INTRODUCTION
Literature and Art: Conversations and Collaborations

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You want to be a painter? First you must cut out your tongue because your decision has taken away from you the right to express yourself with anything but your brush.
Henri Matisse, 1942

Literature and the visual arts have been yoked together in myriad ways for centuries, enjoying a protean relationship of commonalities and differences. For authors, artists, readers, and viewers, the interaction of literature and art continues to encourage questions of form and content; of interpretations of visual and written language; of adaptation, translation, and rewriting; of influence and originality; and of the roles of creator and audience. It is a relationship that both refuses and defines the boundaries between image and word, upsetting the ways in which artists and writers invest in their media. Henri Matisse's polemical advice to students shows the strength with which mono-medial expression can be defended. Matisse, however, repeated and recalibrated this directive in a note included in 1947's *Jazz*, a book of vibrant cut-outs interspersed with handwritten text:

> After having written "he who wants to devote himself to painting must begin by cutting out his own tongue," why do I feel the need to use other media than my usual ones? [...] These pages, therefore, will serve only to accompany my colors, just as asters help in the composition of a bouquet of more important flowers. *Thus, their role is purely visual.*[1]

By turning to language to affirm a declared hierarchy of images over words, Matisse's anxious defence undermines his promotion of the wordless artist. The written aside of *Jazz* makes explicit a constant source of tension in the relationship between literature and visual art: the limitations of each. What can art do that literature cannot, and what can literature achieve that art cannot attain? Could the pages of *Jazz* not express the decorative purpose of the words presented in such a way that Matisse's stance on mute expression need not be challenged? Matisse's explanation intimates a limitation of his art, a need for explanatory composed text: an implication that writing can clarify in a way that art cannot, that it can in fact close off possible interpretations.

The hesitations of authors to have their texts illustrated, for fear that the images will curtail the imaginations of their readers, suggests a similar concern that the combination

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[1] Henri Matisse, *Jazz*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: George Braziller, 1983), p. xv

of the literary with the visual will establish a hierarchy of signification. The suspicion of authors that an image will override their words and the curious faith of an artist that a written text can clarify their art are echoed by readers and viewers, who fret over film adaptations of favourite books and look first to the explanatory blurb printed next to a painting. At once productive and limiting, these tensions have been at work throughout the history of the relationship between literature and art, manifesting variously where painting, illustration, sculpture, photography, or installation intersect with literary writing in all its forms. Therefore the reinterpretation of a text by an artist, or an art object by an author, provokes not only an assessment of the new and original work, but also a reappraisal of art, literature, and the process of adaptation. The relationship prompts evaluations, and therefore a self-consciousness of both or either medium. The interaction of literature and art is therefore inherently critical, even theoretical.

Many examples of visual artists' experimentations with written texts directly engage with literary works – including the ancient Sperlonga sculptures depicting episodes of *The Odyssey*, Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1482), or much of the output of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; arguably the wealth of art inspired by religious texts, such as the Gupta Vishvarupa sculptures of the fifth century, or ninth and tenth century Byzantine mosaics in Hagia Sophia, Istanbul; and illustrated texts from eleventh century Japanese woodblock-printed books to contemporary book-to-art projects such as Stephen Crowe's *Wake in Progress*. Others, however, operate at a remove from literature, investigating instead individual words or non-literary writing. In 1913-14 Kazimir Malevich drew a simple frame and wrote within it 'деревня' ('Village'), noting that 'Instead of drawing the huts of nature's nooks, better to write "Village" and it will appear to each with finer details and the sweep of an entire village.'[2] A conceptual exploration of the power of language, pitted against the visual by borrowing the frame of an exhibited artwork, Malevich's *Alogmisme 29. Village* creates a viewer/reader who must create the framed image. *Alogmisme 29. Village* challenges the role of the artist/author while investing a great deal in the modes of art and the capabilities of words. In his investigation into the effects of language as communication within a curated, artistic space, Malevich gives the word 'village' a quality that one might call literary.

Literature points often to the visual, however its engagement with art can draw on more than the representation of an image. For example, Frank O'Hara uses to great effect the status of revered artworks, borrowing their renowned beauty in the 1960 poem 'Having

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a Coke with You' to express his absorption with a lover: 'and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them / when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank'. O'Hara references well-known artwork (including Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and the drawings of Michelangelo) to make his adoring point, thwarting the trope of comparing a loved one to exalted art by instead deeming art inferior to the loved one:

> and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint
> you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them
>
> I look
> at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world[3]

'Having a Coke with You' draws on a long history of poetry and literature written about, in full or in part, existing or imaginary works of art. Known as ekphrasis, this borrowing of the visual by authors reverses Matisse's use of writing in *Jazz*: it hopes to add to what is conveyed by words without overpowering the medium of writing. Ekphrasis achieves this with success by evoking an image rather than presenting one, by keeping the artwork within the sphere of literature.

The conversations and collaborations of literature and art of course include combinations of text and image which attempt to balance each medium, rather than refract one through the other. The twentieth century emergence of the *livre d'artiste* and contemporary graphic novels arguably prioritise neither the visual nor the written, instead seeking a partnership. Yet the ways in which we consume and disseminate these works tend to divide them – we read mass-published graphic novels, and exhibit one-off *livres d'artistes*. The lack of any simplicity to the relationship between literature and art is in part what causes work which invokes the combination to become critical, a commentary of either or both media and of the functions of intertexuality, adaptation, and translation. By forcing us to consider each medium in relation to the other, we consider the role of all forms of art, of communication, representation, narrative, beauty.

A work which draws from both literature and visual art encourages a questioning of how the activities of artists/authors and viewers/readers are linked in a progression of interpretation, reinterpretation, rewriting, and reimaging. These interactions of literature and art are self-conscious at their origins because they depict a creative act of reading or viewing. W. H. Auden's classic example of ekphrasis, 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (1938), expresses a contemplation of human suffering impelled by viewing Brueghel's *Icarus* and

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[3] Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 175-76

makes explicit its status as a written response to art. By representing a viewer within the poem, who considers both *Icarus* and the ways in which art can approach the realities of disaster, the invocation of Daedalus' over-reaching son turns the poem in on itself. Daedalus, the artistic creator, lingers in the background of the poem, hinting that the worries of the viewer/author are concerned also with the role of an artist and the position of art within the world.

Literature and art together lead not only to an activity of critical analysis but to theoretical questioning. Texts and images which engage with both the visual and the written encourage considerations of form and content; of representation, or the impossibilities therein; of commonalities such as narrative, framing, movement, stasis, metaphor. Interlinked, they can clarify and complicate concerns of literary and artistic theory. The work of installation and concept artist Sophie Calle – a mixture of photography, text, and event – offers responses to such concerns: the constant query of what defines 'art', the late twentieth century post-structuralist death of the author, and contemporary identity-related approaches to art and criticism. In 1979's *Suite Venitienne* Calle follows an almost-stranger to Venice, exhibiting the photographs she took of him with pieces of her own writing. Such autobiographical work eschews concepts of an absent author or artist and forms one of the many twentieth-century challenges to what counts as 'art'. Often choosing polysemantic exhibition titles, Calle uses written language to add to the sense of shifting layers of signification in her work: for example her 2003 Centre Pompidou exhibition was entitled *M'as-tu vue?*, literally translating as 'did you see me?' or 'have you seen me?', but also meaning 'show off'. As Alfred Pacquement, director of the Pompidou, comments, the title 'also emphasises the fact that, though the exhibition is made up of a set of works, ancient or modern, so to speak, it still forms a whole, to be seen and read, like a narrative, in a series of chapters.'[4] Works which demand to be 'seen and read' absorb the dialogues and refusals between visual and written communication, and explicitly ask for us to reappraise how we consume literature and art.

As we move into contemporary manifestations of literature and art, we can perceive that the relationship has come full circle, through a consumerisation of the very association itself. Blackwell's, a notable publisher of academic and literary texts alike, now offers aesthetic realisations of classic fiction. Striking examples include those of posterisation techniques, both through the casual wearing of memorable literary quotations in t-shirt form and the bite-sized book-on-a-page prints that can be framed

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[4] Sophie Calle, *M'as-tu vue?* (Paris: Centre Pompidou and Edition Xavier Baral, 2003), p. 16

and displayed on a wall of one's choosing. Both of these products allow for the accessible presentation of (a select and marketable range of) an individual's aesthetic choices to give an implicit impression of literary worth and cultural capital without the need for in-depth discussion or knowledge of such works. Yet far from being a literal illustration of the dire state of contemporary literacy, the stark visuality of these products both undermines and adds new meaning to the role of words and narrative by drawing attention to its visual worth, as well as acting as a reminder of the importance of typography and presentation more widely, the inevitability of judging a book not only by its cover but also by the layout of its contents.

Indeed to draw upon an inherently less identically reproducible medium, we can consider the recent interest in book sculpture and the materiality of the book form. The intricate work of artists such as Su Blackwell and Brian Dettmer posit this new approach to the printed medium as a physical creation of art through literary artefacts. A contrast between these two artists demonstrates two very different approaches to the reappropriation of literature. Blackwell's sculptures are consistently composed on a surface of an open book, implying an overflow or visual outpouring of the story within, and thus extending the book (binding) as frame while respecting its role as base.[5] Conversely, Dettmer almost completely abandons the structural character of the frame, instead treating the literature as malleable primary material.[6] Together these artists continue to highlight the modern definitions of literature and art, that is, undefinable and often indistinguishable. It is within this space that our authors perform their analyses, towards a reassessment of artistic boundaries within and without literature.

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...a meeting place for issues of visual and material culture, textuality, and poetics in so far as they all contribute to the foregrounding of creative processes...
David Bowe

Providing our earliest example of the physical artistry of the creation of literary works, David Bowe (University of Oxford) opens our issue in an exploration of the importance of the tools of writing, through his article on the work of medieval poet Guido Cavalcanti. Bowe's article performs an in-depth textual analysis of the long-neglected sonnet 'Noi siàn le triste penne isbigottite' [*We are the sad, bewildered quills*], while

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[5] http://www.sublackwell.co.uk/portfolio-book-cut-sculpture/
[6] http://briandettmer.com/art/

emphasising the strong links with medieval writing technologies. Bowe casts light upon a writer who pre-empts many a modern sentiment of the aesthetics of the written word: indeed the knives and quills of Cavalcanti resonate with the surgical nature of the works of Blackwell and Dettmer with several centuries' divide. Through his depiction of Cavalcanti's self-aware work, Bowe raises issues of subjectivity and selfhood across the media of literature and art.

> *...the boundary between literary and critical representation is negotiated by means of a Medusan interchange of gazing and imagining, petrification and insightful reading.*
> Mathelinda Nabugodi

Mathelinda Nabugodi (University College London) continues our discussion of subjectivity through notions of self-reflection, through the oft-represented historical character of Medusa. Demonstrating that works of literature and art can be used both as a lens through which to see and as an object to be looked at, Nabugodi assesses the manifold discussion of the Medusan figure across history. Her article instructively dissects the varying myth through both critical and literary theory, with a focus on Walter Benjamin and the ekphrastic work of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Nabugodi refracts the Medusan gaze in a detailed assessment of seven disparate aspects of this deadly figure, highlighting the ambiguity of both the myth itself and the myth-making process. Through her use of a character whose petrifying capacities are themselves multiply defined, Nabugodi underlines the importance of the reader and spectator, and the reader as spectator, in the construction of these interpretations of the making-visible of Medusa.

> *...the sister arts* can be also considered, in the specific case of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, as the sisters' arts*, that is two different means of expressing the same underlying aesthetic principles as well as the closeness of their professional and private relationship.*
> Annalisa Federici

Remaining within the realm of narrative blurring, Annalisa Federici (University of Perugia) brings an extra level of artistic intimacy to the table through her article on sisters Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. Federici dissects the relationship between art and artist, character and narrative, in such a way that provides new commentary on the self-development of aesthetic principles. Federici demonstrates a cross-fertilisation of techniques of narrative and design that make these works both complimentary and self-referential. The interactions between visual and verbal imagery open up an interactive space for the creation of a common language of aesthetics between abstraction and impressionism.

...the image is no longer relegated to an ancillary function as mere illustration...
the work of Éluard and Ernst accomplishes an interchange and interaction of disparate fragments of
media that cannot necessarily be treated as separate entities, but demand to be viewed as intermedia.
Lauren Van Arsdall

Lauren Van Arsdall (University of California Los Angeles) extends our modernist destruction of artistic boundaries in an analysis of the Surrealist collaborations of Max Ernst and Paul Éluard. Moving on from Federici's analysis of tightly-entwined sister(s') arts, Van Arsdall explores an artistic forum that demonstrates a level of collaboration that puts pressure even on the notion of intertextuality. Her article draws upon the problematic of automatic writing as a means of expression, and posits a redefinition of the method by Ernst and Eluard. Using the Surrealist text *Les Malheurs des immortels*, Van Arsdall performs an in-depth textual dissection of selected doublets in order to demonstrate the possibility of new analysis of the imagery of language, as well as a rebuttal to the notion of the avant-garde as nonsensical or meaningless.

...Butor's engagement with form in this text sees him develop a string of brief encounters with
different artworks over the course of the book, allowing us to align our progression through the text, as
readers, with the trajectory of a visitor leisurely making her or his way through an exhibition space.
Elizabeth Geary Keohane

Elizabeth Geary Keohane (University of Toronto/University of Johannesburg) offers a novel approach to the notions of illustration and ekphrasis, suggesting the potential for a text to play the role of a museum guide. Her analysis of Michel Butor's *Les Mots dans la peinture* suggests limits to the associative potential of ekphrasis, while opening up word-image relations through her designation of the text as a reader in its own right. Offering a very different approach to ekphrasis from Nabugodi's, Geary Keohane steps back from the analysis of the work's contents in order to posit a renewed interest in the structural importance of the text as an entity; an aesthetic of writing beyond the simple depiction of works of visual art. In so-doing, she sets up a meta-curation of the art exhibition, highlighting the continuous potential for verbo-visual interaction.

...we might tentatively suggest a transgressive experience à la Houellebecq *from the perspective of*
sentimentality, altruistic love and compassion, a crucial element of Houellebecquian aesthetics, tentatively
and at least partially opposed to the cruelty and suffering he observes in contemporary cultural
production.
Russell Williams

Russell Williams (University of London Institute in Paris) rounds off the issue with our most contemporary response to the theme of literature and art, through a discussion of the transgressive in the works of Michel Houellebecq. Williams demonstrates how the

postmodern aesthetic of Houellebecq's texts implicates both author and reader in their scandalous depictions that border on the surreal. As we saw Federici depict the modernist artist as character and the image as narrative, so Williams depicts a postmodern destruction of this distinction that is at once playful and violent. Furthermore, this breakdown illustrates the constant potential and desire for auto-biography in art and literature, as expressions of selfhood in a hyper-aware exploration of self-reflective potential.

In our initial call for articles we invited reflections on the following questions: How can we define the fluctuating relationship between literature and art, and how has it changed over time? What reasons can we attribute to its continuing importance? Responding in a wide-ranging and personal manner to these challenges, our six authors elucidate that the relationship between literature and art is longstanding and multifaceted, from the medieval to the contemporary, and from illustration and description to the fully intermedial. The articles in this issue highlight the creative potential of a constant renegotiation of the boundary space between literature and art. *Conversations and Collaborations* does not aim to provide a full or complete response to the problematic of the tumultuous relationship between literature and art. Instead, its selection of approaches intend to provoke further questions, and further interest in unpicking this rich subject area, in a contemporary world where accessibility and interdisciplinarity provide the backbone of cultural interaction.

Text, Artefact and the Creative Process:
'The Sad, Bewildered Quills' of Guido Cavalcanti

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Abstract:

This article will engage with issues of material culture and medieval technologies of writing in conversation with representations of the creative process and poetic subjectivity through a close reading of the sonnet 'Noi siàn le triste penne isbigottite' [*We are the sad, bewildered quills*] by the Florentine poet (and friend of Dante) Guido Cavalcanti (c.1255-1300), in light of common representations of scribes at work in visual culture. By reading Cavalcanti's representation of the art of writing and the artefact of the text this article will explore the 'written-ness' of the Italian tradition, in contrast with the oral performance culture of troubadour lyric, and the implications of this material, textual tradition for the representation of a fragmented self. I will posit that Cavalcanti's poetic praxis depends on the legible, material object of the text. Across Cavalcanti's lyric output we witness a disassembling of the self into myriad, often physiological, parts, which are given individual voices through sustained prosopopoeia, generating a model of subjectivity located in physiology and textuality. In this sonnet, this practice is extended even to the implements of textual production. I will highlight the manner in which the multiple voices of Cavalcanti's texts engage in an internalised dialogue, and their fundamental role in the representation of his poetic self. My reading will investigate this sonnet's representation of tools of writing as lyric voices in themselves, contextualising this imagery within Cavalcanti's poetics of self-fragmentation and placing it in conversation with the material culture of the circulation of poetry in late-medieval Italy. This article will act as a meeting place for issues of visual and material culture, textuality, and poetics in so far as they all contribute to the foregrounding of creative processes — the creation of poetic texts, content and selves — in this Cavalcantian text.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

A manuscript presupposes a scribe. In fact, it quite literally presupposes a hand (*manus*) that writes (*scribere*), and this is precisely what Guido Cavalcanti (c. 1255-1300) offers us in his tragic yet playful depiction of the act of writing in the sonnet 'Noi siàn le triste penne

isbigottite' [*We are the sad, bewildered quills*]. This poem, written in the last third of the thirteenth century, offers us a locus for the simultaneous discussion of poetics, the materiality and circulation of texts and the representation (both literary and visual) of the creative process, whether specifically poetic, or broadly artistic. I will now expand on each of these in reverse order. As regards the creative process, Cavalcanti taps into a vein of imagery that was present in contemporary manuscript illuminations and in depictions of writers elsewhere (most diffusely in representations of the evangelists armed with quills and knives copying down their gospels). This is not to suggest that Cavalcanti's text is precisely ekphrastic, but rather that it can fruitfully be read in light of such imagery. In other words, his literary representation of the tools of writing may be inspired as much by the items in front of him on his writing table — a sort of written still life — as the visual culture in which he is writing, but the illustrative tradition provides an important context for the production of Cavalcanti's text.

These visual and textual depictions of the process of creation, of the making of the written artefact, also provide a useful spur to us as readers to refocus on the materiality of texts. In contrast to the emphasis on oral performance in the Provençal tradition that had gone before, the Italian poetic tradition was 'born [...] under the signs of Latinity and of writing', and this written-ness has implications for the contemporary circulation of early Italian texts and also for the ways in which we receive them today.[1] Cavalcanti vibrantly depicts these implications and he engages with them on multiple occasions in his oeuvre, though I will be restricting my focus primarily to the most emphatic example here. It is in this light that the issue of poetics is raised. Cavalcanti employs the medium of text, the fact of its materiality, and the means of its production to express a model of lyric poetry that relies on a destructive experience of love, a manuscript circulation of poetry, and a fragmented, polyphonic subjectivity. Indeed, we shall see that Cavalcanti's text exists in an imagistic dialogue with illuminations, carvings and other visual depictions of the act of writing.

Visual representations of scribes, Church Fathers and Evangelists, laying down their texts with knife and quill in hand, can be found in numerous illuminations, engravings and frescos throughout Europe and within Italy. We find a plethora of instances of the iconography of the scribe scattered through medieval Europe. One beautiful example of this iconography appears in the late thirteenth/early fourteenth-century manuscript Plutei

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[1] Olivia Holmes, *Assembling the lyric self: Authorship from Troubadour song to Italian poetry book* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 47. For a reconstruction of circulation and compilation culture in late medieval Italy, see Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: urban readers and writers in late medieval Italy (The William and Katherine Devers series in Dante studies)* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

42.19 in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, containing Brunetto Latini's *Tesoro* and, on fol. 72, an image of Brunetto (a famous denizen of the fifteenth circle of the *Inferno* penned by Cavalcanti's one-time friend Dante Alighieri) writing with pen and knife.[2] Elsewhere in Europe we find an English-made Bible of 1270-80 (Princeton, University Library, MS Garrett 28) with images of Jerome (fol. 1[r]), the evangelist Luke (fol. 400[v]) and the Apostle Paul (fol. 434[v]), all writing with pen and knife in hand.[3] This list does not intend to be exhaustive, but merely to demonstrate the commonplace nature of visual representations of the scribe sitting at his manuscript clutching his writing tools.

With this widespread image in mind, let us turn to Cavalcanti's sonnet:[4]

Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite,
le cesoiuzze e 'l coltellin dolente,
ch'avemo scritte dolorosamente
quelle parole che vo' avete udite.
Or vi diciàn perché noi siàn partite
e siàn venute a voi qui di presente:
la man che ci movea dice che sente
cose dubbiose nel core apparite;
le quali hanno destrutto sì costui
ed hannol posto sì presso a la morte,
ch'altro non n'è rimaso che sospiri.
Or vi preghiàn quanto possiàn più forte
che non sdegniate di tenerci noi,
tanto ch'un poco di pietà vi miri.

We are the sad, bewildered quills,
the little clippers and the suffering knife,
who have written with such sadness
all those words that you have heard.
Now we tell you why we've left,
and come to you, here present:
the hand that moved us says it feels
worrying things that have appeared in the heart;
and these have so destroyed him
and pushed him so close to death,
that he has nothing left but sighs.
Now we beg you, as strongly as we can,
not to disdain to keep us
as long as a little pity may become you.

The insistence on the textuality of this sonnet borders on the tautological, coming as it does from a circulation culture rooted in manuscript copying as well as composition. The survival of copied poetry (both fragments and whole texts) in the ledgers of Bolognese notaries (the *Memoriali Bolognesi*) and the three great C13th lyric anthologies — Laurenziano-Rediano 9, Banco Rari 217 (the Palatine Codex), and Vaticano Latino 3973 (with its notable collection of sonnet exchanges, or *tenzoni*) — is indicative of a lively scribal culture and the diffusion of written verse.[5] Indeed many poems from this period of

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[2] Image available at <http://www.florin.ms/tesorettintro.html> [accessed 26 September 2014].

[3] Images available on the *Index of Christian Art* (Princeton University) <http://ica.princeton.edu> [accessed 26 September 2014].

[4] For the texts of Cavalcanti's poems I follow the editorial suggestions made in Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. by Roberto Rea and Giorgio Inglese (Rome: Carocci, 2012). The translations are my own., though alternatives are available in Guido Cavalcanti, *The Complete Poems*, Marc A. Cirigliano trans. (New York: Italica Press, 1992 and *The Selected Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti: A Critical English Edition*, Simon West trans. (Leicester: Troubador, 2009).

[5] For extensive discussion of this culture see Steinberg, pp. 17-144.

Italian production make explicit reference to writing and reading practices alongside more generic, figurative uses of the terminology of singing, saying and hearing. What is more striking in Cavalcanti's poem is the lack of any 'I'.[6] That is not to say there are no speakers in this text: in fact there are many, a veritable chorus of non-'I' voices. The quills, clippers, and knife — the very tools of writing — deliver a message from the hand that moved them regarding the state of the lover. Indeed, in Calvino's assessment, Cavalcanti is 'the first to consider the instruments and gestures of his own activity [of writing] as the true subject of the work'.[7] The ambiguity of Calvino's 'soggetto', which I have here translated with the equally polysemous 'subject', accurately suggests the nature of these non-'I' speakers as offering an alternative subjectivity, one not restricted to the straightforward speaking 'I'.

