my exploration of these themes of Schmitt in each text highlights some new ways in which Schmitt’s own unironic conclusions about the proper establishment and exercise of sovereignty are unpersuasive.

Schmitt’s terms yield new insights into the significance of sovereignty for these authors and works. Across the chapters, Schmitt’s theory of tragedy, drawn from his reading of *Hamlet*, illuminates the deployment of mythic storytelling in *Orlando* and *The Wild Palms*. His analysis of failed symbols, most prominently that of Hobbes’ Leviathan, also reframes the effects of literary imagery in both novels. His narratives of competing territorial orders, namely between land and sea, evoke fresh understandings of state-making in all three works, particularly “Ping”. Further, his rejection of the endless chatter of liberal parliamentary democracy brings into relief a self-reflexive concern with the political effects of too much literary language for Woolf. His critique of romanticism invites analysis of Faulkner’s complication of literary genres. Finally, his anticipatory symbolism, particularly the katechon, reveals the potential of aesthetic images and the limits of political representation in Beckett. By reading these works of fiction via Schmitt, this thesis contributes to the separate, idiosyncratic and very live fields of Woolf, Faulkner, Beckett, and Schmitt studies. The first chapter’s analysis of *Orlando* contributes to work on the meaning of symbols and epochs in Woolf’s work. The second chapter’s reading of *The Wild Palms* highlights the political ramifications of tropes of failure in Faulkner. The third chapter’s examination of “Ping” draws out the political and aesthetic implications of Beckett’s views on the human and humanity. Concomitantly, this thesis seeks to trouble the deployment of Schmitt as a source of ahistorical aphorisms, which scholars tend to shoot through any given work of fiction. By thoroughly mapping Schmitt’s literary engagement, rather than only the gestures to literature in his works, I emphasize how

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<sup>5</sup> Cronin, p. 376.

Schmitt's early cultural diagnoses and his return in later life to literary criticism are significant for understanding the foundational ideas of his major political and legal theses, highlighting this prominent arc of his writings.

## 5.2 Reception and Future

It may appear that we risk reaching the point of Schmitt fatigue in the academy. From ignominy, his recuperation began in English-speaking scholarship in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> He is now seen as one of the leading political and legal thinkers of the twentieth century. *Telos*, the philosophy journal, has devoted numerous special issues to Schmitt, translating and publishing 129 articles by or about him since 1984.<sup>7</sup> There are many summaries of his influence.<sup>8</sup> He seems to be experiencing a second life outside of academia, too. Such is his intellectual redemption that his name appears frequently in public debate, news commentary and political manifestoes. Among an excited cohort, authoritarian conservatives, amoral leftists and self-flagellating liberals have acknowledged, appropriated and claimed affinity to his work. He is fodder for editorials in publications like the *Atlantic*, the *Financial Times*, and the *London Review of Books*, invoked to apprehend crises as disparate as Brexit, the rise of Steve Bannon, identity politics, and the electoral successes of demagogues such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Jair Bolsonaro. His reach extends to the depravity of internet forums.<sup>9</sup> For many, Schmitt helps to clarify the tumultuous present in all its contradictions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The first major English-language biography was written by Joseph W. Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt, Theorist for the Reich* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). The first English translations of Schmitt's work were published under *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, ed. by Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986–91).

<sup>7</sup> 'Carl Schmitt Article Index', *Telos*, <[www.telospress.com/article-index/carl-schmitt](http://www.telospress.com/article-index/carl-schmitt)> [accessed 16 June 2020].

<sup>8</sup> John P. McCormick, 'Political Theory and Political Theology: The Second Wave of Carl Schmitt in English', *Political Theory*, 26.6 (1998), 830–54; Chris J. Thornhill, 'Carl Schmitt after the Deluge: A Review of the Recent Literature', *History of European Ideas*, 26.3/4 (2000), 225–40; Peter C. Caldwell, 'Controversies over Carl Schmitt: A Review of Recent Literature', *The Journal of Modern History*, 77.2 (2005), 357–87.

<sup>9</sup> Schmitt is regularly the topic of message boards on websites such as 4chan.org. Discussions take place under headings such as 'Politically Incorrect'.

<sup>10</sup> See Joseph Owen, 'Why journalists reviving Carl Schmitt are playing a precarious game', *Prospect*, 11 September 2019, <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/journalists-carl-schmitt-revival-sovereign-trump-brexit>> [accessed 15 June 2020]; 'States of Emergency, Metaphors of Virus, and COVID-19', *Verso Books*, 31 March 2020, <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4636-states-of-emergency-metaphors-of-virus-and-covid-19>> [accessed 15 June 2020].

