Skepsi

AMBIGUITIES

Destabilising Preconceptions

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Skepsi is an online research journal based in SECL, the School of European Culture and Languages at the University of Kent, and is entirely run by research students.

The aim of *Skepsi'*s editorial board is twofold: to honour the spirit of SECL by striving to take advantage of its unique position as a crossroads in academic studies in Europe and to become a forum for European postgraduate researchers and postdoctoral scholars by developing collective thinking processes in the context of academic research.

Our title, S*kepsi* — which comes from the Ancient Greek 'σκεφις [*skepsis*]' or 'enquiry' and the Modern Greek 'σχέφις [*sképsis*]' or 'thought' — symbolises our will to explore new areas and new methods in the traditional fields of academic research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Our contribution to the tremendous range of existing academic publications will be to enhance and to promote two aspects of academic research which are crucial: originality and creativity in the approach of thought and of texts.

Skepsi

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Foreword

Every day we encounter ambiguous situations; unclear signals; indecipherable messages. While some of them pass unnoticed and others produce mere misunderstandings, many deeply disturb us. The act of interpreting polysemous signs results in a proliferation and a diffusion of meaning. What is the effect of such a process on human beings? How is the process of subjectification affected by this constitutional interpretative ambiguity?

Arguably, language is the privileged space in which ambiguities playfully and successfully disturb our desire to decipher something we assume to be consistent in meaning. But the uncanniness and the anguish to which ambiguities give rise may also destabilise our preconceived conceptions. This destabilisation could result in our questioning our own perception. To what extent do we need to disambiguate reality in order to protect our sanity? Does an ambiguous message lure the receiver into a maze in which the *promeneur* gets lost? Is reality *tout court* an ambiguous message?

Ambiguous artworks and their attributes were only some of the themes we explored during *Skepsi*'s second annual graduate conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions*, as is shown by the selection of papers which *Skepsi* is proud to present in its third issue together with some external contributions. Ranging from post-war politics to the medieval bestiary, from modern Pop-art collage to the poetry of E.E. Cummings, from the 'institutionalising' of graffiti to Hofmannsthal' *Sprachskepsis*, from the significance of the face in realist and modernist literature to the language of metaphorical opposites and to the significance of irony to methods of interpretation, the articles reflect both the interdisciplinary nature of the conference and the wide variety of papers presented at it.

The *Skepsi* Editorial Board,
November 2009

Where a Silence is Said: The Ambiguities of Apophaticism

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Abstract

It is understood by mystical traditions the world over that none of the predicates offered by cataphatic discourse legitimately describes God as God. As we cannot, according to this thinking, sufficiently posit that God is this or that, we are instead forced through negation to say that God is not this, not that. These denials, however, are still propositions about God, albeit negative ones. To overcome the problem of positive propositions or negative propositions, a method is sought that seeks to negate the propositional altogether and so moves beyond assertion or denial.

In this respect, an apophatic language is employed that is deliberately and necessarily ambiguous or equivocal. This language, which consists of metaphorical opposites rather than literal contradictions, serves through self-subversive imagery to undermine its own meanings, to the point of collapsing in on itself. Accordingly, language of this kind neither seeks to say what God is, nor to say what God is not, but rather unsays what God might or might not be by indicating through saying what cannot be said.

Additionally, this ambiguous unsaying refrains from not saying at all. This unsaying therefore has its emphasis on saying, which tells us that, on the one hand, saying as predication is not adequate to the demands, whilst, on the other hand, the absence of saying altogether is likewise inadequate. Thus, the not-sayable needs the saying of language even if the result is to unsay, just as the saying of language needs in this instance the not-sayable in order to unsay.

This not only serves to disclose in *Being* itself an unavoidable ambiguity resulting from language, but also shows that language on another level is indispensable and a requisite for conveying what it cannot convey. Accordingly, where language is understood to fail, it is nevertheless language itself that informs us of that very failing, which in turn serves to question the supposed failure.[1]

Keywords:

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[1] This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

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T his article is for the most part based on a chapter entitled 'Cataphatic and the Apophatic in Denys the Areopagite' from Denys Turner's book *The Darkness of God*. It is also supported by elements of Michael A. Sells' book *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. My aims are fourfold. First, I shall explain in detail how apophatic language works, drawing largely on Turner's chapter for this purpose. Secondly, I shall describe apophaticism's positively ambiguous nature. Thirdly, moving beyond the scope of Turner's chapter, I shall put forward a defence of language and challenge the generally held yet limited supposition that apophatic discourse represents the failure of language to say, arguing that this does not pay full heed to the fact that the apophatic act of unsaying must necessarily take its leave from the cataphatic act of saying. Finally, I shall draw attention to a second, equally positive ambiguity, which is to be found in both theological meaning and *Being* itself. This second ambiguity owes its disclosure to the limits that are found in both apophaticism and cataphaticism.