The textual representation of speech, even in the context of a decidedly written Italian tradition, remains an emphatic presence in our sonnet, and Maria Corti has highlighted the adoption of spoken forms in the language of the quills, knife, and clippers: 'siàn' [*we are*], 'diciàn' [*we say/tell*], 'preghiàn' [*we beg*], 'possiàn' [*we can*] are spoken Florentine variants of *siamo*, *diciamo*, *preghiamo*, *possiamo*.[8] The presence of alternative voices is, in fact, characteristic of Cavalcanti's representation of the experience of love and indeed of the self. Such a ruptured persona owes its development to the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia, the personifying figure that grants voices to non-human speakers and which characterises Cavalcanti's oeuvre as a whole.[9] Through this insistent prosopopoeia the various fragments of the self take on individuated speaking identities that are arrayed alongside the 'I' in a 'dramatised representation' of the experience of the passion of love.[10] Cavalcanti's personification, then, is not exclusively (or even predominantly) of the sort that gives substance to abstract nouns, though Amore (Love as deity) of course features heavily in his poetry.[11] Rather, Cavalcantian prosopopoeia consists in the creation of

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[6] The absence of the 'mediation of the I-speaker' [*Senza più alcuna mediazione dell'io-personaggio*] is emphasised by Alfredo Troiano, 'Per un'interpretazione del sonetto XVIII di Guido Cavalcanti', *Testo: Studi di teoria e storia della letteratura e della critica*, 46 (2003), pp. 7-22 (14).

[7] 'Il primo a considerare gli strumenti e i gesti della propria attività come il vero soggetto dell'opera', Italo Calvino, 'La penna in prima persona (Per i disegni di Saul Steinberg), in *Una pietra sopra: Discorsi di letteratura e società* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), pp. 294-300 (294), originally published in a French translation as 'La plume à la première personne', Jean Thibaudeau trans., in *Derrière le miroir*, 224, (May, 1977).

[8] Maria Corti, 'La penna alla prima persona', in *Guido Cavalcanti laico e le origini della poesia europea nel VII centenario della morte: Atti del convegno internazionale (Barcellona, 16-20 ottobre 2001)*, ed. by Rossend Arqués (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2003), pp. 217-23, and reprinted in *Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante: La felicità mentale, Percorsi dell'invenzione e altri saggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), pp. 42-49 (46).

[9] *Poeti del Dolce stil novo*, ed. by Mario Marti (Florence: Le Monnier, 1969), p. 157; Robert Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 69-70 & 74-81, and 'The Ghost of Guido Cavalcanti, Revisited', in *Guido Cavalcanti tra i suoi lettori (Guido Cavalcanti: Proceedings of the International Symposium for the Seventh Centennial of his Death)*, ed. by Maria Luisa Ardizzone (Fiesole, FI: Cadmo, 2003), pp. 119-30 (122-23); also Corti 'Introduzione', in Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. by Marcello Ciccuto, 5th edn (Milano: Rizzoli, 1998), pp. 5-27, the section on the personification of spirits (pp. 10-22) is excerpted and reprinted as 'Gli spiritelli, *dramatis personae*', in *Scritti*, pp. 50-58.

[10] '[U]na rappresentazione [...] drammatizzata', Corrado Calenda, *Per altezza d'ingegno: Saggio su Guido Cavalcanti* (Naples: Liguori, 1976), p. 17.

[11] Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, pp. 79-80.

separate, individuated actors and speakers from the body's constituent processes, parts and faculties. For example, in the following lines from one of Cavalcanti's *ballate*:

> Davanti agli occhi miei vegg'io lo core
> e l'anima dolente che s'ancide,
> che mor d'un colpo che li diede Amore
> ed in quel punto che madonna vide.
> ('I' prego voi che di dolor parlate', 4-7)

> *Before my eyes I see the heart*
> *and the suffering soul which are slain,*
> *which die of a blow struck by Love*
> *in that moment when my lady was seen.*

Several of the key terms and images in Cavalcanti's lexicon are evident here: the recurrent sensation of 'suffering' [*dolore*]; the violent act of the 'blow' [*colpo*] which provokes the love experience; the physiological elements of the 'eyes' [*occhi*], 'heart' [*core*], and 'soul' [*anima*]. In Cavalcanti's poetry these physiological terms, along with the concept of 'spritis' [*spiriti*] ('hybrid entities that bridge the gap between the corporeal and incorporeal'),[12] belong to a technical, scientific lexicon, which will be discussed further below.[13] The parts they play in the experience of love-as-passion are rigorously established in Cavalcanti's doctrinal *canzone*, 'Donna me prega'. The technical language of that poem is dependent on an Aristotelian natural philosophy, whose importance for Cavalcanti's poetic 'phenomenology of love' has been carefully explored by a number of scholars.[14] The presence and role of these physiological components (eyes, soul, spirits, et al) in his texts, however, also go beyond the limits of their functions in natural philosophy. The carefully enumerated physiology allows for Cavalcanti's representation of a particular brand of subjectivity insofar as the prosopopoeia of these physiological attributes renders the 'I' as but a single player on a populous interior stage. In the example above, the soul and heart have lives (and deaths) and struggles of their own. While other poets, including Cavalcanti's erstwhile 'friend' Dante, draw on the same physiology of love, their prosopopoeia does not persist in the same way and nor does it affect the 'I' in the same destructive and thoroughgoing manner.[15] Cavalcanti's multi-voiced interior life results in a

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[12] Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 13. For the spirits in Cavalcanti see Federica Anichini, *Voices of the Body: Liminal Grammar in Guido Cavalcanti's 'Rime' (Voci del corpo: Grammatica liminale nelle 'Rime' di Guido Cavalcanti*, (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2009), pp. 87-114, and Dana E. Stewart, *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender and Subjectivity Medieval Love Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), pp. 89-92.

[13] Maria Luisa Ardizzone, *Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 16-29. Also Anichini, pp. 39-47 on 'the alliance between natural philosophy and medicine' which characterised and informed Cavalcanti's intellectual and physiological model.

[14] Ardizzone, *The Other Middle Ages*, pp. 16-40; Inglese, *L'intelletto e l'amore: studi sulla letteratura italiana del Due e Trecento* (La nuova Italia: Florence, 2000), pp. 13-47; Sonia Gentili, *L'uomo aristotelico: alle origini della letteratura italiana* (Carocci: Rome, 2005), pp. 187-91.

[15] Webb, pp. 74-81. There is not space in this article to make fuller comparisons of Cavalcanti's uses of physiology with those of his contemporaries. Elsewhere I have discussed points of contact and contrast between some of Dante's uses physiology and personification and Cavalcanti's. David Bowe, '"E io a lui": Dialogic models of conversion and self-

particular and irreducible polyphonic subjectivity, which goes beyond, and sometimes even displaces the 'I'. Elsewhere, we find a prime example of this new Cavalcantian mode of personification in the sonnet 'Deh, spiriti miei, quando mi vedete' [*Oh, my spirits, when you see me*], in which the 'I' remonstrates with the circulatory spirits for failing to 'send forth|from the mind words adorned with weeping' [*come non mandate|fuor della mente parole adornate|di pianto?*] (2-3).

This fracturing of the self into a multitude of autonomous fragments is the starting point from which the bewilderment, which characterises Cavalcanti's poetry, unfolds.[16] It is also the point from which the polyphony of Cavalcanti's self emerges. The 'I's address to the 'spirits', 'heart', etc., and their replies, feature frequently throughout Cavalcanti's texts, creating internalised dialogues evident in his corpus as a whole. The proliferation of participants in this sonnet represents both a staged dialogue and a polyphony, which I find it helpful to describe in terms developed by Bakhtin in his discussions of novelistic discourse. Such a model of the polyphonic text (and thus, in Cavalcanti's case, subjectivity) is one in which each voice 'sound[s], as it were, alongside the author's word and in a special way combines with it'.[17] Mikhail Bakhtin is referring to Dostoevsky's authorial voice and its relationship with other characters within his novels, but I quote him here because the essence of his observation — that an apparently authorial speaker may co-exist in interdependence and tension with other speakers within a text — strikes me as pertinent and offers a useful vocabulary for describing the kind of relationship found between Cavalcanti's 'I' (analogous to the author's word) and his many speaking personifications (the other, co-sounding voices). The resolute co-sounding of these voices and the resistance to any overriding unity in these texts are the aspects that mark Cavalcanti's poetry and representations of both self and love so intriguing and innovative. While an engagement with Bakhtin in the context of medieval lyric may still surprise, given his explicit interest in the novel and dismissal of poetry as essentially monologic, recent work has acknowledged the usefulness of Bakhtin's thought in reading lyric texts, and I have elsewhere proposed and pursued an extended engagement with the polyphonic and

representation in medieval Italian poetry' (doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2014), pp. 103-20. Dante famously refers to Cavalcanti with the formula 'the first of my friends' [*primo de li miei amici*] in the *Vita Nuova* (III, 14) and the two exchanged a number of sonnets. Later, the relationship seems to have soured and Dante was among the priors of Florence who decreed Cavalcanti's exile from the city in 1300, and later added insult to injury by implying that Guido would find himself in hell among the heretical souls of the sixth circle (*Inferno* X).

[16] Calenda, p. 24.

[17] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 7. As will become increasingly evident, the many voices in Cavalcanti's texts are the many voices of his corporeally defined subjectivity, as in Corti's analysis of the 'prime actors of the dramatic action' [*attori primi dell'azione drammatica*], which she identifies as 'three subjects, only very typical and distinct in Guido, [...] the mind, the soul, the heart' [*tre soggetti, soltanto in Guido be tipici e distinti,* [...] *la mente, l'anima, il cuore*], Corti, 'Introduzione', pp. 8-9), a list which will be expanded in the present article.

dialogic Bakhtin as part of a broader set of 'dialogic processes' at play in medieval Italian poetry.[18] For the purposes of this article I will limit myself to the language and implications of polyphony as useful for shedding light on Cavalcanti's text.

Thus far I have emphasised the interior realm of the poet's body, but in Cavalcanti's texts the boundary between external and internal is always a blurred one. In the sonnet 'Tu m'hai sì piena di dolor la mente' [*You have so filled my mind with pain*] the poet describes his condition in sculptural terms, which give way to an opening out of the interior space. The poet describes himself as a dead man walking ('he who is out of life' [*colui ch'è fuor di vita*], 9), appearing to be made of 'copper or wood or stone' [*di rame o di pietra o di legno*] (11) and moved only by artificial means ('only by mastery' [*sol per maestria*], 12) — an automaton, a moving statue. The interiority which has characterised my discussion thus far is exploded outward as the 'I' reveals the nature of the wound [*ferita*], inflicted by love, which is carried 'in the heart' [*ne lo core*] (13), but remains an 'open sign' [*aperto segno*] (14), evident to 'those who gaze on him' [*chi lo sguarda*] (10).[19] Cavalcanti's interiority, then, is opened out to an audience in a manner which is represented through the sculptural simile of the automaton, and which results in the communicative implications of the sign. The openness of the sign carried in Cavalcanti's heart may be radical, but it owes something to a traditional understanding of the 'intercorporeal circulation' of spirits in medieval physiology.[20] These spirits are 'non-material impulses'; they exist between the physical and metaphysical realms, acting as circulatory go-betweens for body and the soul.[21] Spirits are also connected to and transmitted through the operation of the gaze in a physiological model of amorous interaction which depends on the porousness of the heart and a resultant, quasi-osmotic passage of circulatory spirits between individuals, in our case a beloved and a lover.[22] We need merely recall another of Cavalcanti's sonnets, 'Pegli occhi fere un spirito sottile' [*Through my eyes a deft spirit passes*], which, while often read as self-parody, still precisely maps the processes of the experience of passion as understood in natural philosophy onto these circulatory spirits over the course of its 14 lines (and 14 repetitions of 'spirito' or its diminutive 'spiritello').[23] The opening of Cavalcanti's heart and the associated loss of corporeal control, however, retain their

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[18] See *Dialogism and Lyric Self-fashioning: Bakhtin and the Voices of a Genre*, ed. by Jacob Blevins, (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2008) and the introduction to Bowe, "'E io a lui'", pp. 1-11, respectively.

[19] On the blurring of the internal/external boundaries in this sonnet, see Anichini, pp. 84-85.

[20] Webb, p. 63, in the context of her discussion of the 'Porous Heart' and the circulatory, as opposed to impression, model of sensory perception.

[21] Calvino, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 12. For ease of reference, I quote directly from Creagh's translation, sanctioned by Esther Calvino. Calvino's Italian is found in *Lezioni americane: sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milano: Mondadori, 2002).

[22] Webb, pp. 62-63.

[23] Rea and Inglese, p. 162. For readings of the poem as self-parodic, see Calvino, *Six Memos*, p. 13; Gianfranco Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, II (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), p. 530.

peculiarity in that they allows the spirits far freer movement than the traditional bounds of this circulatory model.[24] This freedom has a knock-on effect both for Cavalcanti's subjectivity and for his account of the material text.

Cavalcanti's spirits number among his myriad personifications, and these personifications are all speakers. Their voices sound alongside the 'authorial', poetic 'I', necessitating a consideration of them as part of a subjectivity that exceeds the bounds of the 'I'-speaker. This is generated precisely through the multiplicity of speaking subjects, which are contained in the poet's body and in the bounds of the text, a dual corpus, in which subjectivity plays out. The *canzone* 'Io non pensava che lo cor giammai' [*I did not think that the heart ever*] gives further weight to this model of subjectivity as the 'I' makes an appeal not, on this occasion, directly to the spirits, but to the *canzone* itself, as is conventional in an *envoi*. This being a Cavalcantian *envoi*, however, it is perhaps unsurprising that the nature of the appeal concerns the mission not just of the text, but also of the spirits:

e prego umilmente a lei tu guidi	*and I humbly beg, please guide to her*
li spiriti fuggiti del mio core,	*the spirits that have fled my heart,*
che per soverchio de lo su' valore	*which, thanks to the overcoming of its power,*
eran distrutti, se non fosser vòlti	*would have been destroyed, had they not flown*
('Io non pensava', 47-50)	

Cavalcanti appeals to the poem to assist the spirits in escaping the internal circulation of the body and to enter properly into the circulatory relationship with the beloved, into the circulation of the material text, by means of the textual corpus. By pleading with the text to carry his spirits, Cavalcanti is inserting the text into the circulation of spirits between individuals discussed above, mediating the mechanism of the gaze with the artefact of the text. This imbuing of the text with physiological functions is a striking example of the spirit as 'vector of information', a 'messenger-cum-message [which] is the poetic text itself'.[25] It also illustrates the aforementioned double body, both poetic and physical, across which Cavalcantian subjectivity plays out and in both aspects of which the personified physiological elements form part of a polyphonic subjectivity, expressed and expressing through poetry. The message with which Cavalcanti ultimately entrusts the *canzone* — '"These are in the figure|of one who dies in bewilderment"' [*'Questi sono in figura|d'un che si more sbigottitamente'*] — acts as a knowing nod to the rhetorical *figura* of prosopopoeia

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[24] On this loss of control, see Webb, p. 160.
[25] Calvino, *Six Memos*.

through which Cavalcanti is expressing his subjectivity and as a potent statement of the roles of the spirits within that polyphonic model of self. The spirits must thus be classified (in Cavalcanti's account) as textual actors as well as physiological ones.

This binding together of personifications with textuality reaches its apex in the principal sonnet under consideration in this article, 'Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite', to which we will now return. As we have seen, the 'I' gives way entirely to non-'I' speakers — the voices of writing implements — which in turn report the faltering voices of other, physiological personifications: 'We are the sad, bewildered quills,|the little clippers and the suffering knife' [*Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite,|le cesoiuzze e 'l coltellin dolente*] ('Noi siàn le triste penne', 1-2). These tools are reporting the speech of yet another non-'I' speaker:

Or vi diciàn perché noi siàn partite
e siàn venute a voi qui di presente:
la man che ci movea dice che sente
cose dubbiose nel core apparite;
('Noi siàn le triste penne', 5-8)

Now we tell you why we've left,
and come to you, here present:
the hand that moved us says it feels
worrying things that have appeared in the heart;

The body of the poet is represented through the mediation of 'la man', the hand personified as speaker and perceiver. It is this hand that 'speaks' [*dice*] and feels [*sente*] and also moves the tools which address us. The poet himself is present, if at all, only in the pronoun 'him' [*costui*] (9) which may indicate his mute presence as the one who is destroyed [*destrutto*] (9), on the brink of death [*sì presso a la morte*] (10), and 'left with nothing but sighs' [*altro non n'è rimaso che sospiri*] (11). All verbal communication is entrusted to the peripheries of the body and the tools of text-making. Thinking again of the illuminations and other images of scribes and writers circulating in Cavalcanti's milieu, this poem would not be an ekphrasis of such a scene, as much as an excision of the figure of the scribe from the image. By removing the scribe from the picture, this sonnet offers an example of 'exacerbated prosopopoeia', which renders Cavalcanti's subjectivity polyphonic, and precludes all attempts to reduce it to any kind of straightforward unity.[26] Such polyphony relies on the doubled body mentioned above (and those polyphonic speakers which it contains), representing the opening up of the poet's interior space, a space which plays host to the physiological and psychological personifications which define Cavalcanti's

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[26] Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 81. Harrison reads this process as entirely destructive, while I view it as part of the construction of Cavalcanti's polyphonic subjectivity.

narration of love.[27] This space and its visitors also form part of the circulatory system in which that body participates.

The inherence of these voices in the processes of Cavalcanti's physico-poetic body should inform our understanding of his polyphonic subjectivity and thus his poetics. What the sonnet fundamentally does, as is confirmed in its final tercet, is to illustrate the possibility, in Cavalcanti's poetics, for a model of subjectivity to be expressed in a text without the necessity of the 'I' as voice:

Or vi preghiàn quanto possiàn più forte
che non sdegniate di tenerci noi,
tanto ch'un poco di pietà vi miri.
('Noi siàn le triste penne', 12-14)

Now we beg you, as strongly as we can,
not to disdain to keep us
as long as a little pity may become you.

The materials of writing take up the challenge of voicing the destructive experience of love even as the poet-as-speaker dwindles into aphasic silence.[28] These final three lines explicitly confer on the tools of writing — the pens, clippers and knife which have been relating the sorry state of the poet — a speaking role, encompassed in the verb *pregare* [*to plead*] (present in its first person plural form 'preghiàn' in line 12), which is typical of the 'I' (as we saw in the *ballata* quoted above). There is, then, no privileged speaker; even the inanimate objects of the writing process become entangled in the physico-poetic body through Cavalcanti's persistent prosopopoeia and thus take on the role of speaking subjects, undertaking the same actions as the soul, the heart and the spirits.[29] This is not to say that this sonnet simply effaces the self, or that the writing implements take the place of the poet. Rather than an either/or dichotomy, we are presented with a polyphony, an encompassment of multiple co-sounding voices. In fact, we can readily consider these apparently external aspects — the pen, knife and clippers — within the physiological chain of events we witness throughout Cavalcanti's poetic process.

Other texts attest to a circulatory amorous experience: the influx of the experience of the lady (by way of the 'gaze' [*sguardo*] and the entry of a 'lofty, noble spirit' [*spirito* [...] *alto e gentile*] in 'Deh spiriti miei' [*Oh my spirits*], 6; 9-10) through the eyes, via the brain to the heart, stimulating the poet's own spirits and soul; and the subsequent outward movement of the spirits, the sighs and the text, a text that is imbued with the power to transfer spirits. Thus if the text can carry the substance of spirit, surely the tools with

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[27] Anichini, p. 85.
[28] See Elena Lombardi, 'The Grammar of Vision in Guido Cavalcanti', in *Guido Cavalcanti tra i suoi lettori*, ed. by Ardizzone, pp. 83-92 (89-90).
[29] Corti, 'La penna', p. 44-45.

which the text are created also carry that substance; they become literally incorporated in the poet's twofold corpus and so enjoy an equal role in the polyphonic subjectivity expressed in Cavalcanti's poems. The intricacy and encompassing nature of this body-poetic is an extreme example of the sort of porousness of the heart and body, which has been elucidated above and provides the defining topography in which Cavalcantian subjectivity plays out. 'Guido is the poet of the membrane', yes, but this membrane extends to the very textuality of which carries his self-representation.[30] It is this radical internalism that characterises Cavalcanti's representation of 'a corporeal subjectivity'.[31] In turn, this subjectivity allows the personification of physiological and psychological entities and the extension of the internal realm into the textual one. Cavalcanti's model even incorporates the tools of writing and the text itself into the ranks of personified entities and, indeed, the circulatory relationship with the lady. This cleaving of the corporeal to the written, of subjectivity to the material creative process, confirms the aforementioned distance of the Italian tradition from the oral performance culture of the troubadours, even appropriating the language of such performance for the tools of writing. In Cavalcanti's sonnet, as is commonly the case in late medieval Italian lyric, even speaking is a visual act. Just as Cavalcanti's subjectivity is corporeal, his 'voice' is textual, material and legible.

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In Cavalcanti's poetry, then, we witness an insistently polyphonic subjectivity in which multiple speaking personifications generate a poetic identity. This process is played out within the enclosed, material space of the poet's double corpus, the physical body and the body of the text. The interactions between the 'I'-voice and the voices of the multiple physiological personifications co-sound to offer an irreducibly polyphonic account of poetic subjectivity. In turn, the status of 'I' as a speaker is neither privileged nor unique, but it is still validated through interactions with the other personified speakers. These personifications, whether strictly internal (heart or soul, for example), transitional (the communicative spirits and sighs), or apparently external elements incorporated in the body-poetic (namely the tools of writing and the text itself), bear an equal speaking weight to the 'I' and, as we have seen, can even be entirely substituted for it in a text. Prosopopoeia fulfils the communicative function of subjectivity and performs identities to the reader, while asserting the identity of the body for which they speak (as in the tool of

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[30] Harrison, 'The Ghost of Guido', p. 124.
[31] '[U]na soggettività corporea'; Gentili, p. 17, in relation to the Cavalcantian model of the sensitive soul.

writing reporting the speech of 'the hand that moves [them]'). The actions of material textual creation, then, become embroiled to the point of inseparability in the representation of subjectivity, which takes place through the speech acts of these multiple voices as transmitted by the material text. In Cavalcanti's model of subjectivity – and with it, poetic creation – the lover's physiology and the materiality of the manuscript text are foregrounded as joint loci of the love experience and source of subjectivity and in turn a poetics which represents that subjectivity in a strikingly novel manner. The voices of the 'I' and the voices of personified heart, mind, eyes, soul, spirits, hand, clippers, knife and quills interact within a single physical and poetic space to generate a circulatory and dialogic subjectivity. In Cavalcanti's verse the physiological processes of love become continuous with the physical processes of artistic creation; his poetics are embedded in both body and text, poet and poetry.

Medusan Figures:
Reading Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin

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Abstract:

The myth of the Medusa has always occupied a prominent position in thinking about art and its relation to life. Medusa's petrifying power performs a shift from motion and mobility to rigidity and permanence: this passage resembles the process by which living images and thoughts are turned into artistic representations. Since Medusa cannot be seen directly, but only through her reflection – be it on Athena's shield or in words – she poses questions of representation that are central to artistic production. This paper seeks to explore some of the theoretical implications of the Medusan myth in the context of the writings of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin. My primary focus is Shelley's poem 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, In the Florentine Gallery' (1819) and the Medusan themes running through Benjamin's thought on literary criticism and on history. This paper grows out of a thesis that traces motifs and images that appear in the work of both writers in order to both reveal affinities between them and to investigate the significance of their writings in the formation of twentieth century literary theory. I am particularly interested in how the Medusan scenario turns into an image of critical self-reflection; one where the boundary between literary and critical representation is negotiated by means of a Medusan interchange of gazing and imagining, petrification and insightful reading. The paper is not in pursuit of proving or disproving a hypothesis nor in creating a coherent narrative. Instead it looks at a number of different facets of its title – Medusan Figures – to investigate the role that this myth can play in thinking and writing about literature from a theoretical point of view.

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As is well known, Medusa's gaze petrifies, although the myth never tells us whether it is being seen by her or seeing her that is deadly. Perseus, the only man to have survived looking at Medusa, overcomes the Gorgon by cunningly capturing her reflection in a shield given to him by the goddess Athena. Afterwards Perseus fastens Medusa's decapitated head onto this shield, which is thenceforth known as the *Gorgoneion* and is used as

Athena's aegis in the victorious march of Greek civilisation. Since the *Gorgoneion* retains Medusa's petrifying power, the replacement of her petrified reflection in the shield by the head it reflects yet again makes looking at Medusa deadly. W. J. T. Mitchell suggests that 'Medusa is the image that turns the tables on the spectator and turns the spectator into an image: she must be seen through the mediation of mirrors (Perseus's shield) or paintings or descriptions'.[1] If the poet or painter were to actually meet her gaze, he would be petrified before he could pick up the tools of his trade. Therefore, any representation of Medusa is inherently anti-mimetic: rather than documenting the Gorgon's features, it testifies that the artist has not beheld Medusa directly, but only her reflection in the shield. Thus, reflection itself functions like a shield that protects the beholder from Medusa's petrifying gaze. Throughout the history of artistic representations of Medusa, the *Gorgoneion* often takes the place of Medusa's face, for instance, as in Caravaggio's *Shield with Medusa's Head* (1597).

Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi), Italian, 1571-1610
Shield with Medusa's Head, 1597
Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 60 x 55 cm
Collection Uffizi Galleries, Florence
Inventory number: 1351

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[1] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 172.

The classicist Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux classifies Medusan self-petrification as the 'condition of her visibility, her forbidden face is accessible only in the form of images'.[2] Medusa's visibility remains a problem also when her reflected image is transferred into the medium of words. According to James A.W. Heffernan, what is at stake in ekphrasis, the literary description of a visual work of art, is not simply a convergence of visual art and literature, but, rather, ekphrasis 'explicitly represents representation itself.'[3] This is heightened in the Medusan scenario, as the impossibility of beholding Medusa underscores how the words we read make us visualise something invisible: they are a verbal presentation of an impossible visual representation. The words are a substitute for looking at Medusa directly, functioning in the same way as Perseus' shield does. In a reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley's ekphrastic poem 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, In the Florentine Gallery' (1819), Mitchell suggests that the Medusan scenario is the 'primal scene' of ekphrasis.[4] Rainer Nägele's reading of Walter Benjamin's Medusan moments goes even further and presents this scenario as 'the primal scene of the aesthetic' itself.[5] In both cases, the primal quality of the scene resides precisely in the passage from life to image to words that it contains. This passage is no less crucial to Shelley's conception of poetry than to Benjamin's work on aesthetics and on modernity.

While Shelley was often inspired by visual impressions when writing, 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, in the Florentine Gallery' is his only explicitly ekphrastic poem.[6] It describes a painting formerly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, although now believed to be by an unknown sixteenth century Flemish painter. Shelley encountered the work during his visits to the Uffizi Galleries in Florence in the winter of 1819.[7] While his notes from the galleries mostly focus on sculpture, it is the fragment on the Medusa painting that reaches

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[2] Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, 'The Gorgon: Paradigm of Image Creation,' in *The Medusa Reader*, ed. by Nancy J. Vickers and Marjorie Garber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 262-266 (p. 262).

[3] James A.W. Heffernan, 'Ekphrasis and Representation,' New Literary History, 22 (1991), 297-316 (p. 300)

[4] After quoting Shelley's 'On the Medusa' in full, Mitchell comments: 'If ekphrastic poetry has a "primal scene," this is it.' Mitchell, p. 172.

[5] Rainer Nägele, *Theatre, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 125.

[6] Shelley's visual imagination is most vividly manifest in depictions of natural phenomena in poems such as 'Mont Blanc,' 'Ode to the West Wind,' and 'The Cloud.' In this context one may also recall 'Ozymandias,' another work inspired by a work of art (a bust of Ramses acquired by the British Museum in 1817). However, rather than being concerned with describing the museum piece, the poem's narrative frame transports the statue back to its original location: 'I met a traveller from an antique land | Who said –' the poem opens. The traveller's narration asserts that 'its sculptor well those passions read | Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,' emphasising a transition from lived passion to lifeless stone that is also at stake in the Medusa poem; 'Ozymandias,' in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Neil Freistat and Donald H. Reiman (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co, 2002), p. 109-10, (l. 6-7). Hereafter cited as *SPP*. Sophie Thomas contrasts 'the lack of "fix"' and '"unfixing"' of Medusa and the fixity of Ozymandias in a reading that turns on 'the effects of tyranny, and [...] the (im)permanence of art'. 'Ekphrasis and Terror: Shelley, Medusa, and the Phantasmagoria,' in *Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures*, ed. by Luisa Calè and Patrizia di Bello (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 25-43 (p. 36).

[7] Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Flamingo, 1995), p. 565.

us as the most 'completed' poetic result of these visits.[8] Shelley chose an unusual image for his ekphrastic poem. Most classical portraits of Medusa favour a frontal representation: her face was usually painted on shields to invoke the apotropaic power of Athena's aegis. Caravaggio's Medusa-shield, which Shelley is also likely to have seen in the Uffizi Galleries, is a much more typical depiction of Medusa than the anonymous work that Shelley writes on. This painting foregrounds the head of snakes, rather than Medusa's face – a shift of perspective that allows both the anonymous artist and Shelley to probe the themes commonly associated with representing Medusa. In a move that eschews the conventions of ekphrastic writing, Shelley's poem opens with the words 'It lieth, gazing…' as if we were standing straight in front of the head of Medusa, rather than in front of a painting of Medusa's head.[9] Shelley does away with the framing devices common in contemporary ekphrastic texts, and the only generic reminder that this is an ekphrastic work is consigned to the poem's title. Furthermore, Shelley destabilises the gazer's position within the poem and it is gazing, rather than describing, that becomes the core of the poem's action. Thus, while the poem tells us that 'it is less the horror than the grace | Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone,' it is not clear who this petrified gazer actually is: the lyric mode would suggest that Shelley is speaking of the petrification of the poem's 'I', whereas the ekphrastic mode suggests it is the reader who is beholding Medusa through the poem's words that petrifies.[10] Perseus is not mentioned, but the myth makes him a likely candidate, whereas the third person inanimate pronoun of the poem's opening – 'It lieth, gazing…' – suggest that it is Medusa's head which is the gazer and that it is consequently her own spirit that turns to stone.[11]

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[8] Frederic S. Colwell has documented Shelley's visits to the Uffizi in 'Shelley on Sculpture: The Uffizi Notes', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 28 (1979), 59-77 and 'Shelley and Italian Painting', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 29 (1980), 43-66.

[9] *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington (Harlow, England: Longman, 2011), vol. 3: 1819-1820, pp. 221-3. In 'Shelley and the Visual Arts', *Keats-Shelley Bulletin*, 12 (1961), 8-17, Neville Rogers introduces a sixth stanza to the poem, although later critical work has concluded that Rogers assembled the stanza out of unconnected fragments found in Shelley's notebooks; see Catherine Maxwell, 'Shelley's "Medusa:" The Sixth Stanza', *Notes and Queries*, 36 (1989), 173-4 and the editorial remarks in the above edition.

[10] Shelley, 'On the Medusa,' l. 9-10.

[11] Catherine Maxwell even goes so far as to identify Perseus with 'Percy S[helley]'. *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 83.

Unknown Artist, Flemish, late sixteenth century
Head of Medusa, ca. 1600
Oil on wood, 49 x 74 cm
Collection Uffizi Galleries, Florence
Inventory number: 1470

Frontisi-Ducroux argues that the convention of representing Medusa frontally lends her a special representational status: 'The frontal character is a figure cut off from its iconic environment. By that very fact it can come into contact with the addressee of the image.'[12] Medusa is not part of a group or setting: she is always looking straight at us – her beholders. However, when looking at a frontal representation of Medusa we know that the gaze that meets ours is a reflection; strictly speaking, we are not looking at Medusa but at the *Gorgoneion* and it is this reflection of Medusa's gaze that we come into contact with, rather than the gaze itself. Louis Marin's comment on Caravaggio's Medusa-shield reveals something that is emblematic of all frontal representations of Medusa: 'The singular potency of her own gaze is applied intransitively to itself, reflecting itself and thereby producing its own petrifaction.'[13] When looking the *Gorgoneion* in the eye, we see Medusa meeting her own gaze; an image of the reflected gaze that killed her but that we can meet

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[12] Frontisi-Ducroux, p. 263.
[13] Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 136.

unscathed, protected by this very reflection. Walter Benjamin's ekphrastic depiction of the angel of history, based on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus,* does not explicitly invoke the Medusa, yet the *Angelus*' full frontal stare lends the picture a clear Medusan element. Here, too, it is a question of facing a frontal gaze:

Paul Klee, Swiss, 1879 -1940
Angelus Novus, 1920
Oil transfer and watercolor on paper, 318 x 242 cm
Gift of Fania and Gershom Scholem, Jerusalem, John Herring,
Marlene and Paul Herring, Jo-Carole and Ronald Lauder, New York
Collection The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
B87.0994
Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating [*worauf er starrt*]. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.[14]

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[14] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, (London: Collins/Fontana Books, 1973), p. 259. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte,' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag. 1974-1989), i:2 (1974), p. 697.

The verb that Harry Zohn translates as 'contemplating,' '*starren,*' literally means 'staring,' but is also related to the verb '*erstarren*,' to grow stiff, to petrify. What Benjamin's ekphrasis presents us with is not only 'how one pictures the angel of history,' but also how artists conventionally picture Medusa. Both Benjamin's angel of history and Klee's *Angelus Novus* are figures 'cut off' from their iconic environments; figures that forcefully arrest the reading viewer's gaze. Benjamin invites us to view history as its angel sees it, what he elsewhere calls 'in terms of the concept of catastrophe'.[15] But we are not only observers of the angel of history, we are also subjects of history; accordingly, the 'petrified, primordial landscape' seen through the angel's gaze includes us within its horizon.[16] The angel's gaze, like Medusa's, is intransitive, by coming into contact with it, we are in fact faced with a reflection. However, it is we ourselves that are reflected amongst the wreckage that makes up the catastrophe of human history.

In his posthumous 'Portrait of Benjamin,' Theodor W. Adorno asserts that the 'glance' of Benjamin's 'philosophy is Medusan. [...] Before his Medusan glance man turns into the stage on which an objective process unfolds.'[17] The petrification performed by Benjamin's angel of history immobilises the subject and, so doing, enables a view of history as 'objective process' rather than as subjective experience.[18] This objective process stands in contrast to the multi-subjected gazing of Shelley's poem 'On the Medusa,' where the moment of petrification is mediated by the difficulty of determining the identity of the poem's multiple gazers:

> Yet it is less the horror than the grace
>> Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone
> Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
>> Are graven, till the characters be grown
> Into itself, and thought no more can trace[19]

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[15] 'Central Park', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1996-2006), iv (2006), p. 164; hereafter cited as *SW* and volume number.

[16] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 2009), p. 166. The angel's mode of seeing history recalls the historical outlook of the German baroque tragedians that Benjamin explores in his habilitation thesis on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928). The full passage reads: 'in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape.' *Facies hippocratica* denotes a sickly, worn-out, dying face.

[17] *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1967), p. 233-5.

[18] In his seventh thesis 'On the Philosophy of History,' Benjamin rejects 'empathy' as a historiographical approach: the 'historical materialist' should not seek to 'relive' past eras, but to unmask 'the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.' (*Illuminations* p. 258) Empathising with the past implies complicity with the victors who write history, rather than the oppressed whose voices are being silenced. Benjamin's triumphal procession evokes the Athenian march of civilisation, whose aegis is precisely the *Gorgoneion* carrying Medusa's decapitated head. Michael Löwy discusses the Medusan resonances of this motif in *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History,"* trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 58.

[19] Shelley, 'On the Medusa,' l. 9-13.

As we have seen, the poem does not conclusively tell us who the gazer is. Accordingly, it is not Medusa's gaze but her grace that is the agent of petrification. Carol Jacobs furthermore suggests that it 'is neither the features of the onlooker, nor his spirit but rather the lineaments of the dead Gorgon's face that are graven at the point of articulation between the Medusa and the would-be Perseus'.[20] The petrified spirit takes on Medusa's features so that even if the gazer is not originally Medusa, the gazer's spirit receives the 'lineaments,' or 'characters' of Medusa's 'dead face'. The spirit becomes an embodied reflection of Medusa.

By interpreting Shelley's Medusan moment in terms of articulation, Jacobs reminds us that we are engaged in an act of reading. The Medusan characters that are being graven onto the spirit's face can also be read as the characters on the page that make up the poem. These characters render the poem self-reflective in the very moment that Medusa's self-reflection is at stake. Jacobs continues:

> Were it possible to extricate our gaze from this scene, we might be able to contemplate its critical implications. For Shelley's poem is about nothing if not about our own interpretative predicament as readers. The 'characters' of line 12 are drawn into a process of unending involution in a notion of art that can no longer be regarded as preserving what happens to serve as the cornerstones of so much of our contemporary critical endeavor.[21]

That is, the inward-growing lineaments of Shelley's image correspond not only to the characters of Medusa's face, but also to the characters that we see on the page even as the lineaments of Medusa's dead face are precisely the main image depicted by these characters. The poem is Medusa's reflection in words and its mode of self-reflective reflection is no less convoluted than the 'unending involutions' of Medusa's viper-hair that it describes.[22] In the words of William Hildebrand, Shelley's 'Medusa replicates the process of self-involution in which subject turns to object: to gaze at is somehow suddenly to be gazed at.'[23] Shelley employs the moment of petrification to dissolve the reader's subjectivity, turning the reader into a gazing and gazed-at object within the poem. It is this that, in the words of Jacobs, undermines 'the cornerstones' of contemporary criticism. A comparable dynamic is latent in Benjamin's text: meeting the angel's gaze implicates the

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[20] Carol Jacobs, 'On Looking at Shelley's Medusa,' *Yale French Studies*, 69 (1986), 163-179 (p. 169). This paper is particularly indebted to Jacobs's close reading, which introduces the problem of ekphrastic writing in general and of viewing and representing Medusa in relation to this poem in particular.

[21] Jacobs, p. 169.

[22] Shelley, 'On the Medusa', l. 21.

[23] William Hildebrand, 'Self, Beauty and Horror: Shelley's Medusa Moment', in *The New Shelley: Late Twentieth-Century Views*, ed. by G. Kim Blank (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 150-65 (p. 159).

historical subject in the pile of wreckage that the ekphrastic angel is beholding. However, in Benjamin, this process of enfolding the reader within the text does not point inwards into the involuted core of poetic articulation but opens outwards onto an objective view of history.

The ease with which 'to gaze at' transforms into 'to be gazed at' in Shelley's Medusa poem points to what Benjamin would regard as the poem's auratic element. In one of Benjamin's early formulations of his theory of aura, the 1927 review of Gottfried Keller's *Sämtliche Werke*, Benjamin writes: 'Describing is sensuous pleasure because the object returns the gaze of the observer, and every good description captures the pleasure with which two gazes seek each other out and find one another.'[24] The interplay of gazing which is at work in the Medusan scenario would thus be characteristic of every descriptive text. In the following decade, Benjamin develops this idea further. In the margin of an undated fragment headed 'What is Aura?' Benjamin scribbles: 'Eyes staring at one's back | Meeting of glances | Glance up, answering a glance.'[25] This slightly uncanny awareness of being looked at that causes one to look up is incorporated into the notion of aura:

> The experience of aura rests on the transposition of a form of reaction normal in human society to the relationship of nature to people. The one who is seen or believes himself to be seen [glances up] answers with a glance. To experience the aura of an appearance or a being means becoming aware of its ability [to pitch] to respond to a glance.[26]

One of Benjamin's last finished texts, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' rewrites this auratic intersection of glances in terms of expectation. Aura is primarily defined as expecting that the inhuman object returns a human gaze: 'Inherent in the gaze, however, is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met [...] there is an experience of aura in its fullness.'[27] Shelley's Medusa can be said to carry such expectations to the extreme. When encountering a work named after the Medusa, we expect to be able to safely meet her gaze through the artistic reflection. However, Shelley's poem does not represent the petrified features reflected in Perseus' shield. Instead, he describes Medusa's decapitated head, which is consistently referred to

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[24] *SW2*, p. 56.

[25] *Walter Benjamin's Archive,* ed. by Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, and Erdmut Wizisla, transl. by Esther Leslie (London and New York: Verso, 2007), p. 45.

[26] *Walter Benjamin's Archive,* p. 45.

[27] *SW4*, p. 338.

as 'it', from a vantage point above.[28] In the involuted structure of Shelley's poem, Medusa's head not only returns our gaze, *it* imprints *its* features onto the gazer's, and turns the latter's spirit to stone. The moment of petrification rests on a transition in which the gazer is effaced by the head that 'lieth, gazing' in the poem's opening gesture. Rather than presenting Medusa's singularly frontal gaze, Shelley's poem offers us a melee of reflections in which there is definitely gazing but no definite gazer. The poem further foregrounds its own gazing by articulating these reflections in the medium of words: we do not look at Shelley's Medusa, we read her – but reading is merely another kind of looking. Reading can thus be understood as seeing with the eye of imagination.

Any frontal representation of Medusa depicts both the last thing she saw and the petrified result of that seeing (her face reflected in Perseus' shield). Marin interprets the Medusan moment as 'a *displacement* from one temporality to another, a passage from the moving, linear time of life and history to the time of representation with its immobility and permanence'.[29] Medusa's reflection in the shield serves as a threshold between the living and the petrified: on one side the living Gorgon, on the other the petrified reflection which is our only means of accessing her face. Critical texts – texts describing literary texts as well as other forms of art – perform a comparable shift in temporality whereby a single meaning is fixed in a work of art whose meaning as such is never fully determinable. Great literary texts are defined by the endless number of possible interpretations that they invite. Furthermore, their meaning evolves and changes over time so that new possibilities for interpretation continuously arise, adding to this already limitless store. In 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821) Shelley captures this idea in the image of an overflowing fountain:

> A great Poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.[30]

The life of a literary work springs from the new readings that can be developed out of it, and there can be no eternally valid or authoritative reading: rather each new reader, no less than each new historical moment, awakens something new within each truly poetic text. Benjamin uses the word 'afterlife' to describe a text's existence amongst future ages. 'The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical

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[28] Shelley, 'On the Medusa,' l. 1; l. 4; l. 5; l. 17; in addition to the 'itself' of the 13th line. Not once does Shelley use 'she' or 'her' in this poem, at most he refers to a 'woman's countenance' (l. 39), but this countenance is itself a reflection within the poem's reflective structure. I develop this point below.
[29] Marin, p. 137.
[30] 'A Defence of Poetry', in *SPP,* pp. 510-535 (p. 528).

objectivity,' he asserts in his seminal essay 'The Task of the Translator.'[31] The required level of objectivity is reached by releasing the notion of life from the confines of biology. Instead, Benjamin grounds life in its historical function:

> The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. […] The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations.[32]

History is defined as intertextuality, and the life of the work of art consists in its afterlife amongst succeeding generations of readers. When Adorno characterises Benjamin's Medusan view of history as objective, he also invokes a conception of history that lives not merely in subjective remembrance but in the artefacts (textual and material) that constitute a culture's heritage.

In an essay that sets out to translate Shelley's last poem 'The Triumph of Life' into Maurice Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort* [*Death Sentence*], Jacques Derrida draws on Benjamin's essay on translation, particularly Benjamin's formulation of 'afterlife.' Derrida defines the posthumous life of literary texts as a 'living on':

> A text lives only if it lives *on* {*sur-vit*}, and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable […] Thus triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living on, its life after life, its life after death. The same thing will be said of what I call writing, mark, trace and so on. It neither lives nor dies; it lives *on*.[33]

The ambiguities of the proposition 'on' – that distinguish 'living *on*' from mere living or dying – are also present in Shelley's poem '*On* the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, In the Florentine Gallery.' In spite of its indexical tone, the 'on' of the poem's title is deceptive since there is no painting of Medusa by Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine gallery. Thus, it is a poem *on*, or about, a painting which, in fact, does not exist. Furthermore, the title is the poem's only indication of its ekphrastic status: without it, the poem would read as a direct depiction of Medusa's deathbed. That is, even though it announces itself as ekphrastic, the poem by and large substitutes for the painting it allegedly describes. The Medusan characters graven onto the gazer's spirit are the characters printed on the page, not those reflected off the painter's canvas. Not only does Shelley's poem take its life from

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[31] In *SW1*, pp. 253-63 (p. 254).

[32] *SW1*, p. 255.

[33] 'Living On: Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, and J Hillis Miller, transl. by James Hulbert (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 75-176 (pp. 102-03).

Medusa's death, but it is literally written *on*, or over, the painting depicting Medusa, as his words replace the canvas. This replacement ensures that the image of the dead Medusa will live on in the peculiar afterlife characteristic of literary works.

Insofar as any critical reading begins with or incorporates a description of the work criticised, it also includes an ekphrastic element that allows the reader to see what the critic has read. However, unlike the author of an ekphrasis, the critic has the benefit of working in the same medium as the work he or she describes. Rather than recreating a visual impression, the critic operates with quotation. Each quotation is a fragment of the literary work that enters the critical text as representative of the whole. By fragmenting the whole, each critical reading destroys the unity of the work, but the work's afterlife is contingent on precisely such destruction. The artwork lives on by dying. In other words, quotations tear apart the artwork's integral unity, but, by doing so, they enable it to live on in ever-new interpretations. Benjamin touches upon the role of quotation in the methodological preliminaries of his 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*:

> In the canonic form of the treatise the only element of an intention […] is the authoritative quotation. Its method is essentially representation [*Darstellung*]. Method is a digression. Representation as digression – such is the methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation.[34]

Quotation is essential to the representational form of a philosophical treatise. But quotation is also that which interrupts the purposeful structure of such a treatise – no less than it tears apart the structure of the original texts from which they are taken. Quotations can be viewed as mirrors in which the two texts, the citing and the cited, are reflected in one another. This reflection performs a dual interruption. And it is this mutual displacement that, for Benjamin, characterises the representational form of the treatise. 'Darstellung takes place in an intermittent, broken rhythm, as an unceasing brokenness of breath,' Jacobs writes on the passage cited above, terming this momentum 'the rhythm of interruption.'[35] The German word for representation, *Darstellung*, pertains to form rather than content and thus gathers up characteristics that are usually associated with literary writing, from tropological devices such as metaphor, simile and rhyme, to prosodic features such as metre, stress pattern and line and/or paragraph division. Benjamin's

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[34] Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 28-9.
[35] Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 18.

insight is that philosophy cannot dispense with such literary devices: even the plainest of styles is a stylistic feature. In the quotation, which is the central element of critical practice, the theoretical text not only conjures up the original, but also mimics the interrupted rhythm of contemplation in which the representation of thought is grounded.

The analogies that Benjamin uses to explain the function of representation in a philosophical treatise are drawn from the arts, and emphasise the temporalities inherent in visual and performing art forms. 'Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum,' he writes in the 'Epistemico-Critical Prologue.'[36] On the next page, he offers a comparison with oral performance: 'Whereas the speaker uses voice and gesture to support individual sentences, even where they cannot really stand up on their own, construing out of them [...] a sequence of ideas, [...] the writer must stop and restart with every new sentence.'[37] In an essay of 1939, written eleven years after the 'Prologue,' we still find Benjamin asserting that 'interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring. It goes far beyond the sphere of art. To give only one example, it is the basis of quotation. Quoting a text entails interrupting its context.'[38] While the subject here is Brecht's epic theatre, it is not lost on Benjamin that quotation is the paragon of critical practice. Nor is it a coincidence that Benjamin evokes theatrical gesture when talking about a textual practice – the interrupted tempo of Brechtian theatre is precisely what he aims for in the realm of philosophical contemplation. 'To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts,' Benjamin writes in one of the methodological sketches for his unfinished magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*.[39] The historical method that Benjamin develops is driven by arresting thought and quotation is his most important tool: 'This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks.'[40] As in epic theatre, quotation performs an interruption – however, here it is history itself that is interrupted and displaced: 'To write history is to cite history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context.'[41] This mode of representation – via interruptive quotations – performs a temporal shift that recalls the Medusan moment. It is through the practice of quotation that Benjamin aims to interrupt the flow of history and allow us to see history the way its angel sees it – as a 'petrified, primordial landscape.'

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[36] Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 28.
[37] Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 29.
[38] Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theater? (II)', in *SW4*, p. 305.
[39] Benjamin, [N10a,3] in *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002). Hereafter cited as *AP* and convolute reference.
[40] Benjamin, *AP*, [N1,10].
[41] Benjamin, *AP*, [N11,3] .