Schmitt's popular appeal is threefold. Firstly, he tries to demystify politics. To be political, in his telling, is to be a truly meaningful person, above frivolous moral, economic and aesthetic identities. The political life is thus the essential life. Secondly, his apparent intellect and card-carrying Nazism provide an appalling and seductive framing that anticipates a disastrous era of totalitarian politics. Schmitt's multifarious use is why so many commentators are attracted to him today, despite his embroilment with National Socialism. Through him, these writers can perform moral disgust while claiming insight into a worrying future. Lastly, his mystique is intensified by the way he constructs his ideas. He uses pithy axioms about legal order and state decision-making that are as slippery as they are suggestive. We can do a lot with them. His outward suitability for the present is thus explicable: his thought promises meaningful political identity; he possesses second sight; his language is appealingly vague. But if we continue to fetishize his intellect and encourage his application, what is at stake?

Schmitt's ideas seem fixed but can be transposed into many iterations, because his work contains concrete-looking definitions but also linguistic slippages, which ask to be understood intuitively and instinctively. But there is ambiguity in his thought. His virile heuristics function as symbolic spaces, within which commentators paint current policies, cravings and sensibilities. They pick any colour: a dash of Erdoğan, a lick of Xi Jinping, a blot of Salvini, or a shade of Johnson. In one *New Statesman* article, the headline foregrounds 'the terrifying rehabilitation of Nazi scholar Carl Schmitt', beneath which it notes his prescience for understanding the political phenomenon of Brexit 'only too well'.<sup>11</sup> Powered by a polarized energy, commentators valorize Schmitt's thought while gesturing at moral aberrations within it. They colour in their appreciation of the abstraction. His theory of sovereignty offers a potent symbolic space within which aesthetic sensibilities can be expressed. This strange reflexivity means that Schmitt's apparently totalizing, clear-sounding statements allow some journalists and academics to be equally totalizing in their pronouncements, but slippery and imprecise in their more superficial references of his work.

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Earle, 'The terrifying rehabilitation of Nazi scholar Carl Schmitt', *New Statesman*, 10 April 2019, <<https://www.newstatesman.com/2019/04/terrifying-rehabilitation-nazi-scholar-carl-schmitt>> [accessed 07 June 2020].

Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), remarked that Schmitt's 'very ingenious theories [...] make arresting reading'.<sup>12</sup> Noting the attraction of Schmitt for contemporary scholars, Meierhenrich and Simons point to 'the aesthetic and emotional appeal of [his] conceptual interventions', which often trump their 'explanatory power'.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on Schmitt's rhetorical and polemical skill indicate the aesthetic sensibilities that provide much of his explanatory power and which pervade his work. He is politically persuasive *because* his work draws on aesthetic sensibilities and fulfils aesthetic cravings. Recent commentators regularly invoke Schmitt, who has taken on a broader symbolic purpose, to explain disparate and sometimes incompatible contemporary political and cultural phenomena. This thesis has tried to negotiate both the excessive excitement and relative fatigue directed towards Schmitt in academia, and within this paradigm of his reception, made efforts to plot a new path for his use in scholarship.

Schmitt's significance in political and literary studies has increased since his Anglophone intellectual recuperation in the mid-1980s. This thesis has been a focused attempt to pay extended attention to Schmitt's aesthetics in relation to the literary culture of his times. My emphasis on Schmitt's aesthetics is not intended to omit discussion of his fascist politics, nor the reactionary, racialized or authoritarian tendencies of Woolf, Faulkner and Beckett, whose personal causes and public reputations have been widely discussed and interrogated. As I argued in the introduction, Schmitt continues to matter—and matters uniquely—to our understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, as well as the more specific relationships between form and order, and between representation and sovereignty. These ideas bear upon the modernist texts I have analysed in this thesis. Schmitt's cravings for reordering, form and representation indicate his anxiety about the aesthetic and precipitate his deliberate insistence on the political, which raises important questions about the meaning, value and utility of art in modernist studies.

Lastly, Schmitt's politics have played a decisive role in the attractions of extreme right-wing thinking across the ages, including our own. This worrying fact indicates why it is so important to get Schmitt right, by interrogating his concepts and methodologies, and by repudiating the fascist elements of his thought. Schmitt remains an influential thinker in political theory and humanities scholarship, and we must caution against his misuse and

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 445.

<sup>13</sup> Meierhenrich and Simons, pp. 25, 17.



overuse. The surface deployment of Schmitt's ideas provides a shortcut to understanding, which obfuscates the dubious blend of expediency, ideology and power in his philosophy, and which ignores the essentially aesthetic forces threaded throughout his writings.





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## Works of Art

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## Filmography

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- Orlando*, dir. by Sally Potter (Sony Pictures Classics, 1992)
- The Passion of Joan of Arc*, dir. by Carl Theodor Dreyer (Société Générale des Films, 1928)