However, before we begin, it would be helpful if we attempt to define what the word 'apophaticism' and its opposite 'cataphaticism' mean. These two technical terms belong to the vocabulary of late Platonist Christian theology. Etymologically, the word 'apophasis' literally means 'to speak away from', and in this respect, to deny. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as: '(of knowledge of God) obtained through negation.' Denys Turner writes:

> 'Apophaticism' is the name of that theology which is done against the background of human ignorance of the nature of God. It is the doing of theology in the light of the statement of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, that 'we do not know what kind of being God is.' It is the conception of theology not as a naïve *pre*-critical ignorance of God, but as a kind of acquired ignorance, a *docta ignorantia* as Nicholas of Cues called it in the fifteenth century. It is the conception of theology as a strategy and practice of unknowing, as the fourteenth century English mystic called it, who, we might say, invented the transitive verb-form 'to unknow' in order to describe theological knowledge, in this its deconstructive mode. Finally, 'apophaticism' is the same as what the Latin tradition of Christianity called the *via negativa*, 'the negative way.'[2]

Cataphaticism on the other hand, is what Turner refers to as the complementary partner of apophaticism. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as: '(of knowledge of God) obtained through affirmation.' Cataphaticism is what the Latin tradition of Christianity called

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[2] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 19.

the *via affirmativa*, 'the affirmative way'.[3] Turner describes cataphaticism as the 'verbose element in theology,' and continues:[4]

> …it is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God, and in that straining to speak, theology uses as many voices as it can. It is the cataphatic in theology which causes its metaphor-ridden character, causes it to borrow vocabularies by analogy from many another discourse […] It is its cataphatic tendency which accounts for the sheer *heaviness* of theological language, its character of being linguistically *overburdened*; it is the cataphatic which accounts for that fine *nimietas* of image which we may observe in the best theologies […]. For in its cataphatic mode, theology is, we might say, a kind of verbal riot, an anarchy of discourse in which anything goes.[5]

1.   How apophaticism works

Within the profusion of cataphatic discourse descriptive of God, Turner tells us that, in his work *Mystical Theology*, the fifth-century author Denys the Areopagite detects a hierarchy consisting of those descriptions that are similar similarities to God and those that are dissimilar similarities to God.[6] The similar similarities refer to 'conceptual' descriptions of God, which we might deem to mean anything that is of an intelligible nature rather than a sensible one.[7] The dissimilar similarities refer to 'perceptual' descriptions, that is, anything 'of which the senses may be aware.'[8] We can recognise this distinction as a Platonic one, in that the conceptual realm relates to Plato's theory of the Forms known only by the mind, which are understood to be 'more' real, while the perceptual realm pertains to those things known only by the senses, which are

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[3]   We should note that these ways are not exclusive to Christianity. For example, negation is found in the form of the Sanskrit phrase, *neti neti*, meaning 'not this, not this.' Employed in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and later used by the Indian philosopher, Shankara, this phrase is understood to be the only appropriate definition of Brahman, without using inadequate affirmations. Again regarding negation, the opening statement in the Taoist *Tao Te Ching* includes the line: 'The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.' (Lao Tze, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. by James Legge, Dover, 1891, p. 1). Another example of negation might be the Mahayana Buddhist *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which states: 'All constructs are empty', and then continues to say: 'The construct that all constructs are empty is empty', and yet again: 'The construct that the construct that all constructs are empty is empty is empty.' (*The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, trans, R. F. Thurman, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976, quoted in Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 4).

[4]   Turner, p. 20.

[5]   Ibid., p. 20.

[6]   Denys is also referred to as Dionysius the Areopagite. Denys took the pseudonym of Paul's Athenian convert. He is, as such, given the modern appellations 'the Pseudo-Dionysius' and 'the Pseudo-Denys'. Turner writes: 'He wrote as if he were the Denys mentioned in Acts 17, 34 as having been one of Paul's successes in the Areopagus at Athens. This, of course, is untrue, but his credentials were not seriously or widely doubted until the sixteenth century. In the meantime he was credited with sub-apostolic authority in the High and Late Middle Ages.' (Turner, p. 12, fn. 1).