In its unfinished state, Shelley's poem 'On the Medusa' contains a gap, a form of interruption in its metric pattern, in which the poem's final reflection emerges. This is found in the poem's closing stanza:

> For from the serpents gleam a brazen glare
> Kindled by that inextricable error
> Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air
> Become a [   ] and ever-shifting mirror
> Of all the beauty and the terror there –
> A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,
> Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks.[42]

The 'ever-shifting' mirror, which forms in the blank space of the 37th line, reflects the object described in line 39: 'A woman's countenance, with serpent locks'. This mirror does not only present us with Medusa's self-reflection but also brings together the interplay of gazes that permeates the poem; thus, Shelley resolves the problem of the gazer's identity as Medusa's, the narrator's, and the reader's gazes all converge in this ever-shifting mirror. Jacobs clarifies that 'what the Medusa contemplates […] is the evershifting image of herself gazing into a mirror formed of a vapor that arises from her own mouth'.[43] But since the Medusan 'lineaments' have been graven onto the reader/gazer's spirit in one of the poem's earlier moves, the self-reflection that Medusa contemplates in the mirror is also a reflection of the poem's reader/gazer. The *mise en abyme* effect is further heightened when we recall that these Medusan 'characters' are also metonymic of the written characters on the page, and, moreover, that the image seen in the mirror – 'A woman's countenance, with serpent locks...' – is the same scene as is depicted in the painting that the poem describes. This is, furthermore, the very image that the critic has to trace in writing on this poem. 'It is in this sense', Jacobs concludes, 'that criticism, too, another attempt to behold, might well be regarded as an act of the Imagination.'[44] The critic writing on Shelley's 'On the Medusa' must imaginatively recreate the poem much like the poem itself creates a painting not hanging in the Uffizi galleries. This re-creation also constitutes the poem's living on amongst future readers. Within Shelley's poem, this creative act takes shape in the 'ever-shifting mirror' where the poem's phantasmagoria of gazes is captured and interrupted. The pleasure of writing about Shelley's Medusa lies precisely in describing this place – where the reader meets the poem's gaze.

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[42] Shelley, 'On the Medusa', l. 34-40.
[43] Jacobs, p. 175.
[44] Jacobs, p. 179.

The Painter in the Novel, the Novelist in the Painting:
To the Lighthouse and Vanessa Bell's Portraits of Virginia Woolf

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Abstract:

This essay explores the implicit connection between Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), a novel featuring the figure of a painter as one of its protagonists, and the Post-Impressionist portraits of Woolf painted by her sister Vanessa Bell between 1911 and 1912. I will posit that this relation is based on a series of analogous aesthetic principles that manifest the closeness of the professional and private relationship between the sister artists. Moreover, I propose a reading of *To the Lighthouse* that, although taking into account the influence of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist dichotomy between 'vision and design', especially highlights Woolf's metanarrative commentary on her own aesthetic principles, as variously discussed in both her private and her public texts. I also suggest that the artworks in question are distinct and at the same time closely connected manifestations of Woolfian ideals, that often conceive of crossing the boundaries between literature and painting. On the one hand, the presence of the painter Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* allows Woolf to explore manifold aesthetic and psychological issues that represent serious concerns for herself as a writer, and can be seen as an opportunity to consider the fundamental aspects of her own artistic vision; on the other hand, the presence of a novelist (Woolf herself) in some of Vanessa Bell's paintings may be interpreted as a prefiguration of her sister's mature aesthetic principles, which are surprisingly reflected – along with the tenets of Post-Impressionism that fascinated them both – in her own painterly technique.

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In a diary entry written while composing the central section of *To the Lighthouse*, by her own definition 'the most difficult abstract piece of writing' she had ever attempted, Virginia Woolf states: 'I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to.'[1] The adjectives 'eyeless' and 'featureless'

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[1] *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Penguin, 1977-84), III (1982), p. 76. Further references are given after quotations in the text, with the abbreviation *D III*.

that she uses to refer to her book seem to be particularly significant not only in terms of Woolf's own aesthetics, but especially in the light of the Post-Impressionist portraits of her painted by her sister Vanessa Bell between 1911 and 1912; these are all the more striking mainly because of the lack of facial features, most notably the eyes.[2] The subterranean link between such different works of art – the novel featuring as one of its main characters the figure of a painter, Lily Briscoe, and the paintings portraying the novelist Virginia Woolf – gives us an insight into the common aesthetic principles subtending Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Vanessa Bell's portraits of her sister. Most of the commentators on the novel have observed the parallel between Lily's progress with her canvas and the development of the narrative, and have recognized the influence of Roger Fry's formalist Post-Impressionist aesthetics on the creation and structure of both Lily's painting and the novel itself.[3] I propose a reading of *To the Lighthouse* that, though acknowledging the role of Fry's advocated balance between 'vision and design', primarily highlights Woolf's metanarrative commentary on her own aesthetic principles that she more or less overtly discusses in both private (diaries, letters, memoirs) and public (novels, short stories, critical essays) texts. In particular, I will argue that these works of art are two different and at the same time closely connected expressions of Woolfian aesthetics, which often deliberately trespass boundaries between literature and painting, or, in Woolf's own words, explore 'the sunny margin where the arts flirt and joke and pay each other compliments'.[4] On the one hand, the presence of a painter in the novel *To the Lighthouse* allows Woolf to examine numerous aesthetic and psychological issues that carry some urgency for herself as a writer, and can be seen as an opportunity to discuss the fundamental aspects of her own artistic conception. On the other hand, the presence of a novelist (Woolf herself) in some of Vanessa Bell's paintings may be interpreted as a prefiguration of her sister's mature aesthetic principles, which are surprisingly reflected – together with the tenets of Post-Impressionism that fascinated both of them – in her own painterly technique. In other words, in the specific case of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell the *sister arts* can be also considered as the *sisters' arts* (to refer to Gillespie's authoritative study): two different means of expressing the same underlying aesthetic principles as well as the closeness of

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[2] Woolf also defined *The Waves* as an 'abstract mystical eyeless book' (ibid., p. 203), and one of its characters, Rhoda, describes herself as having no face.

[3] Among many studies devoted to the subject see, for example, Thomas G. Matro, 'Only Relations: Vision and Achievement in *To the Lighthouse*', *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 212-24; Jane Goldman, 'Virginia Woolf and Post-Impressionism: French Art, English Theory, and Feminist Practice', *Miscelánea*, 20 (1999), 173-91; Jack Stewart, 'A "Need of Distance and Blue": Space, Color, and Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46 (2000), 439-55; Randi Koppen, 'Embodied Form: Art and Life in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*', *New Literary History*, 32 (2001), 375-89.

[4] Virginia Woolf, 'Walter Sickert', in *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, 4 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966-67), II (1966), p. 243.

their professional and private relationship.[5] My reading is not intended as a definitive one, but rather aims to provide some insights to widen the scope of other biographical interpretations; in doing so, I will focus on what I consider a fundamental aspect of Woolf's writing, that is the metanarrativity and self-reflexivity of the literary text.

Between 1911 and 1912, Vanessa Bell painted four portraits of Virginia Woolf, all of which show experimentation with Post-Impressionist principles in relation to portraiture, and a questioning of the need for likeness or verisimilarity of representation. Like other contemporary artists, Bell considerably changed her manner of painting after the famous exhibit 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists', held at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 and followed by a second Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1912-13. One of these portraits, *Virginia Woolf*, shows the novelist in the intimacy of a domestic pose, with facial features barely suggested: wearing a greenish sweater, she is leaning back on an orange armchair boldly outlined in black, holding a piece of needlework in her hands.[6] Another portrait from 1912, *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair*, shows Vanessa's typical dark outlining combined with the same reclining position of the subject, and with a blank featureless face characteristic of several paintings from this period.[7] Finally, similar traits can be found in a third portrait of Woolf, again sitting on an armchair (figure 1).

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[5] Diane F. Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988). On the loving but at times jealous rivalry of the sister artists see also Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983); Gillespie, '"O to be a painter!": Virginia Woolf as an Art Critic', *Studies in the Humanities*, 10 (1983), 28-38; Jane Dunn, *A Very Close Conspiracy: Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990); Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism, and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Gillespie, 'Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, and Painting', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. by Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 121-39.

[6] Vanessa Bell, *Virginia Woolf* (1912), oil on canvas, London, National Portrait Gallery, http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw08084/Virginia-Woolf?LinkID=mp04923&search=sas&sText=woolf&role=sit&rNo=6 [accessed 17 June 2014].

[7] Bell, *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair* (1912), oil on canvas, private collection.
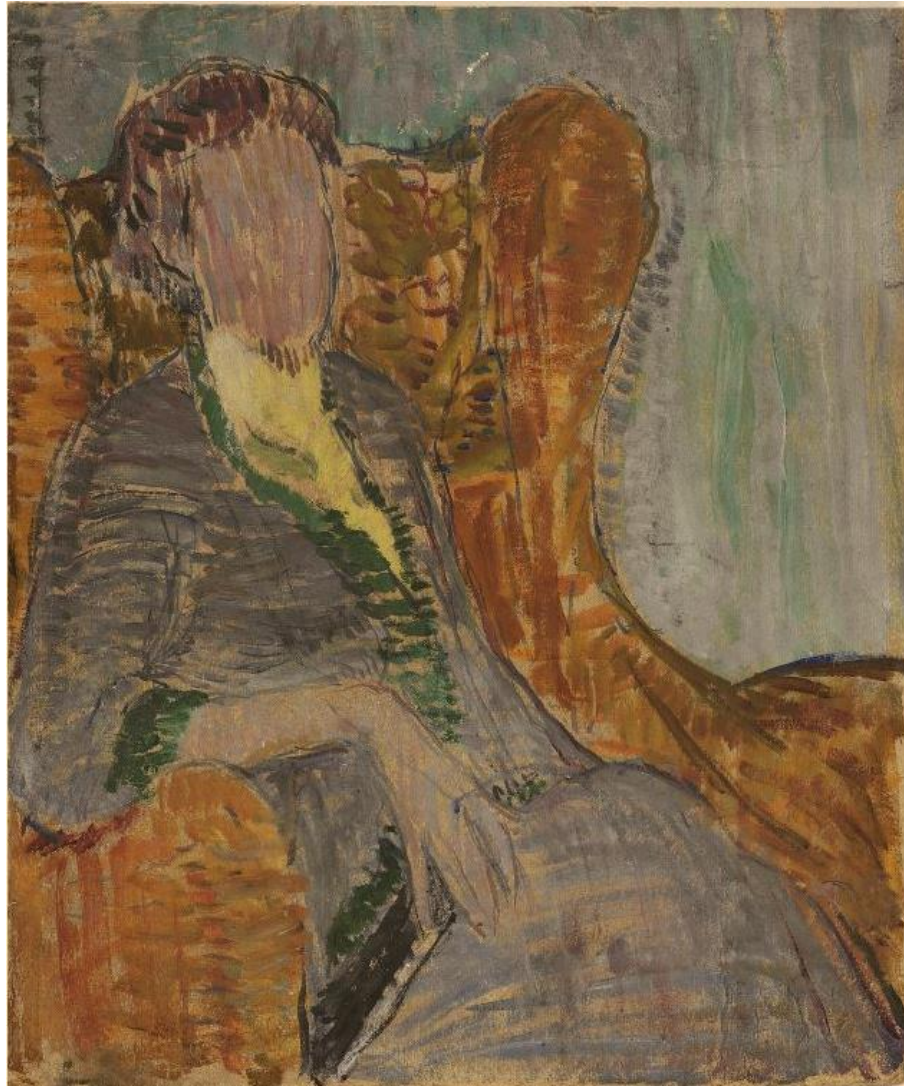
Figure 1: Vanessa Bell, *Virginia Woolf* (ca. 1912)

oil on paperboard, 14 ½ x 12 in., 36.83 x 30.48 cm

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts. Gift of Ann Safford Mandel.

Copyright: Estate of Vanessa Bell.

In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe 'made no attempt at likeness', showing that a mother with child (Mrs Ramsay and her son James) 'might be reduced [...] to a purple shadow without irreverence'.[8] Similarly, Bell challenged the representational tradition of portrait painting by subordinating details to larger visual patterns in order to enhance the structure or architectural framework of the picture, thus echoing Fry's aesthetic principles and his attempt to reconcile 'vision and design'.[9] As Frances Spalding notes about these portraits,

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[8] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 1st edition The Hogarth Press, 1927 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 45. Further references are given after quotations in the text, with the abbreviation *TL*.
[9] Cf. Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1937).

It is evident here, for instance, that Bell is not concerned with creating an illusion and makes no attempt to disguise the brush strokes, which in many places remain separated from each other, thereby insisting on their reality as paint. In the face, these parallel brush strokes, as they fall down over the face, seem to create a veil, which obscures rather than defines the facial features.[10]

With these portraits we are offered not the fixity of precise traits, but the vagueness of a blank, empty, abstract space which is suggestive of the deepest recesses of Woolf's soul and her inner life. This is also reminiscent of Mrs Ramsay's 'wedge-shaped core of darkness', or of her yearnings 'to be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated' (*TL*, p. 52).

As for Woolf herself, in a famous passage from the essay 'Walter Sickert' she states that 'though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common', because 'the novelist after all wants to make us see' (p. 241). Furthermore, some of the private exchanges with her sister, in which they set the common ground of their arts, are particularly illuminating in this regard. When moved to compliment each other on their work, Bell and Woolf often suggest the possibility of crossing over into one another's realm. For instance, in a letter dated 5 March 1927, the novelist writes to the painter:

> The point about you is that you are now mistress of the phrase. All your pictures are built up of flying phrases. [...] I daresay your problem will now be to buttress up this lyricism with solidity. [...] I think we are now at the same point: both mistresses of our medium as never before: both therefore confronted with entirely new problems of structure. [...] I should like you to paint a large, large picture; where everything would be brought perfectly firmly together, yet all half flying off the canvas in rapture.[11]

As this excerpt clearly demonstrates, not only are the instruments of writing and painting conceived as interchangeable, but in discussing her sister's achievement Woolf inevitably addresses one of the basic issues of her own art, that is how to reach that delicate balance between the fleetingness of sensations and the solidity of form, between evanescence and structural unity. 'I want, partly as a writer, to found my impressions on something firmer' (*D III*, p. 63), Woolf annotates while composing the novel. Moreover, the fact that she later writes 'I try to make visible this scene which will soon be gone forever [...] and try perhaps to solidify some of these floating sequences that go through my mind' shows that she never

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[10] Spalding, 'Vanessa Bell's Portrait of Virginia Woolf at Smith College', in *Woolf in the Real World*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2005), pp. 130-31 (p. 130).
[11] *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975-1980), III (1977), pp. 340-41.

abandoned, as is typical of her dualist aesthetics, the attempt to make permanent what is essentially transitory, that is, to confer solidity to the artwork.[12] All of this bears a striking resemblance to a passage from *To the Lighthouse* in which Lily Briscoe envisages for her painting a way to obtain a taut, harmonic tension of surface and structure, ephemerality and endurance:

> Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses (*TL*, p. 141).

It is particularly instructive, therefore, that even in the language she uses to explore the possible relationships between different forms of artistic expression Woolf establishes an analogy with her own way of conceiving the art of writing, that she often sees as founded on a series of binary oppositions (mind vs. world, subjectivity vs. objectivity, unity vs. fragmentation). Critics have variously discussed the presence of dualisms and contrasts in her literary conception, as well as her fascination with liminal spaces; Cheryl Mares, for instance, maintains that 'territorial terms – "boundaries", "margins", "borders", "raids", "transgressions", "outsiders" – are scattered throughout Woolf's comments on relationships between literature and painting', suggesting that she tended to consider them as blurring and mutually fertilizing.[13]

An extreme tension between life and art lies at the heart of Woolf's writing, which seeks, to quote a revealing extract from *To the Lighthouse*, 'that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces' (p. 158), between the sensory world of experience and the formal world of structural relations, by which aesthetics is linked to metaphysics and to spiritual experience. Her main concern as a novelist, mirrored in Lily's painting, is to capture the multiplicity and complexity of human existence, to convey the true essence of reality – 'the thing itself before it has been made anything' (ibid.) – but also to seek the unifying solidity of a pattern beyond shifting appearances; in other words, she always tries to fuse or reconcile the opposite elements which make up her essentially dichotomic vision. In her diary, for instance, she muses:

> Now is life very solid, or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on forever: will last forever; goes down to the bottom of the world – this moment I stand on. Also it is

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[12] *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV (1983), p. 94.
[13] Cheryl J. Mares, 'Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective', in *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Diane F. Gillespie (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 58-89 (p. 61).

transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are somehow successive, and continuous – we human beings; and show the light through (*D III*, p. 218).

Elsewhere, again, she notes:

I attain a different kind of beauty, achieve a symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the mind's passage through the world; achieve in the end, some kind of whole made of shivering fragments; to me this seems the natural process; the flight of the mind.[14]

Significantly enough for the merging of the writerly and the pictorial, in Woolf's private texts the output of the compositional process is generally conceived as an 'image' or 'scene', which is an equivalent of a state of mind or an act of apprehension of reality.[15] Furthermore, the author frequently adopts the metaphor of crystallization for the process by which something enduring is made out of momentary impressions. In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, both Lily and Mrs Ramsay struggle to 'crystallize and transfix the moment' (p. 7), in order to reveal 'a coherence in things, a stability; something [which] is immune from change, and shines out [...] in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby' (p. 85). This has many significant echoes in Woolf's aesthetic principles, as well as in the cultural milieu surrounding her. On the one hand, as Banfield has shown,

The same injunction to relate the immediacy of existence to the permanence of being underlies Fry's theory of Post-Impressionism, meant not to replace but to complete Impressionism. [...] Fry sees as Post-Impressionism's achievement the giving of such formal design to life without destroying it. It joins the ephemeralness of sense-data to the timelessness of universals; it gives in retrospect a necessity to the contingent moment.[16]

On the other hand, the scene (something visual and spatial) as crystallization of the moment (a temporal entity), described in terms pertaining to the field of luminance and preciousness, recurs in many passages in which Woolf reflects on her own creative process. We could compare the aesthetics of *To the Lighthouse* to Woolf's contemporary 'visual' non-fiction, such as the essay 'The Cinema' for instance; here the evocative power of the

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[14] Quoted in Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols (London: Grafton Books, 1987), I, p. 138.
[15] See, for example, the following extracts from her diary: "one sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none I think" (*D III*, p. 113); "I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots. That is: if I pass the lame girl, I can without knowing I do it, instantly make up a scene [...]. This is the germ of such fictitious gift as I have" (ibid., p. 160); "how many little stories come into my head! [...] One might write a book of short significant separate scenes" (ibid., p. 157).
[16] Ann Banfield, 'Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time', *Poetics Today*, 24 (2003), 471-516 (pp. 495-96).

image (in this case the motion picture) is closely related to the functioning of psychological processes and our ability to construct mental representations, as in everyday life 'some momentary assembly of colour, sound, movement, suggests that there is a scene waiting a new art to be transfixed'.[17] The autobiographical essay 'A Sketch of the Past', though written towards the end of her life, can be considered, because of its private and confessional tone, one of the most authentic expressions of Woolf's aesthetics and among the closest (conceptually, not chronologically) to the issues discussed in the novel. Moreover, it is also a text in which Woolf tries to go back to and reflect on the origins of her sensibility or the source of her creative vein, and on those ideas about life and art that, by the time she composed *To the Lighthouse*, had stayed with her for a long time (since her childhood). As she notes in 'A Sketch of the Past', scene-making is not only her 'natural way of marking the past', but also the origin of her writing impulse, in which, admittedly, she has always had to 'find a scene'.[18] The moment, a unit of experienced time rooted in the present of the world of existence, is conceived as 'the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed'.[19] It is, moreover, 'largely composed of visual and of sense impressions', or 'a knot of consciousness; a nucleus'.[20] It is also a still capturing of life in arrested movement, like one of the moments of vision in which Mrs Ramsay or Lily Briscoe hang suspended; something temporary that, once fixed in the atemporal world of being, partakes of eternity. Therefore, Woolf's aim is 'to saturate every atom', 'to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes' (*D III*, p. 209). Within the single, definite moment all is still and suspended and pregnant with meaning. For the same reason, it is regarded as extremely valuable, as a 'spark', a 'diamond', or a 'nugget of pure gold'.[21]

Both these quotations and her autobiographical writings show that Virginia Woolf conceives of literary creation as the transcription of a visionary moment of inestimable value, as an illumination which originates in the dark recesses of the mind and is then released by means of words. All of this is echoed in some of the most intense moments of revelation depicted in *To the Lighthouse*, as in the following scene focusing on Lily Briscoe:

> 'Like a work of art', she repeated, looking from her canvas to the drawing-room steps and back again. She must rest for a moment. And, resting, looking from one to the other vaguely, the old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, the vast, the general question which was apt to particularize itself at such moments as these, when she released faculties that had been on the strain,

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[17] Woolf, 'The Cinema', in *Collected Essays*, II, p. 272.

[18] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Grafton Books, 1989), p. 156.

[19] Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', in *Collected Essays*, II, p. 229.

[20] Woolf, 'The Moment: Summer's Night', ibid., pp. 293-94.

[21] See, respectively, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II (1981), p. 169; ibid., p. 199; *D III*, p. 141.

stood over her, paused over her, darkened over her. What is the meaning of life? [...] The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. [...] Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this external passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was stuck into stability (*TL*, p. 133).[22]

The suspension, stillness, and silence of a visionary moment, which is transitory but also eternal, recur as a familiar trope in Woolf's fictional as well as non-fictional writings. The same could be said of her way of envisaging the secret correspondences and the hidden meaning of life in a sudden, intense illumination, that is both a spiritual and a physical experience. The discovery is an abrupt exposure to the real, an eruption of the contingent in the incessant passing and flowing of life, a manifestation of the transcendent into the immanent, as she theorizes in 'A Sketch of the Past':

And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. [...] From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this [...].[23]

While experiencing a moment of being, all the senses are highly receptive and the mind is able to establish a fortuitous connection between the profusion of sensations deriving from the external world and the flow of consciousness. In this 'rapture', the secret meaning of life, or a coherence in things, is finally disclosed and becomes the origin of the writing impulse. It seems evident that Woolf's manner of responding to experience and her conception of the compositional process are inextricably interwoven, as both rest upon the idea that 'behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern', which becomes real, concrete, perfectly accomplished in itself only through an act of verbal transcription.

These passages show that Woolf's aesthetics can be conceived as a synthesis obtained by reconciling the opposing elements of her double vision, as a unity deriving from the

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[22] There is an extraordinary resemblance between Lily's experience in the novel and Woolf's when she notes down in her diary: 'odd how the creative power at once brings the whole universe to order. I can see the day whole, proportioned – even after a long flutter of the brain such as I've had this morning [–] it must be a physical, moral, mental necessity' (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV, p. 232).

[23] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p. 81. Analogously, in *To the Lighthouse* Lily seeks a moment of revelation in the ordinariness of everyday life: 'one wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy' (*TL*, p. 164).

fusion of the many dichotomies standing at the basis of her art. As Sheehan rightly maintains,

> Her writing articulates not one but two interpretations of experience, as both flux and fragmentation. Life consists of flowing streams of sensation, yet it is also centred in the singular, heterogeneous moment. These two renderings – of vertiginous, wavelike fluidity and atomised, isolated particularity – are [...] covariant properties of experience.[24]

It is only after reaching such a profound awareness that Woolf, together with Lily Briscoe, can finally declare: 'I have had my vision' (*TL*, p. 170).

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[24] Paul Sheehan, 'Woolf's Luminance: Time out of Mind', in *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 121-49 (p. 128).

Surrealist Cross-Pollinations and Confrontations of Image and Text in Paul Éluard and Max Ernst's *Les Malheurs des immortels*

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Abstract:

This article examines a book of texts and collages by Surrealist poet Paul Éluard and artist Max Ernst composed using a new verbo-visual approach to automatic writing. My analysis of *Les Malheurs des immortels* concerns their collaborative process of making verbal and visual collage. This article argues that *Les Malheurs des immortels*, on the one hand, systematically fuses the thoughts of two writers, and on the other hand, alludes to a fracture of the poetic self, a new way of making poetry using more than one voice and set of eyes. The double, considered as a contextual condition (Ernst and Éluard working together) and compositional device (two media in one book) poses a unique challenge for the reader: the texts, in attempting to re-inscribe a reality that is already expressed by a visual code, initiate a correspondence with the image based on phonetic and graphic associations. By focusing on the scientific imagery of one verbo-visual set entitled 'Entre les deux pôles de la politesse,' I seek to reinvigorate an ongoing conversation about the appropriation of scientific diagrams and language by Surrealist poets. In doing so, this article also stakes a claim for the relationship between popular science and Surrealist poetic practices in order to evaluate Éluard and Ernst's redefinition of automatic writing. To this end, my article fits into a wider research project investigating Surrealist works dismissed as purely nonsensical as well as recently discovered Surrealist poets who worked consistently and collaboratively with artists on poetry collections (e.g., Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Paul Éluard and Man Ray).

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Les Malheurs des immortels [*The Misfortunes of the Immortals*] is a puzzling book of automatic texts and collages that not only cross-pollinates text and image, but also stands apart as an early example of Surrealist collaborative practices. Its authors, Paul Éluard and Max Ernst, met in Cologne in 1921 and established an enduring friendship that in the same year led them to compose their first poetry collection together, entitled *Répétitions*. Seen

as a precursor to *Les Malheurs des immortels*, the collages for the *Répétitions* were selected by Éluard from a group that Ernst had made without knowledge of the poems, whereas with the former, the collages were made first, the poems second.[1] Two important differences distinguish *Les Malheurs* from the original collaboration: firstly, the imagery reveals a distinctly scientific content, and secondly, the layout reveals the image is no longer relegated to an ancillary function as mere illustration. Ernst and Éluard reverse the traditional steps of illustration in which a text is first created then an image is supplied as an accompaniment.[2] Instead of starting with a text that would subsequently need illustration, Ernst would send Éluard collages from which Éluard would then write the texts.[3] The majority of this exchange happened through written correspondence, mainly in the form of postcards, hence the telegraphic speech that makes up most of the poems. Éluard and Ernst first met in print: they both published in Dadaist journals that circulated between Germany and France at the time. The publication of *Les Malheurs des immortels* in 1922 is therefore informed by the transitional period of Dadaism to Surrealism in Paris: the collaboration between Éluard and Ernst, as much as it is an effort to negate the notion of the singular author and create surprising juxtapositions, bears the traces of Dada collaborative projects and its aesthetics of collage.

Of particular interest in this article is the scientific imagery found in four of the fifteen doublets that make up the text. Among the four entries, the most striking example is 'Entre les deux pôles de la politesse' [*Between the two poles of politeness;* All translations are my own] because of its combination of scientific imagery from popular and academic sources. In focusing on a discussion of Max Ernst's original sources for the images the collage, I will argue that the implications of the collaborative process as well as the scientific nature of the images in the collage, place 'Entre les deux pôles de la politesse,' as hinted by the title, into a dialectical framework in which two media (image, text) and two creators (Éluard and Ernst) confront each other without cancelling each other out. Furthermore, the effort to avoid cancelling each other out sets up a state of shuttling between modes of interaction, aimed not at the fusion or merging of two authors into one, but at the interplay between them. The double, considered as a contextual conditioning -

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[1] *Répétitions* has a ratio of one collage for every three poems. It is clear that this earlier work was not yet a full-fledged collaboration with equal ratios of collages to poems. In *Les Malheurs des immortels* the collages and poems form perfect pairs: twenty poems to twenty collages.

[2] See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 91. He writes that 'the 'normal' relations of image and word (in the illustrated newspaper or even the cartoon page) follow more traditional formulas involving the clear subordination […] of one medium to the other […]'.

[3] Breton and Soupault wrote *Les Champs magnétiques* within two weeks in 1919, whereas Ernst and Éluard used long distance communication. As Ernst scholar Werner Spies acknowledges, the original manuscript of *Les Malheurs des immortels* is currently unavailable, and any evidence of a post-card correspondence between Éluard and Ernst comes from a letter written by Gala Éluard.

Ernst and Éluard working together - and compositional device - two media in one book - is palpable in *Les Malheurs des immortels*: the texts, in attempting to re-inscribe a reality that is already expressed by a visual code, initiate a correspondence with the image based on phonetic and graphic associations.[4]

'Entre les deux pôles' alludes to a range of graphic traces produced by automatic procedures related to the major theme of mechanical measuring devices omnipresent in *Les Malheurs*.[5] The dominant image in the collage for 'Entre les deux pôles' is a neural map of the human body against a Cartesian plane. It is as if Éluard and Ernst foresaw Breton's poetic line, 'la courbe blanche sur le fond noir que nous appelons pensée,' [*the white contour on the black background we call thought*] which appears in the poem 'Tournesol' [*Sunflower*] published just one year after *Les Malheurs*. The imagery of Surrealist automatisms like the seismometer in *Nadja*, which functions as an analogy for convulsive beauty, and even the technical device of a photographic camera, whose images show the viewer details hidden when the picture was taken, have long been commented upon by critics.[6] It is intriguing that Ernst anchors his visual vocabulary in two scientific tropes: the graph, a record of a phenomenon that cannot be perceived with the unaided eye and therefore seeks recourse to a graphic representation of that phenomenon, and the anatomical drawing of the nervous system, a visualization of turning the inside out, or making the interior visible.

What is the significance of the scientific illustrations in *Les Malheurs des immortels*? Scholars of Surrealism have addressed the presence of scientific tropes in some Surrealist texts, concentrating mainly on zoology, botany and mineralogy in the multidisciplinary work of avant-garde intellectual Roger Caillois, but until recently, none have seriously treated the appropriation of scientific diagrams by Surrealist poets, nor contextualized Surrealist poetic practices within the scope of contemporaneous scientific discoveries.[7] The work of art historians Gavin Parkinson (*Surrealism, Art and Modern Science*- Yale University Press; 2008) and David Lomas (*Simulating the Marvelous* and *Modest Recording Instruments*: *Science, Surrealism, and Visuality*; 2010), among others, has begun to redirect critical attention to an otherwise speculative consideration of the overlap

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[4] See Eliane Formentelli, 'Max Ernst, Paul Éluard ou l'impatience du désir,' *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 164 (Oct-Dec 1976), p. 503.

[5] http://art.famsf.org/max-ernst/entre-les-deux-poles-de-la-politesse-book-les-malheurs-des-immortels-misfortunes-immortals

[6] The ending line of *Nadja* is 'La beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas.' [*Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all.*] See André Breton, *Œuvres complètes, tome 1* (Paris : Gallimard-Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, 1988), p. 753. For more on the topics of Surrealist automatism and photography, see Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985) and Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Boston: MIT Press, 1995).

[7] See Claudine Frank, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), for a discussion of Roger Caillois's role within Surrealism in the 1930s and George Bataille's College of Sociology.

between scientific diagrams and Surrealist discourse. Expanding the notion of the use of 'instruments' in Surrealist writing, Parkinson paints a fuller picture of what has been only conjecture or coincidence: the birth of surrealism also coincided with the popular acceptance of the theory of relativity, the beginning of quantum physics, and new visual models to understand these scientific discoveries. Both Surrealism and the realm of physics faced a similar dilemma: namely, how to visualize that which was previously invisible or inaccessible. Using an *appareil enregistreur*, or recording device, played an integral part in visualizing 'invisible' forces such as electromagnetic fields. In these terms, the portrait of André Breton standing over a microscope on a table next to a piece of paper and pen, equating the role of writing with that of other visualizing instruments, is emblematic of how science and Surrealism simultaneously attempted to render unconscious thought and unseen phenomena visible. While the notion of automatic writing in Surrealist poetics entails uninhibited release from aesthetic considerations for the sake of freeing the unconscious from self-censure, it can manifest itself in everyday life via the chance encounter, as in the example of this Surrealist anecdote in which Ernst recounts how he came across the material that would become the major source for his collages in *Les Malheurs*.

Ernst made a radical change in his source of collage material from mixed sources to exclusive use of illustrations pulled from old catalogues shortly before embarking on *Les Malheurs*.[8] In 'Au delà de la peinture,' Ernst gives a vivid anecdote of a Eureka-moment he experienced while glancing through a catalog of scientific illustrations.[9] He is struck by the pages of the catalogue showing instruments related to a long list of scientific fields. The headings 'anthropologique, microscopique, psychologique, minéralogique, paléontologique' into which the catalogue is organized, begin to obsess him. Flipping between pages creates 'une succession hallucinante d'images contradictoires' [*a hallucinatory succession of contradictory images*] which makes the images appear 'double, triple, et multiple,' as if Ernst is carrying out a virtual collage without any scissors or glue. Ernst views the images as multiple because the images carry a seemingly limitless range of meaning when they are articulated with other images, like the various scientific instruments featured in the catalogue, cobbled together with pieces and parts from specialized machines. Moreover, the hallucinatory quality of these overlapping images is not only a function of the order in which they appear in the catalogue but also an

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[8] See Werner Spies *Max Ernst Collage: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*. (New York: Harry Abrams Publishers, 1988), p. 271. In a letter to Tristan Tzara dated 1921, Ernst writes, 'If you come across any old department store catalogs, fashion magazines, old illustrations, etc. kindly make a gift of them to me [...].'
[9] Ernst, *Écritures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 258.

expression of the in-betweenness of the multiple significations they convey for the common reader. This range of meaning is significantly narrower for the specialist, the catalogue's original target audience. But for Ernst, the scientific images are visionary, not instructive. Mysterious to the non-specialist, the scientific images make ideal Surrealist collage materials because they were found through chance. The contingency of relation among the images - based on their placement in the catalog as Ernst flips through it - allows the images to impinge on each other and according to Ernst, give birth to multiple, even contradictory images and meanings.[10]

Ernst also expands his practice of collage to include verbal citation, allowing for associative relationships between collages and texts. Due to its emphasis on the relationships between word and image, *Les Malheurs* arguably fits the definition of a Derridean doubling. As Rosalind Krauss explains in her seminal essay on Surrealist photography, the double 'opens the original to the effect of deferral, or of one thing after another or within another: of multiples burgeoning within the same.'[11] The double as deferral and a 'multiple burgeoning within the same' is applicable to the intertwined visual and verbal doublets in *Les Malheurs* since the echoes between words in the texts of any one doublet produce a delay in understanding for the reader/viewer, not unlike the delay between a reception tower and an electrical signal. What is strange, even complacent, about *Les Malheurs* is that the collage images evoke less a fantasy world than they draw attention to *how* the world is perceived and the very devices that enable signals to be transmitted and, by extension, messages relayed. In joining images gleaned from science such as graphs, gas bubbles, and lightning rods to create a pseudo-scientific image in the form of Surrealist collage, Ernst invents a new visual vocabulary for automatic writing practices that use the image as a point of departure for writing. His misrecognition, or reappropriation of the use value of the scientific diagram, results in new potential for signification.

Even though the doublet 'Entre les deux pôles' most directly readdresses the role of scientific diagrams in Surrealist poetics, critics tend to overlook this particular piece from *Les Malheurs* because it does not fit within a traditional medium-specific narrative of collage, that of ripping and patchwork, of torn paper and frayed, deckle-edged seams.[12] The practice of collage, from the French verb 'coller,' meaning 'to glue,' originated in the

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[10] Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe.* (New York: Harry Abrams Publishers, 1988), p. 55.

[11] Rosalind Krauss, 'Modernist Myths,' *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), p. 110.

[12] Sonia Assa's reading of *Les Malheurs des immortels* inscribes Ernst's collage practice in a view of collage as a childlike craft activity of cutting and pasting. See 'Of Hairdressers and Kings: Ready-made Revelations in *Les Malheurs des immortels.' French Review* 64, no. 3 (February, 1991) pp. 643-58.

popular aesthetic of pasting paper and findings into scrapbooks, and was adopted by Cubists such as Picasso who placed scraps of paper onto the canvas. Dada artists such as Kurt Schwitters incorporated material from everyday life (ticket stubs and sweet wrappers) into collages. Despite Ernst beginning his first collages in the Dada scene in Cologne, Germany in 1920, his collages stand in contrast with the collages of his peers, in which the boundaries between the media are visible to the viewer. For Ernst, it was important that his collages be constructed to give the illusion of seamlessness, therefore he aligned the line directions of lithographs to ensure the boundary between the clippings remained indiscernible to the naked eye. Given these aesthetic concerns, Ernst's version of collage is closer to a surgeon (with precise suturing tools) than a tailor. Yet, studies of *Les Malheurs* tend to focus on the motif of sewing as a metaphor for collage because of the opening doublet entitled 'Les Ciseaux et leur père,' [*The Scissors and their father*] which features two dressmaking forms, one for a child and the other for a woman, wearing nineteenth-century fashions. However, due to the attentive precision Ernst devotes to the creation of a collage in which the constitutive parts are seamless, the work warrants greater attention for how it reveals a surprising connection between the concepts of illumination (revelation) and optics. The inclusion of scientific fields of study in Ernst's anecdote on the discovery of the catalog containing scientific illustrations demonstrates this concern with institutional and popular model-making, or the representation of things which are not visible to the naked eye, and not just for *fashions.*

The source material for the major visual elements of the collage for 'Entre les deux,' which depicts a man and a giant bubble set against a graph on a black background, demonstrates an underlying connection to the practice of making visual models and performing experiments outside of a lab for the sake of mere entertainment instead of institutional research. Ernst conserves the original theme of a bubble and a human figure from a scientific demonstration published in *La Nature*, a nineteenth-century magazine that targeted non-specialists who wanted to learn about scientific advancements. The inevitable, and as some historians have argued, unfortunate, result of the widespread popularity of the magazine *La Nature* was the 'vulgarization of science' in the Third Republic. The bubble illustration that Ernst used in the collage for 'Entre les deux pôles,' comes from a section of the magazine devoted to parlor tricks, or applications of a scientific concept to the realm of cheap entertainment.[13] A caption with detailed instructions for the demonstration accompanied the illustration. Ernst incorporates verbatim the words 'les bulles de savon' [*soap bubbles*] from the original caption of the

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[13] http://cnum.cnam.fr/CGI/fpage.cgi?4KY28.29/52/100/432/0/0

article, even though he typically leaves out any direct links between the title of the collage and the text. Though the instructions on how to attach a paper doll to a floating soap bubble appear innocent enough, when Ernst puts the bubble on the same scale as a human figure in the collage, he translates the original document into an unsettling image that distorts perspective and proportion: the paper doll becomes a transparent human figure, a rival to the now imposing size of the soap bubble.

The same effect of disorientation resonates in the text portion of the image-text doublet 'Entre les deux pôles.' Ernst's collaborator Éluard borrows from a range of literary devices belonging to the nineteenth century. Sentimental lamentations form the opening line of *Les Malheurs des immortels*, which reads 'Le petit est malade, le petit va mourir.' The line was probably plucked from a popular nineteenth-century children's book, *Les Malheurs de Sophie,* a collection of moralistic tales about a young girl who disobeys her parents.[14] Furthermore, as one might expect in a moralizing children's book, the numbing grammatical repetitions with the preposition 'pour' take a nonsensical turn: 'pour se défendre des vers luisants, pour sarcler les petits pois, pour éviter les courses de taureaux' [*to protect oneself from brilliant verse/worms*]. Sourcing both a literary device and visual material from the same era is just one example of visual punning that mimics its verbal counterpart in *Les Malheurs des immortels.*

Ernst and Éluard also play with homophones in the line 'pour se défendre des vers luisants'. The word 'vers' has two very distant meanings: 'verse' and 'worms.' By interchanging 'verse' and 'worms' Éluard creates ambiguity between which connotation to choose by enmeshing the two meanings. His use of automatic writing questions the very pedestal upon which the long tradition of poetic verse had previously sat: by writing automatically, Éluard eschews premeditated compositional practices that characterize carefully constructed, brilliant poetic verse, rejecting the connotation of poetry as a craft. It could furthermore be argued that their choice to leave the words exposed and little-edited marks a departure from earlier experiments in published automatic writing as in André Breton and Philippe Soupault's *Les Champs magnétiques*, which was highly edited by Breton, despite its status as 'automatic' text.[15] For Éluard, the meaning of 'vers' as 'verse' is placed in the same register as 'vers,' as 'worm'. The second meaning takes shape in the collage as a series of lines on the graph, like the movements of the inchworm, which

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[14] See Sonia Assa, 'Of Hairdressers and Kings: Ready-made Revelations in *Les Malheurs des immortels.*' *French Review* 64, no. 3 (February, 1991), pp. 643-58.

[15] Without access to the original manuscript for *Les Malheurs des immortels,* which may be held in a private collection, it is impossible to verify that no editing of Éluard's automatic writing took place. Any information regarding its whereabouts would help substantiate what must remain for now an educated guess.

correspond to the motif of agriculture and the earth suggested in the line that immediately follows, beginning 'pour sarcler les petits pois' [*to root up the green peas*].

Another example of the oscillation between two meanings of a word in the text where both meanings find a corollary in the collage is the phrase 'promontoires dégonflés' [*deflated promontories*]. At first glance, the desert-like landscape of the collage suggests flatness. A closer look at the horizon reveals a varied silhouette of mesas and basins, topographic features that qualify as 'promontoire[s]'. As an anatomical term, the word 'promontoire' is used when referring to contact points between bones in the human body. Though the human figure in the foreground of the collage does not show bone structure, it does attempt to illustrate the body as a system of interconnected pathways and lines. The complex inner-workings of the body is reduced to a single sub-system, that of the nerves. In a sense, the anatomical illustration reduces the prominence, or importance, of the human to a series of lines; a series of neurological relays constitute the matter of man. The anatomical and geomorphological meanings of 'promontoire' shift the reader between two levels of scale: Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man and the landscape horizon, between vast systems in the outside world and those contained within the body.

The precariousness of words with double meanings finds graphic expression in the collage, suggesting suspension and dispersion of meanings, making the space between the image and the text function like an echo chamber. Demonstrating a preoccupation with the production of language, the collage portion of 'Entre les deux pôles' shows a sound wave with its characteristic peaks and troughs. In the accompanying doublet, the phrase 'les mots fragiles' [*fragile words*] is repeated twice, followed by 'le doux diapason,' or the tuning fork. The second permutation of 'les mots fragiles' returns in the expression 'le mot: fragile'. The repetition of the line also establishes two poles or axes between the words 'mot' and 'fragile', foregrounding the transformation of the stable, written word to the ephemeral, oral utterance of a word by the human voice. This transformation is alluded to in the collage by the tuning fork and the accompanying sound wave they create represented in line on the graph. Exactly at the intersection of the sound wave with the bubble-like 'goitre', or tumor-like growth that occupies the area around the voice box, we have 'la bulle' [*the bubble*]. The circular form of the bubble at differing angles of intersection with the wave traces the shape of distinct letters of the alphabet that dominate the text: p, d, and b.[16] The bubble becomes a spherical cipher that recurs throughout 'Entre les deux pôles' in the graphic representation of letters as well as images to which the words refer: 'petits pois'

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[16] The concrete shape of the letter on the page, underscored by the intersection of the bubble along the graph, evokes other instances of modern experimental poetry such as the *calligramme*.

(*green peas*; in a pod they appear typographically as 'ooo'), 'courses de taureaux' (*bull-fighting*; held in circular amphitheaters), and 'goitre' (*goiter*; a bulbous growth on the thyroid gland). Even the enigmatic 'chapeaux volants' [*flying hats*] in the final line 'personne ne se souvient plus de semences de chapeaux volants en plein hiver' alludes to a circular structure of the text itself: the 'chapeau volant' refers to the only circumflex accent in the word 'pôles' from the title, since the circumflex is informally referred to as a 'hat' which here hovers over the 'o' in the word 'pôles'. As mentioned previously, suspension and intermediate states are the overarching modes of 'Entre les deux pôles'. The words in the poem are '[d]es mots fragiles' because they are tenuously held together. The words are also potentially separable because they are made up of fragments— the vowels and consonants, phonemes and syllables that constitute each word and utterance.[17]

The fragile bond that holds together the same words and images of 'Entre les deux pôles' is derived in part from the very collaboration between Ernst and Éluard as they developed the prose poems. Their collaboration affirms the process of poetic creation epigrammatized by Lautréamont: 'La poésie doit être faite par tous, non par un' [*Poetry should be made by all, not by one*].[18] The collaborative process would become the hallmark of Surrealist poetic co-authorship. Ernst and Éluard demonstrate that the 'tous' in Lautréamont's line points to the necessity of two subconscious minds to create new ways of seeing as opposed to a singular voice of the lyric poet.[19] The interface between Éluard's textual contributions and Ernst's textual and visual material in *Les Malheurs* offers a unique example of automatic writing that relies on an artwork—the collage—as a starting point.

Considering that Ernst provided titles as a starting point for Éluard to write the text, the elements of the title irrevocably guide the stylistic choices in the prose poem. The 'entre' [*between*] in the title analogizes the process of Ernst and Éluard creating the doublet. For example, in 'Entre les deux pôles' the first line 'Cet acrobate, trempé jusqu'aux os, vous apporte dans son goitre les mots fragiles,' [*This acrobat, wet/fearful to the bone, in his goiter brings you fragile words*] alludes to the goiter-like bubble that seems to walk the thin line strung out in tight-rope fashion between the left and right sides of the collage. The relationship between the title and the opening line of the poem can be summarized as

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[17] The word 'fragile' comes from the Latin *fragilis* and *fragmentum*, meaning part.

[18] Surrealists saw Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse) and Rimbaud as model figures because their poetry dealt with the irrational world. See Renée Riese Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 149-88.

[19] Lautréamont justifies plagiarism as a necessary imperative for 'moving' poetry forward: 'Le plagiat est nécessaire. Le progrès l'implique. Il serre de près la phrase d'un auteur, se sert de ses expressions, efface une idée fausse, la remplace par l'idée juste.' *Poésies II* (1870), (Paris: ed. Librairie Gabrie) p. 6. [*Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expression, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea.*]

the distance between two poles or points that the acrobat must traverse. The motif of the pair is even reinforced in 'Entre les deux' through the alliterative repetition of the letter p: 'pôles de la politesse' [*poles of politeness*], 'petits pois' [*green peas*], 'Pierre et Paul', and 'personne ne se souvient plus [...] en plein hiver' [*no one remembers anymore ... in the middle of winter*].[20]

Ernst and Éluard enact a verbal collage as much as Ernst creates a visual collage, yet their collaboration is not as simple as a partnership. The genesis of *Les Malheurs* and the biography of the two authors show a more dialectal, troubled arrangement at play. [21] Likewise, the doubling in the title 'Entre les deux pôles de la politesse,' analyzed in my close reading of the same passage, sets up a word-image in which two poles are positioned: the words 'pôle' and 'politesse' echo each other and convey a state of suspension. 'Entre les deux poles de la politesse' is emblematic of Ernst and Eluard's friendship as much as the process of signification they create with text and image: to be in between two poles might mean not being at either one definitively. Through the many grammatical articulations of the double, Ernst and Éluard place the reader 'in between' several interpretations of an image, an interesting anticipation of an early definition of the Surrealist image.

What kind of image do Éluard and Ernst create, if *Les Malheurs* is neither fully a collage, nor fully a poem? And how does their version of a Surrealist image differ from Breton's? In the first Surrealist manifesto, published two years after *Les Malheurs*, Breton characterizes surrealism as a process of image production. Drawing on Pierre Reverdy's definition of the Surrealist image as '[le rapprochement de] deux realités distantes' [*the coming together of two distant realities*], Breton explains that only when the rapprochement is fortuitous does the spark create a Surrealist image.[22] Breton couches his definition in scientific terms, claiming that the measure of the efficacy of the Surrealist image, its spark, lies in 'la différence de potentiel entre les deux conducteurs' [*the difference of potential energy between two conductors*].[23] Elaborating on the 'electrochemical' property of the image and its relationship to automatic writing, Breton develops the scientific metaphor as, '[...] Et de même que la longueur de l'étincelle gagne à ce que celle-ci se produise à travers des gaz raréfiés, l'atmosphère surréaliste créée par l'écriture mécanique [...] se prête particulièrement à la production des plus belles images'

[20] In 'Les Ciseaux et leur père' [*The Scissors and their Father*], a tall dress-form figure holds another headless figure resembling the model for a girl's dress. In 'Des Éventails brisés' a man rides a water-powered bicycle contraption mounted on an alligator.
[21] While functioning as an overarching poetic motif, the notion of the pair also mirrors the lifestyle of Éluard and Ernst during the early 1920s. More than Max Ernst's patron, Paul Éluard and his wife, Gala, formed a *ménage-à-trois* with him. See Robert McNab, *Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
[22] André Breton, 'Manifeste du surréalisme,' *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 337.
[23] Ibid, p. 338.