[7]   Referring to chapter 5 of Denys the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology*, Turner writes: 'we deny that the Cause of all is mind, has imagination, conviction, speech, understanding; it has no number, order, magnitude, equality, likeness or unlikeness; it is neither eternity nor time, life, wisdom, oneness, goodness, not even divinity. It neither exists nor does not exist.' (Ibid., p. 27).

[8]   Denys the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology*, 1040D. Turner, referring to chapter 4 of *Mystical Theology*, writes that '[…] it is denied that the Cause of all is material, has shape, form, quality, quantity, weight, is found in place, is seen, touched, perceived, suffers, feels, is deprived of light, changes, decays, is divided, is diminished, ebbs, flows […].' (Ibid., p. 27).

understood to be 'less' real.[9] Turner writes: 'For us, existence cannot come in degrees, for the rules governing the logic of existence are those of zero-sum: a thing either exists or it does not.'[10] This is to say that today we tend to regard something as either real or not real, rather than more real or less real. However, it was once understood that one thing could be more real than another within a hierarchical chain of being, that began in the sensible realm and ascended to the intelligible. This means that something more or less exists, in respect of realising more or less of what it is to be. A thing, as Turner states, realises more or less of what *is*. For example: a horse was once considered more real than a cabbage, a man more real than a horse, and an angel more real than a man. This is because, in terms of its life, each thing exists more or less depending on where it stands in ascending the scale that measures the degree of reality as such. Thus, the more a thing befits what it truly is to be, that is, attains to the Ideal, the closer it is to the Divine as that which most truly is.[11] Hence, in respect of what *is*, a horse is seen to realise more of what it is to be than a cabbage, a man more than a horse and an angel more than a man. And in relation to that which most truly is, namely God, man is seen to bear a more similar similarity to God than a horse, while a cabbage bears a more dissimilar similarity to God than a horse.

Despite this hierarchical chain of being where one thing is deemed to be closer to God than another in terms of its reality, for Denys, God (as such) is beyond *any* conceptual or perceptual assertion. So while one thing might be more similar to God than another, neither of these affirmations attain to what God in truth is. Turner writes: 'Creatures may be more or less "like" God. But there cannot be any respect at all in which God is "like" any creature.'[12] However, in that all positive affirmation is understood to fail in saying what God is as such (precisely because it limits the unlimited), the way of negation is seen to be more apt, in that the negative seeks to *more accurately deny* rather than affirm. It does this by contrasting with the assertion made concerning God, which has the effect of refusing and thereby nullifying the original claim. An example is to positively (but inadequately) affirm that 'God is light.' A negation that might

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[9] Turner writes: 'The more rooted our language about God is in the objects of our perceptual, bodily powers, the more 'dissimilar' is the similarity that language describes. The less our language is thus dependent, the more 'similar' are the similarities it describes.' (Ibid.).

[10] Ibid.

[11] This hierarchy ascending from the less real to the more real is also seen to work within each group. For example, Turner writes: 'if, by contrast with another, Red Rum is a better horse, then this is because, Plato thought, Red Rum participates more fully in that complete reality which is equanimity *as such*. That is to say, Red rum *realises* more of what-it-is-to-be-a-horse than that other horse does.' (Ibid, p. 28).

[12] Ibid, p. 32.

follow this is to say that on the contrary, 'God is darkness.' To say that 'God is darkness,' attempts to render invalid the insufficient claim that 'God is light.'

There is, however, a problem here. Although a denial is given that is designed to counter the positive assertion, that denial is itself an assertion, albeit a negative one. Despite any attempt to negate, and *because* of any attempt to negate, the denial in fact 'posits' a claim about God. This has the curious effect of making it a positive negation, so to speak. In trying to negate the original affirmation, it too becomes an affirmation by likewise attaching a predicate to God. Turner writes: 'a negative image is as much an image as the affirmative image it negates, the negativity of the image doing nothing to qualify its character as an image.'[13] The point here is that the negative image, though appearing to be apophatic, is in fact still cataphatic.