[*And like the spark that electrifies rare gases, the Surrealist atmosphere created by automatic writing lends itself particularly well to the production of the most beautiful images*].[24] According to Breton, Surrealist images are the precipitates of what appears to be a spontaneous electrical reaction. In other words, the charged atmosphere of automatic writing enables the reaction between disparate terms to take place. However, if Breton's view of the Surrealist image attempts to resolve contrary terms for the sake of a synthesizing 'étincelle' [spark], Éluard and Ernst in *Les Malheurs* desire an undecidable volley of images, word and picture in an electrical storm of verbal and visual collisions.

Deciphering Éluard's text, which is far from a mere caption for the collage, reveals that the reader may be deciphering a work whose very meaning is meaningless itself. *Les Malheurs* was intended to rely heavily on the reaction of the poet to image. Because the images in the collages themselves refer for the most part to far-flung assemblages of scientific models that find themselves pieced together seamlessly on the same plane, it allows the poet to develop associations that Ernst may never have foreseen and therefore conveys a limitlessness of meaning. This malleability of interpretation opens up imaginative possibilities to envision things that have never been seen with the naked eye. Perhaps because of this predilection for the visual shared between Surrealism and science that both seek to 'donner à voir' [*to display*; *to make something seen*], critic and writer Walter Benjamin, summarizing Apollinaire and Breton, would later assert that because of the avant-garde, 'the conquests of science rest far more on surrealistic than on logical thinking'.[25] But what remains to be seen is whether or not a logic to surrealist logic prevails. In short, can one speak of a scientific aesthetic that underpins one of the hallmarks of Surrealist poetry, automatic writing? Benjamin observes that Breton saw 'mystification' as the 'foundation of scientific and technical development.'[26] While Benjamin is reluctant to champion the mystification of machines by the avant-garde, which he calls 'impetuous' it is worth mentioning that new ways of seeing enabled by machines such as the X-ray had by 1924 become part and parcel of life, whereas before World War I, X-rays were not routine. This is why Apollinaire could exclaim in his artistic manifesto 'L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes' published in 1917, 'Quoi! On a radiographié ma tête. J'ai vu, moi vivant, mon crâne, et cela ne serait en rien de la nouveauté? *A d'autres!*' [*What? We x-rayed my head. I saw for myself my cranium, and that's nothing new?*

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[24] Suzanne Guerlac, *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 130.

[25] Walter Benjamin, 'Last Snapshot of the Intelligentsia,' *One Way Street and Other Writings*. Transl., Edmund Jephcott. (New York: Verso Books, 1997), p. 212.

[26] Ibid.

Here's to more!].[27] Apollinaire's exclamation conforms to the popular belief at the time that if X-rays revealed internal structures of the human body so clearly, perhaps there were other hidden realities to be discovered. Indeed, 'Entre les deux pôles' belies a new vision – that of seeing through matter to unveil what lies beneath the surface. As an automatic text, 'Entre les deux pôles' also speculates on the capacity of the image to prompt verbal and visual associations from scientific sources outside the traditional literary domain.

Les Malheurs uses scientific systems of representation such as the Cartesian coordinate graph, anatomical drawings of the nervous system, and the X-ray, to create automatic texts, and to this end, rethinks the purpose of the images as pure information. Since Éluard and Ernst are not specialists, they see the images as sources of potential energies where several meanings can collide in a verbo-visual in-between space. The images arouse intrigue and a sense of mystery, two sensations that contribute to Éluard and Ernst's general sense of estrangement from the everyday world. This same estrangement allows them to tap into the subconscious and emerge with new meanings for images gleaned from Ernst's unique approach to collage. Considered in these terms, the series of doubles in 'Entre les deux pôles' can be understood as dialectical arrangements that circumvent any type of absolute duality such as the divide between consciousness and matter, reason and the irrational. *Les Malheurs* is not an integrated image-text. It is instead a series of articulations, even hostile confrontations, between different layers of meaning; for the most part, it remains opposed to concrete understanding. Likewise, the symbiotic relationship between Éluard and Ernst never aimed for fusion. As Éluard affirms, 'Pour collaborer, peintres et poètes se veulent libres. La dépendance abaisse, empêche de comprendre, d'aimer. Il n'y a pas de modèle pour qui cherche ce qu'il n'a jamais vu. À la fin, rien n'est aussi beau qu'une ressemblance involontaire.' [*To collaborate, painters and poets, must consider themselves to be free. Dependence degrades, prevents understanding, loving. There is no model for he who searches for something he has never seen. After all, nothing is as beautiful as an involuntary resemblance*]. [28] Instead of interpenetration of text and image, the work of Éluard and Ernst accomplishes an interchange and interaction of disparate fragments of media that cannot necessarily be treated as separate entities, but demand to be viewed as intermedia. *Les Malheurs des immortels* is, on the one hand, an example of systematic collision of the thoughts of two writers, and, on the other hand, alludes to a fracture of the poetic self, a new way of making poetry using more than one voice and set of eyes.

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[27] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes*. Ed. Pierre Caizergues (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p.949.

[28] Paul Éluard, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Dumas and Scheler (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp.882-83.

Michel Butor's *Les Mots dans la peinture*:
A 'Museum of Words'?

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Abstract:

This article examines Michel Butor's 1969 work *Les Mots dans la peinture*, asserting that its inventive structure has been largely passed over by critics due to its primary use as a key text in word-image studies. Butor proposes to examine words in paintings in this work and in so doing, focuses at length on the museum space. I suggest that Butor's text sets itself up as an imaginary art museum for its reader, and organises itself spatially in such a way as to emulate the visitor's passage through an exhibition space. Butor thus creates what will be termed, following James A.W. Heffernan, a 'museum of words', 'a gallery of art constructed by language alone'.[1] In arguing that the museum space informs the structure as much as the content of *Les Mots dans la peinture*, my article also offers insights into the work's interrogation both of ekphrasis and the role of illustration. Moreover, this piece's sensitivity to Butor's poetic endeavours and experimentation with the essay form, as well as to his thoughts on the interconnected activities of writing, reading, and travelling, further challenges the way in which the aesthetic value of *Les Mots dans la peinture* in its own right has long been overlooked.

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This article will analyse the role of illustration in Michel Butor's *Les Mots dans la peinture*, in order to uncover its implications for the limits of ekphrasis.[2] The book's final line, almost irreverent in tone, communicates Butor's surprising refusal to engage with the presence of illustrations in the work: 'J'ai décidé de ne pas aborder dans cet essai la question des images à l'intérieur des livres, à l'intérieur des livres notamment sur les mots dans la peinture, mais rêvez-y' [*In this essay, I have decided not to broach the question of images in books, notably in books which examine words in paintings, but you can think*

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[1] James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 8.
[2] Ekphrasis is defined by Heffernan as 'the verbal representation of visual representation'. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, p. 3.

about it].[3] This declaration has had the effect of partly obscuring the inventive literary project constituted by *Les Mots dans la peinture*. In line with Butor's deliberate glossing over of one of the many problems involved in categorising his text, critics have mostly overlooked the structure of this work in the half-century following its publication. The construction of *Les Mots dans la peinture* will therefore be examined here with a view to providing a more comprehensive analysis of the way in which word and image relations operate in this work.

Les Mots dans la peinture appeared in 1969 with Skira, a publishing house specialising in art editions, and at that time particularly renowned for its high quality visual reproductions, including colour illustrations. The work comprises fifty-one numbered sections which consider the role of words in paintings, from medieval to modern art. It contains fifty-five illustrations. We can see from the aforementioned citation that Butor himself deems it to be an essay, a form whose malleability, I will argue, suits his tentative exploration of the phenomenon of words in paintings.[4] Jean Duffy is rare among critics in analysing the structure of *Les Mots dans la peinture* in her monograph on Butor, highlighting the thematic organisation of its sections.[5] She concedes, however, that *Les Mots dans la peinture* dispenses with certain aspects of the (academic) essay model:

> If *Les Mots dans la peinture* eschews the conventional apparatus of the academic essay, it is nevertheless a scholarly, analytical and illuminating study of the multifarious functions played by words in paintings and in their reception.[6]

Yet it is precisely as a relatively straightforward study of words in paintings that *Les Mots dans la peinture* has been understood by critics, without lengthy consideration being given to the aesthetics of the text itself, particularly in the light of its unusual and, as I will show, often playful structure. A sustained reflection on the work in its own right, rather than solely as a means of understanding the paintings it discusses, is long overdue. The extent of the compartmentalisation involved in *Les Mots dans la peinture* means that the work,

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[3] Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture* (Geneva: Skira 'Les Sentiers de la Création', 1969), p. 151. All subsequent page references are given in the text. All translations are my own.

[4] Jeff Porter, in his introduction to *Understanding the Essay*, underlines the idea of trial or attempt from which the essay derives its name. See *Understanding the Essay*, ed. by Patricia Foster and Jeff Porter (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2012), p. x.

[5] See Jean Duffy, *Signs and Designs: Art and Architecture in the Work of Michel Butor* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), p. 223. It has usually been the case that *Les Mots dans la peinture* is referenced as a study. See Richard Hobbs, 'Reading Artists' Words', in *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. by Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 173-82, Lucien Giraudo, *Michel Butor: Le dialogue avec les arts* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2006), and Laurent Jenny, 'Les mots de la peinture moderniste ou les bonheurs d'une mésalliance', in *Versants*, 55 (2009) <http://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Les_mots_de_la_peinture_moderniste> [accessed June 17 2014].

[6] Duffy, *Signs and Designs: Art and Architecture in the Work of Michel Butor*, p. 224.

fragmented as it is into these fifty-one sections, lends itself particularly well to the essay form.[7] Indeed, Theodor Adorno argues that fragmentation is the very process through which an essay coheres: '[i]t thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.'[8] Butor's insistence both upon fragmentation within *Les Mots dans la peinture* and a certain crossing of genres and influences (the essay, the poem, the *livre d'art*) therefore deserves to be understood as integral to the work's aesthetic, since he will be seen to allow the content of *Les Mots dans la peinture* to inform its structure. Butor's engagement with form in this text sees him develop a string of brief encounters with different artworks over the course of the book, allowing us to align our progression through the text, as readers, with the trajectory of a visitor leisurely making her or his way through an exhibition space.

The first image that confronts the reader as she or he engages with *Les Mots dans la peinture* precedes the written text, and is a detail of a Marc Chagall painting entitled 'La place du marché' (c.1917). The detail depicts a figure who has just put a foot over the threshold of a building (a grocer's, as the sign in Russian above the door tells us). Arguably, for Butor, the image of crossing a threshold marries well with the idea of beginning a book, or taking the first step of a journey into a narrative, since he discusses at length the possibility of 'travelling' within and through a given text in his seminal 1972 essay 'Le Voyage et l'écriture'. Butor establishes the indissoluble link that exists between the activities of reading and travelling early on in this essay:

> Il y a donc voyage, même si l'ouvrage, à première approximation du moins, n'est pas un récit de voyage, et ceci pour deux raisons :
> d'abord parce qu'il y a trajet au moins de l'œil de signe en signe [...]
> ensuite parce qu'il y a cette issue, cette fuite, ce retrait, parce qu'à travers cette lucarne qu'est la page, je me trouve ailleurs [...]
>
> [*A journey is therefore at stake, even if the work, at first glance at least, is not a piece of travel writing, and there are two reasons for this:*
> *firstly, because there is at the very least the movement of the eye from sign to sign [...]*

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[7] Porter also elucidates the particular fragmentation that the essay form can often favour: 'We eagerly embrace the essay's nonlinear quality, losing ourselves in its unpredictable twists and turns [...] Yet getting lost in an essay is not the same as getting lost in a novel. Novels have plots; the essay is famous for rambling, its paratactic structure favoring breaks and digressions over continuity [...].' *Understanding the Essay*, p. x. Furthermore, Charles Forsdick underlines the ambulatory nature of the essay in '*De la plume comme des pieds*: the Essay as a Peripatetic Genre', in *The Modern Essay in French: Movement, Instability, Performance*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and Andy Stafford (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 45-59.

[8] Theodor Adorno, 'Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, 32 (1984), trans. by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, pp. 151-171 (p. 164).

then because there exists such an exit, such an escape, such a retreat, because through the skylight of the page, I find myself in another place [...]][9]

In the case of *Les Mots dans la peinture*, Butor engages the reader by inviting her or him to 'travel' from sign to sign, from section to section and from painting to painting, just as a guide leads the way during a museum visit (notably, Butor at one point describes the text's trajectory as 'notre sinueux cheminement' [*the winding path we forge*], p. 118). In the context of this article, the idea of the museum is understood specifically as an interior space that houses a curated art collection, and is open to the public. If Butor's text sets itself up as an imaginary art museum for its reader, and organises itself spatially in such a way as to emulate the visitor's passage through an exhibition space, then the compartmentalised structure of *Les Mots dans la peinture* can be said to take on an architectural quality, referencing the spatial layout and anticipated rhythm of the museum: at each point the text stalls us, as if we were in front of the painting it discusses, and makes us look, before guiding us towards the next artwork. Those sections that operate as verbal representations of visual representations, and which can then be seen to constitute a series of ekphrastic efforts, allow us to underline further this spatial analogy, since they usually situate the encounter with a given painting in a museum setting, notably a characteristic of much modern ekphrastic work.[10]

Using ekphrasis to understand Butor's aesthetic efforts allows the literary value of this work to be more easily uncovered, highlighting the author's experimentation with the intrinsic malleability of the essay or the creative challenge of positing the artworks of others as the primary material of one's own text, for instance. Identifying the ekphrastic bent of *Les Mots dans la peinture* also inserts this work into the long and illustrious history of ekphrastic literature.[11] Certainly, given that each section has its own title, is of a comparable length to the others, and constitutes a sustained reflection on a given artwork, the possibility that these vignettes might also be deliberately and playfully engaging with the long-established difficulty surrounding the definition of the prose poem cannot be ignored.[12] Although Section 51, entitled 'ut pictura poesis' (usually translated as 'as is painting, so is poetry'), and offered as the text's conclusion, ostensibly discusses a Juan

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[9] Michel Butor, 'Le Voyage et l'écriture', *Romantisme*, 4 (1972), 4-19 (p. 5).

[10] Heffernan, p. 8.

[11] Heffernan's study, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, begins with the shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, and works up to contemporary poetry.

[12] Alexandra Wettlaufer discusses the difficulty in defining the prose poem in her study *In the Mind's Eye: The Visual Impulse in Diderot, Baudelaire and Ruskin* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi 'Faux titre', 2003). She notes that 'the *poème en prose* is a prose passage that, like a poem, is brief and intense in its effect, and, as Baudelaire also indicates [...], there is a deliberate unity of impression, a "totalité d'effet" that transforms poetic prose into a true prose poem' (pp. 124-25). Notably, Wettlaufer underlines that, for Baudelaire, this principle also applies to painting: 'for in the *Salon de 1859* he insists that the two essential conditions for art are "l'unité d'impression et la totalité d'effet"' (p. 125).

Gris artwork for the most part, there is an abiding sense that Butor's literary project as a whole posits itself as a work of art, a type of poetic endeavour that would seem to merit the same analysis as the paintings it considers.[13] At this juncture, it is important to remember that Butor's text includes illustrations of many of the artworks he describes (mostly black-and-white; only a few are in colour). It might be noted, however, that Butor, in an interview with Martine Reid, sees the printed page of text as itself inescapably visual, asserting that '[i]n an illustrated book, you are dealing with a fundamental plastic structure which is the rectangle of the double page [...] All one has to do is move away a bit to see that the rectangle of the text is also a rectangle of drawing and color [...]'.[14] While Butor clearly demonstrates a sensitivity to the visual nature of the verbal, it will be seen, however, that illustrating an ekphrastic text in particular intensifies the ongoing power struggle between word and image. Indeed, Butor exploits this struggle to his own creative ends in *Les Mots dans la peinture*.

If the reader can 'travel' through this text in the wake of the writer, then the latter does not only operate as a spectator in his own right (aside from being the person who has 'curated' the selection of paintings under discussion), but also *supplants* the museum guide, in elucidating certain key paintings for the reader via his comments.[15] Positioning the Chagall doorway, magnified to fill the first page of the work, as a point of entry, the rectangular space of the page would seem to suggest a doorframe, or an archway, accordingly hinting at the potential for the reader to 'travel' from one section to the next. Butor's museum is an imaginary and somewhat idiosyncratic one, as it groups together paintings from galleries all over the world, and from a variety of periods, without the conservationist's regard for organising artworks chronologically. Instead, given the overarching thematic organisation of the paintings it considers, as noted by Duffy, it can be said that Butor's work houses a series of projected exhibitions.[16] Might we then understand *Les Mots dans la peinture* to be a 'museum of words', to borrow the term James A. W. Heffernan uses to describe the ekphrastic text? Can *Les Mots dans la peinture*, like many other examples of ekphrastic writing, be seen as 'a gallery of art constructed by language

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[13] To give an example of the poetic quality of Butor's work, I quote a passage from Section 5, 'la chute d'Icare' [*The Fall of Icarus*]: 'Une grande sphère d'indifférence s'est développée dans l'espace autour de cette catastrophe [...], et une sorte de chaîne va lier pour nos yeux désormais, à travers voiles et mâts du navire, l'imprudent fils de Dédale à son désir, à son meurtrier, le soleil à l'horizon [...]' [*A great sphere of indifference developed around this catastrophe [...] and, in our eyes, a sort of chain is henceforth going to link, by means of the sails and masts of the ship, the reckless son of Dedalus to his burning desire, to his murderer: the sun on the horizon [...]*] (pp. 14-15).

[14] 'Bricolage: An Interview with Michel Butor', trans. by Noah Guynn, *Yale French Studies*, 84 (1994), 17-26 (p. 19).

[15] The essay form in particular allows the writer to remain to the fore. As Pierre Glaudes and Jean-François Louette note, in the case of the essay 'le moi de l'énonciateur est sans cesse présent'. See *L'essai* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), p 295.

[16] The term used here invites comparisons with André Malraux's *Le Musée imaginaire* (Geneva: Skira, 1947), an illustrated volume notably also published by Skira. Butor's 'musée imaginaire', however, does not appear to engage with the hegemonic and reductive discourses of appropriation central to Malraux's.

alone'?[17] How might such a perspective be reconciled with the presence of photographic reproductions of many of the paintings which inspire the written text? In fact, viewing *Les Mots dans la peinture* in terms of a museum space is not solely a case of understanding its content as having an influence on form; it also allows us to uncover the extent of Butor's remarkable innovativeness in organising text and image. The spatial reading that the structure of this work would appear to encourage in fact leads us to revisit the way(s) in which we approach the relationship between ekphrasis and book illustration.

Although the presence of illustrations in *Les Mots dans la peinture* might first of all enable the work to portray the struggle for dominance that invariably characterises text-image relations, Butor focuses on this particular tension only when it applies to the phenomenon of words appearing in paintings, as the following extract from Section 1 shows: [18]

> Des mots dans la peinture occidentale? Dès qu'on a posé la question, on s'aperçoit qu'ils y sont innombrables, mais qu'on ne les a pour ainsi dire pas étudiés. Intéressant aveuglement, car la présence de ces mots ruine en effet le mur fondamental édifié par notre enseignement entre les lettres et les arts.
>
> [*Words in Western painting? Once the question is raised, you realise that they are innumerable but, as such, they have not been studied. This is an interesting blind spot, since the presence of these words effectively destroys the fundamental wall between the humanities and the visual arts that has been constructed by our education.*] (p. 5)

We see that a figure of architecture is immediately invoked by Butor: 'le mur fondamental édifié par notre enseignement entre les lettres et les arts'. If this wall is destroyed not simply by the presence of these words, but by *admitting* and *highlighting* their presence, Butor has, in this work, carved out a new space for discussing their impact. The first three sections consider the status of word and image relations, pointing explicitly towards the museum setting, and the role of this space in reinforcing what Butor sees as the unbreakable link between word and image. Sections 4, 5, 6, 10, 21, 22, 26, 31, and 44 all carry the titles of the paintings they discuss, and work together to illustrate the points Butor raises early on about the irresistible pull that draws the viewer to the title, as well as the latter's power in shaping our understanding of the artwork it names. Section 1, 'au

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[17] Heffernan, p. 8.

[18] W.J.T. Mitchell foregrounds this power struggle throughout *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, stating that '[t]he history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a "nature" to which only it has access'. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 43. See also Part Two 'Image Versus Text: Figures of the Difference', pp. 47-52.

milieu des mots' [*Among words/In a verbal environment*], firmly establishes that paintings cannot be said to exist in a non-verbal vacuum: 'Nous ne voyons jamais les tableaux seuls, notre vision n'est jamais pure vision' [*We never see paintings in isolation; our vision is never pure vision*] (p. 5). Moreover, Butor's subsequent explanation for the inevitable dominance of the verbal plunges us immediately into the museum space:

> Dès que nous nous mêlons tant soit peu de beaux-arts, on nous a parlé, on nous a montré, nous avons reçu une invitation, vu des affiches, feuilleté, lu parfois un catalogue, nous sommes venus voir quelque chose qui avait déjà dans notre esprit une forte détermination : bien plus forte encore si nous allons dans un musée. Que de paroles, en effet, y conduisent ou troublent notre visite!

> [*Once we get the slightest bit involved in the fine arts, someone has addressed us, someone has shown something to us, we have received an invite, seen posters, leafed through or sometimes read a catalogue, we have come to see something which, in our minds, is already clearly defined: even more so if we go to a museum. In fact, so many words steer or even stir up our visit there!*] (p. 6)

The use of the verb 'troubler' – meaning 'to cloud' and 'to disrupt', as well as 'to stir' (emotions, in particular) – would appear to betray a feeling that one's encounter with a visual work of art can be impaired in some way by the impingement of the ever-present verbal. Indeed, Section 1 concludes by presenting Butor's professed surprise at the identical trajectories silently followed by certain museum-goers during a visit to the National Gallery of Washington. He then realises that they are listening to audio guides: '[u]ne voix secrète les faisait voir' [*a secret voice enabled them to see*] (p. 7), as opposed to the 'commentatrices visibles' [*visible museum guides*] (p. 6) who lead other groups. The idea of a 'voix secrète' guiding one's appreciation of a painting also points toward the influence that Butor's numerous commentaries on paintings will have upon our way of seeing these artworks, as we, whether knowingly or not, progress through his 'museum of words'.

Once the mode of ekphrasis can be identified in a given text, it might be suggested that the original work of art has been reinterpreted or even regenerated in some way. The status of the work of art in such a situation does not escape Butor in *Les Mots dans la peinture*. Indeed, his comments benefit from being considered in the light of certain points raised by Walter Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', particularly those pertaining to the 'aura' of the original work of art. In his seminal essay, Benjamin states that '[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space [...] That which withers in the age of mechanical

reproduction is the aura of the work of art.'[19] For Butor, the idea of any such aura is rendered unviable by what he sees as the 'halo verbal' [*verbal halo*] attached to the work of art *and* its reproductions:

> Si je voulais décrire la structure aujourd'hui de toute expérience picturale, il me faudrait naturellement préciser comment l'œuvre d'art « elle-même » est le noyau, parfois d'ailleurs déjà détruit […], d'un ensemble de reproductions plus ou moins fidèles, autrefois fort clairsemé, souvent très dense maintenant, et comment le halo verbal s'enracine d'abord à l'original, mais peut se multiplier, se diversifier autour des différentes reproductions.

> [*If I wanted to describe today the structure of any pictorial experience, it would be necessary for me to point out the way in which the artwork 'itself' is the kernel, sometimes even already destroyed, of a whole collection of relatively faithful reproductions (one that was sparse in the past but is now often very dense), and the way in which the verbal halo attaches itself first of all to the original, but can multiply and vary around the different reproductions.*] (p. 9)

Given that the paintings illustrated constitute in part what inspires Butor to write *Les Mots dans la peinture*, the textual component of the work, by Butor's own logic, acts as the 'verbal halo' attached to these images. Moreover, the presence of illustrations in a book that focuses on ekphrastic writing raises other key questions: does a black-and-white or colour reproduction of a work of art necessarily engage the reader? If these illustrations represent the 'source' of a given section, are they accordingly more powerful than the ekphrastic text itself, or does ekphrasis, if a type of 'verbal halo', in any way subjugate the painting to which it is attached? To what extent does the fragmentary composition of *Les Mots dans la peinture* affect the relationship between word and image? For alongside the work's fifty-one sections, it is necessary to bear in mind the impact of the fragmented representation of many of the paintings discussed in *Les Mots dans la peinture*. Reproducing but a detail of an artwork keeps the reader from appreciating the painting as a whole: she or he must instead focus on the text that describes it. The frequent isolation of details of certain paintings in *Les Mots dans la peinture* in fact pushes us back towards the text that accompanies them. Even if Butor eschews a systematic discussion of the presence of these illustrations in his work, their insertion into the text proves his thesis concerning the consequent power of the verbal over the visual. Moreover, a marked playfulness typifies Butor's use of illustrations, allowing his book to recreate the incessant interplay between the visual (the painting viewed) and the verbal (the white card which indicates,

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[19] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 211-44 (p. 215).

among other details, the title of said artwork; the catalogue; the museum guide's voice) that characterises a museum visit.

Several sections in particular, all of which work to sustain Butor's 'museum of words', help us further uncover his understanding of the relationship between book illustration and ekphrasis. Section 27, 'Johannes Van Eyck fuit hic', contains a detail of the artist's signature on the Arnolfini wedding portrait and, on the following page, an image of the painting as a whole. The artist's signature, reproduced and magnified to the same scale as many of the images of paintings in this book, not only distorts our vision but in fact reminds us that this book is already 'inscribed' by others, those artists who have created the works upon which Butor comments. The reappearance of Van Eyck's signature as an element of the portrait reproduced on the following page further disconcerts us, since the lettering has now become difficult to detect. In subtly connecting the two illustrations of the same painting in this section, Butor sheds light on the distance at which the visual artist can be held in ekphrastic writing: Van Eyck is brought into focus and shunned in equal measure here, as the new text emanating from his work attempts to assert the authority and originality of its interpretations.[20] We might also consider the way a detail from the Van Gogh painting 'Arbre d'après Hiroshige' is deployed here as a page border for Section 46, 'écritures imitées' [*Imitated writings*]. Disconnected from the original artwork in this way, the Van Gogh fragment forces the eye back to Butor's text on painterly imitations of non-Roman alphabets; a reproduction of the Van Gogh painting in its entirety does not appear. The chosen detail, depicting ideograms presumably meant to resemble Japanese writing (given that the painting's title pays homage to Hiroshige), also operates as a framing device in Van Gogh's painting, where the image of the tree is flanked by two vertical lines of ideograms. Occupying the outer margin of the page, the use of this detail from the painting to frame the typeface in *Les Mots dans la peinture*, just as it frames the image of the tree in the original artwork, once again calls into question attempts to differentiate and dissociate word and image in a clear-cut way. Moreover, Butor further complicates the relationship between word and image by highlighting the 'propriétés plastiques de l'imprimé' [*plastic properties of printed matter*] in the text of the same section (p. 46). The final section of his work, 'ut pictura poesis', engages with its subject in a similarly inventive way. The text from the Juan Gris artwork is reproduced in full in this section, and thus takes on the appearance of a stand-alone poem. It seems independent of

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[20] See my article on Henri Michaux's text *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques*, a series of ekphrastic poems inspired by the paintings of René Magritte. In this article, I note that ekphrasis often attempts to disengage itself from its source of inspiration. Elizabeth Geary Keohane, 'Ekphrasis and the Creative Process in Henri Michaux's *En rêvant à partir de peintures énigmatiques* (1972)', French Studies, 64.3 (2010), 265-275 (p. 275).

the original painting, yet it is embedded in an ekphrastic piece of writing that itself only exists because this artwork inspires it. As shown by each of these instances, Butor's frequent tendency to interrogate and even reverse the conventional functions of both book illustration and ekphrasis leads to a work which extends beyond its self-imposed brief of investigating words in paintings in order to *reframe* the verbal in terms of the visual.

It has already been established that the work's closing comment, cited at the beginning of this article, displays Butor's acute awareness of the importance that we might accord to illustrations in this text, even if he sidesteps such an analysis himself. The phrasing takes care to reference the work's own self-reflexive impulse: 'la question des images *à l'intérieur des livres, à l'intérieur des livres* notamment sur les mots dans la peinture' [*the question of images in books, notably in books which examine words in paintings*] (p. 151; my emphasis). Sections 41-45 discuss the presence of books, manuscripts, letters and printed material in paintings, and each section is accompanied by one or more illustrations. Section 42, 'livres jaunes', features reproductions of three still life paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, all of which depict books. Two of these three paintings portray open books, offering a visual representation of the interior of books *as* the interior of the book, thus heightening the self-reflexivity hinted at in Butor's text. This playfulness extends to Section 44, 'Marat assassiné', where the letter still held by the murdered Marat (clasped horizontally in David's painting) is magnified, rotated into an upright position, reproduced as a detail, and offered as part of a double page, facing Butor's prose. It is at once a painting of a page, and the contents of an entire page of *Les Mots dans la peinture*. Alongside the earlier examples examined here, these instances underline the way in which the struggle between the verbal and visual generates a ludic dimension for the reader in Butor's 'museum of words', akin to (and yet entirely independent of) that experienced by the real-life museum-goer.

If, as Butor so convincingly argues, our way of seeing the so-called sister arts needs to be reassessed, it is important that *Les Mots dans la peinture* also be revisited. Having been somewhat overlooked because of a general – and often surprisingly uncritical – acceptance of its role as a key analytic text in word and image studies, it deserves to be understood as an inventive and protean piece of literature in its own right. I have shown here the way in which it operates as a 'museum of words', at once referencing and attempting to supplant the art museum. This spatial analogy highlights not only the dynamic manner in which *Les Mots dans la peinture* foregrounds novel approaches to topics such as ekphrasis and the role of illustration, but also the innovative way in which the book itself comes together.

'La transgression ne m'intéresse pas, pour le dire brutalement': Michel Houellebecq, critic of transgression

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Abstract:

Critics of contemporary French novelist Michel Houellebecq have frequently used the adjective 'transgressive' in their descriptions of both the man and his work. There are, however, huge differences of both order and magnitude between the notion of transgression in the writing of the provocative novelist and that theorised systematically in the work of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille, archetypical avatars of transgression. Houellebecq has even gone on record to declare his disgust at what he perceives as the synonymy between cruelty and transgression in their work and 'transgressive' visual art more broadly. Nonetheless, Houellebecq's fiction does display a constant preoccupation with both transgression and the transgressive: he is drawn to both the obscene and the unacceptable.

This article, which forms part of my ongoing research into the less canonical or less explored strands of Houellebecq's work, considers the representation of both sex and transgressive contemporary visual art as represented in Houellebecq's fiction. It demonstrates how Houellebecq's writing maintains a critical dialogue with transgression, in particular in the work of the Vienna Actionists, Damien Hirst and, more implicitly, Jake and Dinos Chapman. It also touches on the author's writing about art and his description of his own death, at the hands of a crazed art collector, in *La Carte et le territoire* (2010). As a result, it demonstrates how the image of a moralising author emerges in his work. It also considers how Houellebecq's stance can be closely aligned with those of critics Ovidie and Paul Virilio. To conclude, it considers how the author formulates a specifically Houellebecquian notion of transgression, or an aesthetics to which art and writing should aspire, which resonates with the Roland Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977).

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Amongst the many adjectives used to describe contemporary novelist Michel Houellebecq and his fiction in the numerous journal articles, collections of scholarly essays,

monographs and press clippings about the man and his work, the word 'transgressive' occurs time and again. Sabine van Wesemael groups him together with Bret Easton Ellis and Frédéric Beigbeder as a purveyor of what she terms the 'roman transgressif' [*transgressive novel*].[1] Murielle Lucie Clément suggests that Houellebecq's literary project is concerned with 'la transgression réitérée des codes, littéraires et sociaux' [*the repeated transgression of literary and social codes*].[2] Jack Abecassis additionally argues that Houellebecq's 'true' transgressions lie within his ambiguous relationships with the various ideological perspectives his fiction holds up for examination.[3]

The notion of what it means to transgress has also been examined within writing in an almost immeasurable number of ways by an equally immeasurable number of writers. Indeed the very word 'transgression' is an intensely critically problematic term. Julian Wolfreys, for example, reflecting the complexity of the critical debate, warns that critics should be particularly on their guard when using the term. He has reiterated that 'there is no single definable concept of transgression', 'the very idea of transgression is irreducible to conceptualization' and clarified that 'Transgressions, plural, take place'.[4]

The use of the word 'transgression' is particularly problematic when discussing Houellebecq's novels. The author's work certainly displays an interest in themes that can be considered from the perspective of transgression: sex, violence and racial difference. These, along with the various unpalatable opinions expressed by characters in his novels, as well as the author's real-life comments in media interviews, have added a somewhat transgressive aura to his œuvre. [5] While the ideas presented within Houellebecq's novels might be provocative or unpleasant, even abhorrent, writing that could be described in terms of pornography or racism is certainly not without precedent within French writing.[6] Is 'transgressive', then, an appropriate adjective to describe Michel Houellebecq's work? Indeed his writing seems to be of a very different order to that which Georges Bataille –

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[1] Sabine Van Wesemael, *Le Roman transgressif contemporain* (Paris: Harmattan, 2010), p. 33.

[2] Murielle-Lucie Clément, 'Michel Houellebecq. Ascendances littéraires et intertextualités' in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, ed. Murielle-Lucie Clément and Marie van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 106. My translation.

[3] Jack I. Abecassis, 'The Eclipse of Desire: L'Affaire Houellebecq', *MLN* 115 (2000), 801-26 (803).

[4] Julian Wolfreys, *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 7-9.

[5] Bruno Clément in *Les Particules élémemtaires* is frequently used as a mouthpiece for controversial statements. A black student is described as a 'grand singe'. Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémemtaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 192. Bruno is equally dismissive of the women he meets on a libertine campsite: 'Parler avec ces pétasses […] c'est comme pisser dans un urinoir rempli de mégots; ou encore c'est comme chier dans une chiotte remplie de serviettes hygiéniques: les choses ne rentrent pas, et elles se mettent à puer.' Ibid., p. 113 [*Talking to these morons (…) is like pissing in a urinal full of cigarette butts, like shitting in a bog full of Tampax: everything starts to stink*] Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. by Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 131. Houellebecq declared in interview with the revue *Lire*: 'Et la religion la plus conne, c'est quand même l'islam. Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré... effondré!', Didier Sénécal, 'Entretien: Michel Houellebecq', *Lire* 290 (2001), 28-36 (31). [*And the stupidest religion is Islam. When you read the Qur'an, you are blown away….blown away!*]. My translation.

[6] As an example of the 'pornographic': *Histoire d'O* by Pauline Réage (1954). Céline's pamphlet *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937) notoriously contains anti-Semitic assertions.

theorist of transgression, and key point of reference for both writers and artists – Georges Bataille presents in a text such as *Histoire de l'œil* (1928) where both profanation and the illustration of the proximity between sex and death are systematic. Readers anticipating a Foucaultian 'éclair dans la nuit' [*lightning flash in the night*] on reading Houellebecq's work might be disappointed.[7] Indeed describing a globally recognised, multi-million unit-shifting, Goncourt prize-winning author as 'transgressive' when he has been fully recuperated into the consumer mainstream seems a highly problematic assertion.[8]

This article nevertheless argues that that a close critical examination of the relationship between the transgressive and the fiction of Michel Houellebecq is a valuable critical exercise. I will demonstrate that Houellebecq maintains a complex relationship with transgression and transgressive behaviour and we can identify a discourse of transgression in his work with which his writing maintains a sophisticated critical dialogue. This is striking in the way Houellebecq considers what he presents as the interrelated fields of sex and contemporary visual art. In this way an image of a moralising Houellebecq, critic of transgression and transgressive behaviour, emerges. Such a stance is not without precedent in contemporary French writing. As this article demonstrates, this critical position reflects those held by cultural critics of sexuality and art, notably Ovidie, ex-porn star and critic of the politics of pornography, and theorist Paul Virilio. This article concludes with a consideration of Roland Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977) and suggests how we might sketch a transgressive experience *à la Houellebecq* from the perspective of sentimentality, altruistic love and compassion, a crucial element of Houellebecquian aesthetics, tentatively and at least partially opposed to the cruelty and suffering he observes in contemporary cultural production.

Houellebecq on transgression

In a 2007 interview with *Le Magazine littéraire*, Houellebecq grandly declared, after denying any interest in the writings of Sade and Bataille: 'Pour moi, le sexe et la transgression n'ont rien à voir. La transgression ne m'intéresse pas, pour le dire brutalement' [*For me, sex and transgression aren't related. To put it bluntly, I'm not interested in transgression*]. Clarifying this statement, Houellebecq added: 'Je n'aime pas

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[7] Such as that Foucault locates in Bataille's transgression. Michel Foucault, 'Préface a la transgression', *Dits et écrits, 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), Vol. 1, p. 265. My translation.

[8] Martin Crowley also considers the extent to which Houellebecq can truly be described as a transgressive writer. Crowley posits the idea that Houellebecq's work can be described as an attempt to 'transgress' from within a position of recuperation by market forces. He suggests it might be a '(dubious) attempt to fly under the radar of capitalist assimilation by producing an art so knowingly and nauseously trashy as to constitute an immanent denunciation of its inevitable assimilation by the market in cultural capital'. See Martin Crowley, 'Postface à la transgression, or: Trash, Nullity and Dubious Literary Resistance', *Dalhousie French Studies* 87 (2009), 99-109 (104).

cette confusion entre le sexe et le mal qui fait que tous les gens sont hors sujet' [*I don't like the confusion between sex and evil which means real people end up irrelevant*].[9] What displeases Houellebecq about Bataille and Sade's eroticism is the lack of shared pleasure, of joy associated with the sexual act in their work. If the Sadean libertine experiences pleasure through sex, it is only at the expense of his victim's ruthless exploitation.[10] Furthermore, the sexual experience for Bataille as explored in his fiction such as *Madame Edwarda* (1941) or *Histoire de l'œil* is inseparable from that of anxiety.[11] Houellebecq's narrow understanding of Sade and Bataille sees sex when viewed from the perspective of transgression as a negative, even unpleasant, activity, a denial of the other rather than a shared, jubilant expression of love which, as we shall see in the final section of this article, his texts appear to favour.

While Houellebecq here speaks from within the context of writing about sex, the association of transgression with exploitation and cruelty is made more broadly and consistently throughout his work. Indeed, this reflects a darker side to transgression which, while related to, is not confined to sexuality. The notion of transgression has, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, become associated with and used to justify deviant or unconventional behaviour. In addition to producing scandalous fiction, so-called transgressive art and cinema have regularly approached the boundaries of what is morally and legally acceptable. As Roger Dorey notes, transgression has attained 'une signification négative où elle devient synonyme de violation, de profanation et souvent même de perversion' [*a negative signification whereby it becomes synonymous with violation, profanation and even perversion*].[12] This is a crucial consideration for Houellebecq's work and, as we shall see, contributes to the critical position his texts assume. Rather than explicitly a direct attack on Sade or Bataille, Houellebecq's work is consistently critical of how their work has been appropriated in the name of a celebratory culture of transgression.

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[9] Dominique Rabourdin, 'Pour moi, le sexe et la transgression n'ont rien à voir', *La Magazine littéraire* 470 (2007), 35-37 (37). My translations.

[10] See, for example, Sade, *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

[11] Patrick ffrench describes an 'influence of anxiety' that runs through writing in French in the wake of Bataille's work, see Patrick ffrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'oeil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 39. This anxiety is posited in terms of both reflecting anxiety and producing it on the part of the reader. As examples, ffrench suggests the work of writers including Pierre Klossowski, Pauline Réage and Bernard Noël. I would suggest that Houellebecq's work is most appropriately viewed as remaining distinct from such an influence.

[12] Roger Dorey, 'Introduction: Penser la transgression', *L'Interdit et la transgression*, ed. Roger Dorey (Paris: Dunod, 1983), p. 1. My translation.

Houellebecq on transgressive sex

Sex plays an important role within Houellebecq's fiction and critics have correctly identified how it is expressed in the context of a neoliberal libidinal economy within which everyone, according to the theory propagated by contemporary media, has access via consumerism to a fulfilling, varied, exciting sex life.[13] In reality, as Houellebecq demonstrates repeatedly, this is restricted to the young, the attractive and the rich. Those unlucky to be none of these are inevitably frustrated, resentful and unhappy. For those lucky enough to possess a degree of sexual capital, everything is permitted, but this freedom comes at a price, sexual promiscuity can lead to a hunger for bigger, better, ultimately more transgressive kicks, hence the hidden tyranny of sexuality that Houellebecq unmasks.[14]

Sex can, for Houellebecq, be a beautiful, joyful, shared experience, an expression of both compassion and altruistic love. This is explored within the context of the tender sexual relationships between Michel and Valérie in Houellebecq's *Plateforme* (2001)[15] or in the early relationship of Bruno and Christiane of *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998).[16] Sex can, however, also be understood from the perspective of cruelty; to be denied sex can be felt as an act of cruelty, as it is by the lonely Tisserand in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), a consummate example of the suffering of the sexually disenfranchised.

Sex is also cruel when it ceases to be a shared experience, the realisation of tenderness and when it becomes, as in Sade, the search for solitary pleasure through the exploitation of others. For Houellebecq, when sex flirts with transgression it risks becoming selfish, even acutely narcissistic. This is best illustrated in *Plateforme* where Bertrand Bredane, significantly a contemporary artist, leads Michel and Valérie to an underground S&M club featuring PVC-clad dominatrices and sadistic behaviour, the parodic trappings of transgressive sex that evoke the 'negative' elements of transgression highlighted above by Dorey. Bredane attempts to justify his interest in 'la partie dégueulasse de l'être humain' [*what is disgusting in the human animal*]:

> Je ne crois pas à la *part maudite,* parce que je ne crois à aucune forme de malédiction, ni de
> bénédiction d'ailleurs. Mais j'ai l'impression qu'en s'approchant de la souffrance et de la cruauté, de

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[13] This has been particularly effectively explored, for example, by Douglas Morrey. See Douglas Morrey, 'Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy', *Portal* 1 (2004), [accessed March 6, 2013], http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/44/22.

[14] This is demonstrated by the tale of David di Meola recounted in *Les Particules élémentaires*. David's desire for both fame and sexual satisfaction sees him move to California where he ultimately becomes involved in snuff movies, eventually himself carrying out sickeningly sadistic murders. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 205-12.

[15] See Michel Houellebecq, *Plateforme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), pp. 133-34.

[16] See Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 141-42.

la domination et de la servitude, on touche à l'essentiel, à la nature intime de la sexualité. Vous ne croyez pas?

[*I don't believe we have a dark side, because I don't believe in any form of damnation, nor in benediction for that matter. But I have a feeling that as we get closer to suffering and cruelty, to domination and servility, we hit on the essential, the intimate nature of sexuality. Don't you think so?*][17]

Valérie responds negatively after witnessing the sexual torture on display, concluding: 'Je n'arrive pas à comprendre qu'un être humain puisse en venir à préférer la souffrance au plaisir' [*It's beyond me that a human being could come to prefer pain to pleasure*] and identifies sado-masochism as 'exactement le contraire de la sexualité' [*the very antithesis of sexuality*].[18] Crucially, Bredane's italicised reference to 'la *part maudite*' in the original French text functions as a reference to Bataille whose essay *La Part maudite* (1949) describes a worldview built on excess and transgression.[19] This specifically Bataillean term implicitly places Bredane's intensely materialistic view within the context of the discourse of transgression, which Houellebecq appears to parody here. This is, of course, a somewhat misguided reference to Bataille's text which actually presents a theory of 'general economy' for society, based on the squandering of profits over capitalist accumulation, rather than advocating libertarian S&M. What the intertextual reference serves to suggest, however, is an appropriation of Bataille in order to 'legitimise' such hedonism, as alluded to in Dorey's above quotation. Bredane's 'theoretical' approach to sex, with its focus on revealing the dark side of human nature, is thus something that Michel and Valérie, along with Houellebecq's writing more broadly, appear to understand, but ultimately reject.

Elsewhere, sex in Houellebecq is similarly corrupted and again approaches the 'contraire de la sexualité'. In *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005), for example, Daniel is struck when the prophet, the leader of the religious cult he has been frequenting, calls over one of the female members of the group mid meeting so that she will perform a sex act:

Obéissant sans un mot, elle s'agenouilla entre ses cuisses, écarta le peignoir et commença à le sucer; son sexe était court, épais. Il souhaitait apparemment établir d'entrée de jeu une position de dominance claire; je me demandai fugitivement s'il le faisait uniquement par plaisir, ou si ça faisait partie d'un plan destiné à m'impressionner.

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[17] Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 183 [italics in original text]. Houellebecq, *Platform*, trans. by Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 188.

[18] Houellebecq, *Plateforme* , p. 185. Houellebecq, *Platform*, pp. 190-91.

[19] In this essay Bataille articulates his theory of general economics built on his observations relating to the dynamic of excess. Bataille has 'un angle de vue d'où un sacrifice humain, la construction d'une église ou le don d'un joyau n'avaient pas moins d'intérêt que la vente du blé' [*a perspective from which a human sacrifice, the construction of a church or the giving of a jewel is as interesting as the sale of wheat*], see Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite* (Paris: Minuit, 2009), p. 49. My translation.

[Obeying without a word, she knelt between his thighs, opened the dressing gown, and began to suck; his sex was short and thick. He wanted, apparently, to establish from the outset a clear position of dominance; I wondered in passing if he did it uniquely for pleasure, or if that was part of a plan to impress me].[20]

This blowjob is contrasted with the 'immense Bonheur' that Daniel receives during oral sex from Esther, with she performs 'avec joie' a few pages prior to this encounter.[21] The contrast between the two scenes serves as an implicit denunciation of the prophet. His behaviour here is reduced to a display of dominant machismo, the woman is completely subjugated, even humiliated; she is on her knees and completely ignored as the conversation continues above her head. For the prophet, the sexual act, arguably more unpleasant and narcissistic than truly transgressive, reinforced by his t-shirt bearing the crude slogan 'Lick My Balls', is designed to reinforce his status as alpha male, thus his place on the side of cruelty in the Houellebecquian worldview.[22]

What appears to be Houellebecq's anti-transgressive stance towards sex is highly evocative of that proposed by Ovidie, who has taken a strikingly similar position. Writing in *Porno Manifesto* (2002), she is scathing about self-declared libertines, such as Bredane and the prophet, who claim that a committedly 'transgressive' approach to sexuality is justified by its liberating potential for the individual subject:

> les néo-libertins adoptent souvent la définition consensuelle qui affirme que toute jouissance est jouissance de la transgression. Cela montre en quoi ils ne peuvent en aucun cas être une optique de libération. Car la liberté sexuelle ne peut s'obtenir qu'avec le dépassement de la transgression afin de jouir librement. Et lorsque cette transgression est dépassée, il est logique qu'un désintérêt pour la sexualité à excès finisse par s'installer.