If the negative image is understood to be cataphatic along with the positive image, what then is regarded as genuinely apophatic? One way this is thought, wrongly, to be achieved is through out and out 'contradiction.' That is, rather than negate the assertion 'God is light' by saying 'God is darkness', and so positing another claim about God, one simply says 'God is *not* light.'[14] This follows Aristotle's *principium contradicitonis* or 'principle of contradiction' which states that 'the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect […]' or more concisely: '[…] it is impossible for any one to believe the same thing to be and not to be [...].'[15]

We can see perhaps the slight difference between the two counterclaims 'God is darkness' and 'God is *not* light' more clearly through the use of logical operatives or constants. Where, on the one hand, 'God is light' and 'God is darkness' can be understood as p and q, 'God is light' and 'God is *not* light' can be understood as p and *not* p. Still, in either respect, they are each subject to the principle of contradiction, so that *one or neither but not both must be true*. However, while it may appear that saying 'God is *not* light', and so saying logically '*not* p' instead of 'q', is an out and out negation, it nevertheless has the same effect as the assertion 'God is darkness', in that both posit a negative claim about God.[16] There is, as Turner states:

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[13] Ibid., p. 35.

[14] 'God is light' and 'God is *not* light' cannot be affirmed together as they are seen as contradictions pure and simple. The point of saying 'God is *not* light,' is to prevent one from also saying 'God *is* light.'

[15] The *principium contradictionis* is also known as 'the principle of non-contradiction' Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by W.D. Ross, (The Internet Classics Archive, *«http://classics.mit.edu//Aristotle/metaphysics.html»* Active March, 2009), Book IV, Part 3, 1005, b19-20, 1006 a1.

[16] Turner writes: 'It is of the greatest consequence to see that negative language about God is no more apophatic in itself than is affirmative language.' Quoting Denys the Areopagite, Turner adds: '[The Cause of all] is beyond assertion *and denial*,' and again: 'We make assertions *and denials* of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion…[and] *also beyond every denial*;' and yet again: '[The One is] beyond…the assertion of all things and the denial of all things, [is] that which is beyond assertion *and denial*.' (See Turner, pp. 34–35).

'[…] a very great difference between the strategy of *negative propositions* and the strategy of *negating the propositional*; between that of the *negative image* and that of the *negation of imagery*.'[17] Whilst one posits a negative image, the other claims to negate all imagery entirely. In this way it seeks to *un*say altogether.

But how can we *un*say without being subject to the principle of contradiction? For, in terms of ascending the scale to what God truly is as God, we attempt to deny the inadequate assertion that 'God is light' by saying instead that 'God is darkness' or indeed 'God is *not* light.' And yet, if these statements too are mere predicates and inadequate assertions, we are left with no choice according to the principle of contradiction but to try and deny these claims also. The only way we can deny the claims 'God is darkness' or 'God is *not* light' is to posit again the opposite proposition, 'God is light.' The result is an endless to and fro from one assertion to the other, which not only prevents ascent to what God in truth is as God, but *thwarts the negation of the propositional*. As we can see, rather than attaining the negation of the propositional, we simply end up swapping positive and negative propositions *ad infinitum*. So what is the solution to this problem?

This vicious circle only occurs if the assertions are understood to be literal propositions.[18] For if I believe that the assertion 'God is light' is literally true, then the literal assertion to the contrary, 'God is darkness' or 'God is *not* light', will in effect say that 'God is light' is literally false, because according to the principle of contradiction they cannot both be literally true. This, however, does not so simply apply if the images are instead understood to be metaphors, the reason being that they are not literally true, but metaphorically true. Turner writes: '[…] it is in the nature of metaphors that they succeed in conveying the truths which they convey only on condition that they are recognized to be literal falsehoods, for it is part of their metaphorical meaning that they are literally false.'[19] This tells us that literal truths cannot be said together because only one can be true, whereas metaphorical truths can be said together because, although they do negate one another, neither is literally true and so cannot, therefore invalidate the other. This then marks the difference between 'metaphorical opposition' and 'literal

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[17]   Turner also adds: 'The first of each of these pairs belongs to the cataphatic in theology, and only the second is the strategy of the apophatic.' (Ibid., p. 35).