> *[The neo-libertines often adopt the consensual definition which affirms that all sensual pleasure is a result of transgression. This shows that their perspective in no way offers any form of freedom. This is because sexual freedom can only be attained by moving beyond transgression to enjoy oneself freely. Once you have moved beyond transgression, it is logical that a disinterest for sexual excess will settle in.]*[23]

Ovidie's perspective is that sexual behaviour founded on transgression for transgression's sake or in the name of freedom or self-liberation (or even based on a misquotation of Bataille, such as demonstrated in Houellebecq by the above example from *Plateforme*), is fundamentally opposed to shared, liberating sex since it effectively condemns the

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[20] Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 229. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an island*, trans. by Gavin Bowd (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), pp. 165-66.

[21] Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île* , p. 196.

[22] Ibid., p. 127.

[23] Ovidie, *Porno Manifesto* (Paris: La Musardine, 2004), p. 201. My translation.

transgressor to consistently hunt for transgressive kicks rather than finding real subjective liberation. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the prophet's behaviour, it is also associated with narcissism and ultimately 'réduit la relation sexuelle à un acte masturbatoire qui devient jouissance égoïste et non partage d'un état émotionnel' [*reduces sexual relations to a masturbatory act which becomes selfish enjoyment and not sharing an emotional state*].[24]

The perspective presented by Houellebecq's work regarding the corruption of sexuality appears to have remained consistent in the years between the publication of *Plateforme* in 2001 and 2010's *La Carte et le territoire*. Houellebecq explicitly develops this same point in the latter text, when Jasselin considers how societal attitudes to sexuality have evolved throughout his life:

> Marqué sans doute par les idées en vogue dans sa génération, il avait jusque-là considéré la sexualité comme une puissance positive, une source d'union qui augmentait la concorde entre les humains par les voies innocentes du plaisir partagé. Il y voyait au contraire maintenant de plus en plus souvent la lutte, le combat brutal pour la domination, l'élimination du rival et la multiplication hasardeuse des coïts sans aucune raison que d'assurer une propagation maximale aux gènes. Il y voyait la source de tout conflit, de tout massacre, de toute souffrance. La sexualité lui apparaissait de plus en plus comme la manifestation la plus directe et la plus évidente du mal.
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> [*Marked no doubt by the ideas fashionable in his generation, he had up until then considered sexuality to be a positive power, a source of union that increased the concord between humans through the innocence of shared pleasure. On the contrary, he now saw in it more and more often the struggle, the brutal fight for domination, the elimination of the rival and the hazardous multiplication of coitus without any reason other than ensuring the maximum propagation of genes. He saw in it the source of all conflict, of all massacres and suffering. Sexuality increasingly appeared to him as the most direct and obvious manifestation of evil*].[25]

As suggested by both Ovidie and Houellebecq, transgressive sexual behaviour is fundamentally opposed to loving, shared sexual relations: it is ultimately emotionally lacking and will inevitably lead to a sexual dead-end. Indeed, Jasselin's pessimistic analysis is proved elsewhere in Houellebecq's fiction. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, for example, it is instructive that Christiane aggravates her medical condition, resulting in her paralysis and subsequent suicide, during partner-swapping at a Parisian *club échangiste*.

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[24] Ovidie, *Porno Manifesto* , p. 201. My translation.
[25] Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), p. 303. Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, trans. by Gavin Bowd (London: William Heinemann, 2011), p. 203.

Houellebecq and contemporary art

Throughout Houellebecq's work, such a descent into suffering is not confined to the sexual sphere. Contemporary art also notably presents a symptom of a broader contemporary slide towards the transgressive. In an early essay, Houellebecq describes a video work by Jacques Lizène where the artist's penis is trussed up and animated by strings as a sign of the 'foirage triste qui accompagne l'art contemporain' [*the sad atmosphere of failure which accompanies contemporary art*] which, in its sexualized bleakness is 'le meilleur commentaire récent sur l'état des choses' [*the best recent commentary on the state of things*].[26] Accordingly, it is fitting that, in the example considered above, *Plateforme*'s Michel is initiated into transgressive sexuality by an artist. Bredane's artworks can themselves be described as eminently, even stereotypically, transgressive. They include works of incredible repugnance, including 'laissant pourrir de la viande dans des culottes de jeunes femmes, ou en cultivant des mouches dans ses propres excréments' [*leaving rotting meat in young girls' panties, or breeding flies in his own excrement*] or cruelty, accosting gallery visitors with the parts of dismembered corpses.[27] Bredane's work can be read as a parody of real-world artworks that have been described as 'transgressive', and directly evokes Damien Hirst's well-known conceptual artworks which themselves have included the liberal use of dead animals and the deliberate cultivation of flies.[28] As with Houellebecq's exploration of sex, the world of contemporary art is infused with the transgressive; just as sex is corrupted through S&M, art has degenerated into exploitation, cruelty, narcissism, and a celebration of death.

Houellebecq's Prix Goncourt-winning *La Carte et le territoire* is particularly illuminating from this perspective. The text's main protagonist, Jed Martin, is himself a contemporary artist and the novel provides apparently well-informed observations of the Parisian art community.[29] At the novel's centre is the vicious murder of the character of 'Michel Houellebecq', who has been grotesquely killed and whose entrails have been arranged with great care in his living room:

> Toute la surface de la moquette était constellée de coulures de sang, qui formaient par endroits des arabesques complexes. Les lambeaux de chair eux-mêmes, d'un rouge qui virait par places au noirâtre, ne semblaient pas disposés au hasard mais suivant des motifs difficiles à décrypter, il avait

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[26] Houellebecq, 'L'Art comme épluchage', in *Interventions* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), pp. 83-84. My translations.

[27] Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 179. Houellebecq, *Platform*, p. 184.

[28] Notably Hirst's 1990 installation 'A Thousand Years', and 1991's dead shark notoriously preserved in formaldehyde 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living'.

[29] Indeed, this appears be informed by the author's own interest in contemporary art. Houellebecq has been consistently involved in writing about, and the production of, visual art since the early 1990s. In 1997, for example, Houellebecq provided the text for Opera Bianca, an installation by artist Gilles Touyard at the Centre Pompidou, whilst he collaborated with artist Sarah Wiame in 1993-1995 and 1996.

l'impression d'être en présence d'un puzzle. Aucune trace de pas n'était visible, le meurtrier avait procédé avec méthode, découpant d'abord les lambeaux de chair qu'il souhaitait disposer aux coins de la pièce, revenant peu à peu vers le centre tout en laissant libre un chemin vers la sortie. Il allait falloir s'aider de photos, essayer de reconstituer le dessin de l'ensemble.

[*The whole surface of the carpet was splattered with trails of blood, which in places formed complex arabesques. The strips of flesh in themselves, of a red colour which sometimes became blackish, did not seem arranged at random but followed motifs that were difficult to decrypt; he felt it was like being in the presence of a puzzle. No traces of footprints were visible: the murderer had acted methodically, first cutting the strips of skin that he wanted to place in the corners of the room, then returning gradually towards the centre while leaving a path to the exit. They would need photos to help try and recreate the design of the whole*].[30]

The delicacy of the arrangement of body parts and the patterns created by the bloodstains are themselves evocative of a work of contemporary art. Furthermore, the narrator's description of the murder scene here invites comparisons with a piece of visual art criticism; the appreciation of colour in the line 'd'un rouge qui virait par places au noirâtre' and the observation of the artistic pride the murderer takes in his work: 'le meurtrier avait procédé avec méthode'. Moreover, when Jed is shown a photograph of the crime scene, he compares it to the work of transgressive visual artists Jackson Pollock and the Vienna Actionists.[31]

After an investigation that lasts for the final third of the novel, the murderer is revealed to be a depraved art collector with a taste for producing art using real human body parts which recall the hyperreal work of provocative visual artists Jake and Dinos Chapman.[32] His motive was to steal a portrait of Houellebecq painted by Martin. In this way, Houellebecq is murdered by a contemporary artist for a work of contemporary art in a slaughter that itself takes the form of a work of art. While arguably a light-hearted reference to how Houellebecq's writing has received its fair share of negative reviews from the literary establishment, he has here been literally torn apart by an art lover. The artistic assassination of Houellebecq also serves as a key motif for Houellebecq's critique as considered above. It is symptomatic of a spectacular world that values the visual above all and takes a narcissistic, even hedonistic, pleasure in experiencing the transgressive, even if it involves exploitation or, in this case, death. As Jed Martin concludes with an observation that can be applied to both the worlds of sex and art: 'La valeur marchande de la souffrance et de la mort était devenue supérieure à celle du plaisir et du sexe' [*The market value of*

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[30] Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 288. Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, p. 192.
[31] Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 351.
[32] Houellebecq's description here recalls works such as 1996's 'Tragic Anatomies: Fuck Face' which use realistic technique to give the impression that their work is made of real body parts.

suffering and death had become superior to that of pleasure and sex].[33] Martin proceeds to clarify how this movement is exemplified within art by the work of Damien Hirst, whose morbid creations have assumed a higher market value in the preceding years than those of the previous leader, Jeff Koons, whose work is best known for its kitsch, colourful irreverence. As with the previous examination of the libidinal economy, art too gives way to exploitation, suffering and death. This observation consequently permits a more oblique reading of a scene where Martin destroys his unsuccessful portrait of Hirst by driving a palette knife into the latter's eye.[34] This act thus becomes a critical statement about Hirst's grisly art, turning his techniques back against their purveyor. Bruno Viard's reading of the episode takes such a reading one step further and, perhaps slightly unconvincingly, proposes that Hirst himself is responsible for Houellebecq's eventual demise in the novel.[35]

The work of the Vienna Actionists, with whom Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler were associated in the 1960s and early 1970s, is another recurrent target for Houellebecq's criticism in both his novels and critical writing. The Actionists' performance-based work has been described by Maggie Nelson as featuring 'multiple forms of mutilation, beatings, penetrations and bloodletting', and is proposed by Houellebecq as a further example of how art, like sex, has degenerated towards narcissistic cruelty.[36] Most damningly, in *Les Particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq's narrator elaborates a hypothesis where 'les *serial killers* des années 90 étaient les enfants naturels des *hippies* des années 60' [*the* serial killers *of the 1990s were the spiritual children of the hippies of the Sixties*], suggesting that the cultural liberalism of the 1960s has been responsible for a social movement towards extreme individualism, the natural consequence of which is murder.[37] For Houellebecq, the Dionysiac excesses of the Actionists were little more than a symptom of such a cultural slide, with the artists dismissed as 'matérialistes absolus, des jouisseurs à la recherche de sensations nerveuses de plus en plus violentes' [*pure materialists, libertines forever in search of new and more violent sensations*].[38] Elsewhere, and writing under his own by-line in the introduction for

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[33] Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 371. Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, pp. 251-52.
[34] Ibid., p. 30.
[35] Viard argues that 'il est facile de reconnaître la manière habituelle de Hirst, spécialiste du trash et du macabre [...]. Le maître du morbide a simplement remplacé une œuvre (le tableau à l'huile) par une autre de sa façon (l'installation de chair humaine). Pas besoin de signature!' [*it is easy to recognise the stylistic hallmarks of Hirst, specialist of trash art and the macabre (...). The morbid master has simply replaced one work (oil painting) with another (human flesh installation). No need for a signature*]. Bruno Viard, '*La Carte et le Territoire*, roman de la représentation: entre trash et tradition', *Lendemains*, 36: 142-143 (2011), 87-95 (92). My translation.
[36] Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: a reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), p. 21.
[37] Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 261 [italics in original text]. Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 252.
[38] Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 260. Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 252.

an art catalogue, Houellebecq has definitively declared that: 'ma répugnance pour les actionnistes viennois reste entière' [my revulsion for the Actionists remains complete].[39]

The perspectives presented in *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Plateforme* and *La Carte et le territoire* themselves reflect a broader late twentieth-century debate in the artistic community. In particular they evoke the views presented by theorist-turned polemicist Paul Virilio in his controversial pamphlet *La Procédure silence* (2000), whose publication generated a debate played out in media when it is fair to anticipate Houellebecq would have been writing 2001's *Plateforme*.[40] In this book Virilio is aggressively critical of contemporary artistic production, arguing that it has few aspirations outside of a desire to shock, scandalise or even perpetuate violence against the spectator. This is an art that Virilio ironically describes as 'art maudit' [*accursed art*], which is also a nod to Bataille, and the product of an artistic current that runs throughout the twentieth century, from Dada, the Actionists, towards contemporary body modification by artists such as Orlan, all for Virilio crucially based on nihilistic destruction.[41]

In this essay, Virilio is definitively Manichean in his view of the art world: there are only two types of art, 'pitoyable' [*pitiful*], which is able to display a certain compassion for its subject, and 'impitoyable' [*pitiless*], the dominant trend in the contemporary art world concerned, ultimately, with cruelty and perpetuating a violent response on the part of the viewer through extremity.[42] The latter category is certainly congruent with the art that one would describe as 'transgressive', certainly the examples he provides seem to fit into that category. This simplistic view of the art world is arguably one that manifests within Houellebecq's fiction: the work of Bredane and the artistic murder of the Houellebecq character could be considered, to use Virilio's term, 'impitoyable'. Indeed, this dualistic way of seeing, with clear distinctions being made between 'positive' and 'negative' or 'good' and 'bad', can equally be observed within Houellebecq's conception of sex. Sex is 'bad' when it is flavoured with the transgressive, but 'good', when associated with love, affection and tender compassion.

Love as transgression?

Love, both as altruism and its ideal manifestation as sex, is crucial for Houellebecq's novels, and risks being overshadowed by the elements of cruelty in his work with which it

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[39] Houellebecq, 'Préface', in *Erotoscope*, Tomi Ungerer (Paris: Taschenn, 2001), pp. 10-11 (10). My translation.

[40] For a further discussion of this debate, see Andrew Hussey, 'The atrocity exhibition', *NewStatesman.com*, April 14, 2003, [accessed March 6, 2013], http://www.newstatesman.com/node/145231.

[41] Paul Virilio, *La Procédure silence* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), p. 15. My translation.

[42] Virilio does not explicitly clarify what he terms as 'pitoyable' art, but cites examples of artists as diverse as actor Charlie Chaplin, poet Bernard de Bonnard and contemporary musician Bob Dylan to illustrate his point.

forms a stark contrast. Whereas S&M is a darkly negative example, a tender, willing, shared heterosexual relationship is at the apex of both physical and spiritual happiness. This is perhaps best demonstrated in *La Possibilté d'une île* through Daniel's relationship with Esther: her eagerness to offer sexual pleasure is for Houellebecq the epitome of the form a loving relationship should take. The response this ideal sexual relationship has on Daniel is striking:

> Pour la première fois de ma vie je me sentais, sans restrictions, heureux d'être un homme, je veux dire un être humain de sexe masculin, parce que pour la première fois j'avais trouvé une femme qui s'ouvrait complètement à moi, qui me donnait totalement, sans restrictions, ce qu'une femme peut donner à un homme.

> [*For the first time in my life I felt unrestrictedly happy to be a man, by this I mean a human being of the masculine sex, because for the first time I had found a woman who opened herself completely to me, who gave me totally, without limits, what a woman can give to a man*][43]

This relationship enables Daniel to find a profound happiness, based on a shared sexual experience, 'sans restrictions', contrasting with the limits that transgressive sexual relationships as described by Ovidie above ultimately impose.[44]

Crucially, this relationship with Esther also provides Daniel with the opportunity to, in a sense, transgress his own identity of cynical comedian. There is a transcendent quality to their loving relationship that provokes a turnaround in his personality:

> Pour la première fois aussi je me sentais animé à l'égard d'autrui d'intentions charitables et amicales, j'aurais aimé que tout le monde soit heureux, comme je l'étais moi-même, [...] je revivais en somme, même si je savais que c'était pour la dernière fois.

> [*For the first time also, I felt moved in regard to others by charitable and friendly intentions: I would have liked everyone to be happy, like I was myself* [...] *I was living again, even if I knew that this would be for the last time*][45]

Such a reversal is evocative of another form of transgression, one liberated from the negative associations considered above: the transgressive potential for love evoked by Roland Barthes, in his *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* where he outlines its 'obscene' potential:

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[43] Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 221. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 158.
[44] A relationship based on love and compassion does not, however, need to be sexual. The strongest example of this is the relationship evoked between Michel and his paternal grandmother in *Les Particules élémentaires* which is based on 'classic' Catholic family values of devotion and duty.
[45] Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 221.. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 158.

Discréditée par l'opinion moderne, la sentimentalité de l'amour doit être assumée par le sujet amoureux comme une transgression forte, qui le laisse seul et exposé: par un renversement de valeurs, c'est donc sentimentalité qui fait aujourd'hui l'obscène de l'amour.

[*Discredited by modern opinion, the sentimentality of love must be felt by the amorous subject as a strong transgression, which leaves him alone and exposed: by a reversal of values, it's therefore this sentimentality which makes love obscene today.*][46]

Love, for Barthes, has the potential to be transgressive for the individual subject in how it results in an emotional vulnerability, which leaves the subject feeling exposed, but also unrestrained and unselfconscious, which Barthes expresses as 'la bêtise' [*stupidity*].[47] Love becomes obscene due to how the constructed subject himself is profoundly transgressed and consequently feels the emotions associated with being 'in love'. This is mirrored in the above extract detailing how Daniel feels reborn in his relationship with Esther, which results in a reversal in his character; he becomes friendly and kind-hearted rather than crude and exploitative. In a similar way, Michel of *Plateforme* also experiences love as a transgression of his personality: his relationship with Valérie leads him to a similar 'renversement de valeurs'; he changes the complete direction of his life from career civil servant to guru of sexual tourism.

While apparently held up as the apogee of positive physical and metaphysical experience, romantic love and sex are, however, not necessarily as uncomplicated as the previous examples might seem to suggest. As I have argued above, all of Houellebecq's protagonists are caught inescapably in the grip of the contemporary neoliberal system, which appears to extend as far as the domain of affective experience. In the previous example, Daniel is unceremoniously ditched by Esther as she opts to forge a career in the acutely unforgiving capitalist structure of the American movie industry. Houellebecq also notes in an early essay how contemporary courting can effectively be reduced to numerical exchange of vital statistics in the *société de marché*: a partner's desirability is calculated 'par la biais d'un calcul numérique simple faisant intervenir l'attractivité, la nouveauté et le rapport qualité-prix' [*by means of a simple numerical calculation which takes attractiveness, newness and the quality-price relationship into consideration*].[48] The sex act is thus similarly corrupted by the onward march of neoliberalism. Describing his

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[46] Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. 5 (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 217. My translation.

[47] Ibid., p. 218. My translation.

[48] Houellebecq, 'Approches du désarroi' in *Interventions 2* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), p. 27. Houellebecq later clarifies that such calculations can be based on: 'des critères simples et objectivement vérifiables (âge - taille - poids - mensurations hanches-taille-poitrine pour les femmes; âge - taille - poids - mensurations du sexe en érection pour les hommes)' [*criteria that are simple and objectively verifiable (age - size - weight - thigh-waist-chest measurements for women; age-size-weight - erection size measurements for men)*]. Ibid., p. 30. My translations.

experiences in *clubs échangistes*, Bruno notes that

> La plupart des femmes dans ce milieu branlaient avec brutalité, sans la moindre nuance. Elles serraient beaucoup trop fort, secouaient la bite avec une frénésie stupide, probablement dans le but d'imiter les actrices de films porno. C'était peut-être spectaculaire à l'écran, mais le résultat tactile était franchement quelconque, voire douloureux.
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> [*Most of the women in the group jerked men off crudely; they had no technique. They gripped the cock too tightly and shook it frantically, probably trying to imitate something they had seen in a porn film. It might have been spectacular on screen, but on the receiving end, it was mediocre, sometimes painful*][49]

Here, the spectacular – and profit oriented – porn industry has provided a model that appears to have compromised the intimacy of the amorous experience. Bruno, however, still indulges. Perhaps inevitably, then, in the face of the onward march of the markets, love and sex are contaminated in Houellebecq's writing, resulting in what Best and Crowley identify as an 'ambivalent combination of critique and collusion' throughout his work.[50] Houellebecq's writing, then, is at least partially complicit in the world it claims to criticise. The overall textual attitude is perhaps most appropriately demonstrated by the distinctly Houellebecquian protagonist of a short story, 'Cléopâtre 2000', which recounts a visit to a Cap-d'Agde swingers' club. The narrator hesitates, in front of a 'glory hole':

> Je regrette mon attitude, je me relève; j'ai décidé de jouer le jeu jusqu'au bout. Pendant deux heures, je resterai collé à la paroi, dans un état d'attente heureuse. De temps à autre, des mains et des bouches viendront s'occuper de mon sexe.
>
> [*I regret my attitude; I decided to play the game to the end. For two hours, I'll stay stuck against the wall in a state of happy expectation. From time to time, hands and mouths will come and busy themselves with my penis*][51]

This hesitancy, which gives way to participation, is characteristic of the partial complicity noted above: despite their critique, this never extends as far as practical abstention from such moments. Equally, the texts' explicit, repeated and arguably pornographic presentation of such scenes which, as Franc Schuerewegen has suggested, are largely designed to 'exciter les appétits sexuels du lecteur' [*whet the sexual appetites of the male reader*], can be seen as tipping the overall balance towards complicity, rather that uncomplicated critique.[52]

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[49] Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 180-81. Houellebecq, *Atomised*, pp. 171-72.
[50] Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 15.
[51] Houellebecq, 'Cléopâtre 2000' in *Lanzarote et autres textes* (Paris: Libro, 2002), pp. 79-83 (82). My translation.
[52] Franc Schuerewegen, 'Scènes de cul', in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 92. My translation.

Any emancipatory or transcendental potential for romantic love and sex is also undermined by its highly normative status in Houellebecq's work. The sex presented is almost exclusively heterosexual, or apparently designed to whet the appetite of Schuerwegen's clichéd heterosexual male (i.e. the narrator's *ménage à trois* with two lesbians in *Lanzarote*). Furthermore, gay and lesbian characters are repeatedly dismissed or ridiculed throughout. The lonely homosexual Desplechin resorts to peering at young men sunbathing through a telescope, while the gay restaurateurs described in *La Carte et le territoire* are reduced to stereotypes: 'Georges, maigre, chauve et vaguement inquiétant qui avait un peu un look d'ancien pédé cuir. Anthony, en cuisine, était *bear* sans excès' [*Georges, a thin, bald, and vaguely worrying man who looked a bit like a former leather queen. Anthony, in the kitchen, was an understated bear*].[53] On the one hand, Houellebecq's work seems to champion a 'transgressive' romantic and sexual experience, yet on the other this is concurrently deeply conservative: are those who display a more unconventional or 'deviant' approach to sexuality fully able to enjoy such liberation in the worldview sketched by his novels?

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While Houellebecq's writings have been critically considered in terms of how they transgress, what they say about transgression is frequently in danger of being overlooked. The author has in interviews distanced himself from transgression as a synonym for cruelty and exploitation. As we have seen, however, Houellebecq enters into a critical dialogue with this form of transgression in his novels as well as starting to articulate his own, more optimistic form. It is also possible to suggest that this optimism can be observed within the way the author views his own artistic output. Traces in his writing seem to suggest that Houellebecq has a conception of an art which does not rely on exploitation or cruelty to have a 'positively' transgressive effect. This is vividly evoked in *La Possibilité d'une île*, where Daniel visits the studio of artist Vincent who has created a piece of immersive conceptual art which recreates the subjective experience of love on the part of the viewer.[54] Here, the potential for art itself to inspire emotion other than shock or revulsion is posited; Houellebecq encourages us to view art, and by implication his own writing, in terms of its ability to evoke a similarly pathetic effect. In this way, a different Houellebecq from the cynical nihilist of the contemporary media emerges and we can fully

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53 Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, pp. 66-67. Houellebecq, The Map and the Territory, p. 38. [Italics in original texts].
54 Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, pp. 400-03.

appreciate the author's inherent conservatism, even his sentimentality. Maybe Houellebecq's true transgression lies in the extent to which his novels, even in the face of the insidious creep of neoliberalism, consistently champion the outmoded, what Barthes terms 'l'obscénité sentimentale': old-fashioned romantic love.[55]

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[55] Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, p. 220.