[18]   Turner tells us that Denys the Areopagite treats both the perceptual affirmations and denials made about God as metaphors. Turner argues: 'if treated as literal, the attributions of the perceptual' names are all false, and no special strategy of denying them is required. We all know that God is not literally 'lifeless' or 'material' and that literally God does not have 'weight,' 'quantity' or 'shape.' Since they are all literally false, the negation of these names, taken as literal, would simply yield the contraries of these names as literally true. And that is not at all what is involved in the apophatic strategy of denial.' (Ibid., p. 36).

[19]   Ibid., p. 37.

contradiction'.[20] Metaphorically speaking, what one image affirms the other can in the same instance deny, whereas literally speaking, what one image affirms the other cannot in the same instance deny.[21] Where opposites are mutually inclusive and so coincide, the *coincidentia oppositorium*, contraries are mutually exclusive and so, we might say, 'coexcide.' That is, while opposites fall in with one another, contradictions fall out with one another. Opposition concerns 'both-and', while contradiction concerns 'either-or.' Opposed metaphors can be simultaneously affirmed, whilst literal contradictions cannot. But for what reason do the opposed metaphors need to be simultaneously affirmed?

The answer is that the juxtaposition of, for example, the affirmative image 'God is light' with the negative image 'God is darkness' results in the negation of each image by the other because both are being affirmed. And the same is true with the juxtaposition of the images 'God is light' and 'God is *not* light.' These can be said together because they are not literally true, which leaves aside contradiction. This being the case, it begs a second question: how exactly are the opposed metaphors simultaneously affirmed? The answer is through 'paradox', or, more specifically, through an 'oxymoron.' Thus, we might juxtapose the affirmative image 'God is light' and the negative image 'God is darkness' by saying, for example, 'God is a dazzling darkness.' Likewise, we might juxtapose the affirmative image 'God is light' and the negative image 'God is *not* light' by saying, for example, 'God is a lightless light.'

The crux of the matter is that in being said together in the form of a coincidence of opposites, they inevitably serve in cancelling out the propositional itself. That which dazzles cannot be dark, whilst that which is dark cannot dazzle. And that which is lightless cannot be light, whilst that which is light cannot be lightless. The assertions 'God is a dazzling darkness' and 'God is a lightless light' effect the negation of *each* image in that what one affirms the other necessarily denies. And so crucially, what is said to befall is the 'transcendence' of the imagery itself, which in turn has the effect of *negating the propositional*. In his book, *The Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, Michael A. Sells writes:

> […] in the apophatic use of metaphors, causal explanation is displaced as the metaphor turns back upon itself in the hard version of paradox. […] The meaning event with apophatic language includes a moment that is nihilistic or "anarchic" — without *arche* or first principle. The anarchic moment is intimated in the turning back of the second proposition upon the first in order to remove the delimitation.'[22]

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[20]   Their relation, we might say, is one of conflict and resistance, rather than the vanquishing of one by the other. That is, they 'struggle against' one another so as to remain antagonists.

[21]   Turner maintains that 'the logic of negation in respect of metaphors is […] different from that of literal utterances […] in that opposed metaphors, unlike literal contradictions, can be simultaneously affirmed'. (Ibid., p. 38).

[22]   Michael A. Sells, *The Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 208–09.

Sells refers to this momentary liberation as 'ontological pre-construction'.[23]

The way to the apophatic then, is through the dialectics of the cataphatic. For example, the assertion 'God is light' is the *affirmation*, the assertion 'God is darkness' the *negation*, and finally the assertion 'God is a dazzling darkness' serves in *negating the negation*. The coincidence of the opposites negates the propositional nature of language, in that the imagery is undercut by the imagery. That is to say, each image (insofar as they can be affirmed together) subverts the other. Sells writes:

> Any saying (even a negative saying) demands a corrective proposition, an unsaying. But that correcting proposition which unsays the previous proposition is in itself a "saying" that must be "unsaid" in turn. It is in the tension between the two propositions that the discourse becomes meaningful.[24]

A little later, Sells also writes: 'The coincidence of opposites is a form of dialectical logic that plays against and upon the linear logic of delimited reference.'[25] Turner refers to this as the combined and mutually cancelling forces that crack open the surface of language, so as to leave a fissure in our discourse through which the apophatic is glimpsed.[26]

2. The ambiguity of apophaticism

We have seen that, unambiguously, according to the principle of contradiction, one or neither proposition *but not both* must be true. However, with the coincidence of opposite metaphors that negate the propositional altogether, it is the case that 'neither proposition *because of both* must be true.' The coincidence of opposites that grants the apophatic, is in its very nature ambiguous. Something is ambiguous precisely because it wanders in two directions or drives two ways. It is owing to this double nature that the ambiguous is in turn understood to be doubtful or dubious. This is to say, that the words 'doubtful' and 'dubious' each refer in meaning to being twofold. Typically, whenever something is referred to as ambiguous and for that doubtful and dubious, it is meant disparagingly on account of its failure to distinguish between alternatives. It therefore fails to successfully provide any clear and certain meaning. It is for this reason likewise 'equivocal', which is to say of doubtful sense, in that it gives equal significance to alternatives and is therefore capable of a twofold interpretation. It is seen therefore to deceive. Accordingly, the ambiguous or equivocal is deemed unreliable. However, the ambiguous or equivocal is precisely what apophatic discourse relies upon. Here, it is the distinguishing between alternatives and providing a clear and certain meaning that proves to be

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[23] Ibid., p. 10.
[24] Ibid., p. 3.
[25] Ibid., p. 21.
[26] See Turner, p. 33.

the failing. In this respect the unambiguous is unreliable, which is to say the ambiguous *is* reliable. The ambiguous is reliable in that its double meaning grants the necessarily unclear and uncertain outcome on which the apophatic depends.[27]

The ambiguity of apophaticism relies upon paradox, which literally means, 'contrary to received opinion.' And yet, as tends to be the case with paradox, the seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement that is logically unacceptable nevertheless points to an order of truth that supersedes logic. It is for this reason that the paradoxical is often understood to be 'strange, but true.' Accordingly, whilst the paradoxical ambiguity of apophaticism is in form oxymoronic, it is *not* 'pointedly foolish', as the word 'oxymoron' in fact means.[28]

However, the ambiguity posed by apophatic discourse is transcended *by way of* the ambiguity. The ambiguity indeed occurs, but because it occurs it exceeds or surpasses itself. Both meanings occur at once in order for each to undermine the other. That is, where both images can be said together, the one is cancelled out by the other, so that the ambiguity cancels out the ambiguity. The doubtful and dubious do not in this respect imply problems proposing a solution, for they in fact grant the solution through their mutual subversion.

All in all, the negation of the propositional *through* the propositional is seen as necessary in that, as Turner points out, to know what God is like, we would have to know what he is not like, and to know what he is not like, we would have to know what he is like. The point is, as Turner indicates, that we do not know what God is similar to, or what God is different from, precisely because God as God is beyond all similarity and difference. We do not know to what extent we can say what God is, nor for that matter to what extent we can say what God is not. In that God is identified as not being like or unlike anything, our affirmations and negations fall by the wayside, which is why each must be affirmed so as to refute the other. It is here, says Turner that, '[…] on the other side of both our affirmations and our denials that the silence of the transcendent is glimpsed, seen through the fissures opened up in our language by the dialectical strategy of self-subversion.'[29] Similarly, Sells writes: 'Apophasis moves towards the

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[27] We might add, that the coincidence of opposite metaphors refers to a more genuine sense of the word 'rely', which means to 'bind together.' Incidentally, 'binding together' was understood by the ancients to be the meaning of the word 'religion.'

[28] The paradoxical and oxymoronic are understood as logically unacceptable and therefore absurd, when taken to be literal truths. But this should not be the case when they are taken as metaphorical truths, for the metaphorical points to an order of truth that supersedes logic. In this respect, truth points to uncertainty rather than certainty, to the infinite rather than the definite. However, to the logical positivist kind of thinking that by nature is exact, specific, or precise, this poetic manner of thinking is generally regarded as erroneous, fallacious, and so not valid in that it cannot be verified as true.

[29] Turner, p. 45.

transreferential. It cannot dispense with reference, but through the constant turning back upon its own referential delimitations, it seeks a momentary liberation from such delimitations.'[30]

3.   A defence of language

Given what we have argued so far, apophatic discourse is often understood to highlight a deficiency in language. Turner, for example, says of apophasis that it is: '[…] a Greek neologism for the breakdown of *speech*, which, in face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark.'[31] He also says of the term 'apophatic theology' that it: '[…] ought to mean something like: "that speech about God which is the failure of speech".'[32] This is true, but only insofar as speech by naming delimits, thereby determining the limits or boundaries of something as something.[33] Consequently, its delimiting nature cannot be relied upon to name the unlimited. Even if we refer to the unlimited as the 'unlimited', we still refer to it by name and so delimit the unlimited. That is, both the referent and the name imply a delimited entity. Whatever we say, by so saying, we refer to a grammatical object.[34] But, as Sells argues, 'the prime motivation of apophatic language is to subvert or displace the grammatical object.'[35] In this respect, the dialectical strategy of self-subversion seems to direct our attention to the breakdown or failure of speech. And it is for this reason that Turner asserts the following:

> the negation of the negation is not a *third* utterance, additional to the affirmative and the negative, in good linguistic order; it is not some intelligible *synthesis* of affirmation and negation; it is rather the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder, which we can only express, *a fortiori*, in bits of collapsed, disordered language.[36]

This, I venture to argue, is not entirely the case. For the paradoxical coincidence of opposite metaphors that serves to negate the negation is surely a *third* utterance, which is why Turner refers to it as a dialectical strategy. It may indeed represent the collapse of affirmations and denials into disordered language, and yet it is language, and aptly, I say, after all is said and done, that not only suffers this collapse but permits it as suffering. The collapse that language suffers is indicative of language, in that suffering in terms of 'bearing' and 'carrying' is language's function as a meaning event. The only difference here is that language suffers in such a way as to attempt to unsay. Language 'says' *nothing*, which is not to say that language

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[30]   Sells, pp. 8–9.
[31]   Turner, p. 20.
[32]   Ibid., p. 20.
[33]   Sells asserts: 'The very act of naming delimits. A name's referent is, by the act of naming, marked off in some manner from those things which it is not. It is… a some-thing, a delimited entity.' (Sells, pp. 15–16).
[34]   Sells, for example, refers to the apophatic event as 'the evocation of a sense of mystery.' (Sells, p. 16). However, he then deliberately qualifies this by saying the following: 'To evaluate mystical union as an experience of mystery is a kataphatic judgment. The experience has a grammatical object (mystery).' (Sells, p. 217).
[35]   Ibid., p. 214.
[36]   Turner, p. 22.

fails to speak. Language permits this unsaying in that the unsaying must 'pass through' saying. It is language's unsaying that momentarily 'gives leave' of language's saying. This dialectical utterance does not simply produce a *tertium aliquid*, or 'third something', but rather what we might call a *tertium inaliquid*, or 'third un-something.'

Furthermore, Turner says of the reality of the divine, that it is 'a language-defeating silence', adding later, as we have already quoted, that on the other side of our affirmations and denials 'the silence of the transcendent is glimpsed.'[37] Again, I would argue that the silence Turner speaks of is only glimpsed because of language. And that this is so, we can assert that what is glimpsed is not simply a silence, for the silence is said. Accordingly, the silence is not a pure, or so to speak, silent silence, but an acquired silence. The silence is not simply silent, but is in addition to the speaking.[38] Given this situation, commentators such as Turner are forced to admit that '[t]he apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language' and that 'the proper route to the apophatic is […] through the dialectics of the cataphatic.'[39] Likewise, we have already quoted Sells, who in asserting that apophasis moves towards the transreferential, also adds that: 'It cannot dispense with reference […]'[40]

4. The ambiguity of theology

To conclude, both the cataphatic and the apophatic fail in their respective intentions. For in its particular approach to God, the cataphatic necessarily excludes what it cannot include. Whilst in its particular approach to God, the apophatic necessarily includes what it cannot exclude. The cataphatic cannot say it, whilst the apophatic cannot *not* say it. The cataphatic feigns to affirm God, whilst the apophatic feigns to deny God. The combined failure of both cataphaticism and apophaticism discloses, I believe, a fundamental ambiguity in theological meaning and, indeed, in *Being* itself in the form of an *aporia*, which is to say, an impassable or irresolvable situation: this ambiguity being that a substantial ontology and a non-substantial dis-ontology mutually presuppose and are each indebted to the other.

This indebtedness tells us that a more genuine approach to God is ambiguous, which simply points to its having a double meaning. This ambiguity might be considered doubtful and

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[37] Ibid., pp. 22, 45.
[38] Meister Eckhart wrestles with this problem when he writes: 'I say God is unspoken. But St Augustine says that God is not unspoken, for if He were unspoken that would be speech, and he is more silence than speech.' (Meister, Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, *Volume 1*, trans. and ed. by, Maurice, O'Connell, Walshe, Element, 1987, Sermon Thirty Eight, p. 274).
[39] Turner, pp. 34, 39.
[40] Sells, p. 8.

dubious, owing to the failure to distinguish between the two alternatives that the approach to God offers. But as we have seen, the ambiguous nature of God is such that it must be doubtful and dubious, because any decision to choose, or indeed, choice to decide, that is characteristic of a thinking that hankers after proof and certainty, will have already gone awry in its intended approach to God. Indeed, I would argue that theology must *strive to be* doubtful and dubious in order to be 'reliable', that is to say, binding. That both the cataphatic and the apophatic fail in their respective intentions, that failure on both accounts, albeit unwittingly, is their actual success. It is here, according to ambiguity, that theology *as* theology must be done. It must be unashamedly ambiguous, and for that doubtful and dubious, for whilst being guilty of the charges made against it, it is not affected by these charges because, by its nature, it overrides their limitations. Hence it is immune to those charges, owing to the fact that it is not subject to the framework of thinking according to which those charges are made. In strictly theological terms, any charges of being doubtful or dubious are in themselves doubtful or dubious.

To close, I would repeat that the mutual failings of both cataphaticism and apophaticism, according to their respective feignings, in fact disclose an innate ambiguity in mystical theology that *each* method implies. The challenge is to see how this failing in either respect, nevertheless succeeds in opening up the approach of theology as 'the study of the nature of God.' This does not simply suggest, as might appear, that a new approach beyond that of cataphaticism and apophaticism is required, but demands the recognition that the tension, struggle, and feigning in each of these two disciplines is an integral part of their method, as well as a nod to the necessity of the other. Accordingly, this should also be taken into consideration when contemplating the metaphorical truths of any religious scripture itself, or commentary on that scripture. Finally, we might say that the 'favourable failing' of each method points to yet another ambiguity, worthy of our respect and attention.

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Doubts and Ambiguities in the Transmission of Ideas in a Medieval Latin Bestiary: Canterbury Cathedral Archives Lit. Ms D.10

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Abstract

This article connects medieval bestiary studies to doubts and the ambiguity of memory, so as not only to problematize the transmission of ideas from Late Antiquity and early medieval monasticism but also to consider how they imbricate contemporary visual theory on flaws. How did certain classical and early Christian ideas on nature and the visible and invisible worlds contest medieval cultural and literary norms in the medieval Latin bestiary? How does examining these tensions challenge our own perceptions?

By focusing on one chapter in a late thirteenth-century bestiary fragment in Canterbury Cathedral Archives, on the bear or *ursus*, this article examines how doubts expressed in the margins of the manuscript point to greater concerns about our perception of the value of late exemplars. It also shows how modern visual theory on flaws permits us to engage in a fruitful dialogue with those ideas about seeing developed in Late Antiquity and the early medieval period which are contained in the bestiary.

In conclusion, this article makes the *ursus* a site of doubt and the flaws in both medieval copying and contemporary image replication a means of looking afresh at the transmission of ideas.

Keywords: Bestiary, medieval, animals, bear, *ursus*, doubt, disbelief, flaw, memory, mnemonics, *ductus*, Canterbury, Benedictine, monasticism, Neo-Platonism, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Lacan, Walter Benjamin, CCA Lit Ms D.10, Cambridge Trinity College Ms O.4.7, British Library Ms Additional 11283

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This article connects medieval bestiary studies to current thinking on doubts and the ambiguity of memory to examine how these issues problematise the transmission of ideas.[1] How did concepts and ideas from Late Antiquity imbricate and contest medieval cultural

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[1] See, for example, Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (*Cambridge University Press, 1990), especially chapter 4, and more recently, *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. M. Carruthers and J. Ziolkowski (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) pp. 1-32. For doubt in more general medieval and contemporary contexts, see James Q. Whitman, *The Origins of Reasonable Doubt: Theological Roots of the Criminal Trial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) and on unpacking

and literary norms in the bestiary.[2] How does examining these tensions challenge our own perceptions?

These questions are discussed via an examination of a Latin bestiary manuscript from *c*.1300. This is a thirty-folio fragment in Canterbury Cathedral Archives, Lit Ms D.10, and this article focuses on just one chapter, that describing the *ursus* or bear (figure 1: see page 15). The reason for choosing D.10 lies in its unusual discourse on accepted medieval and late antique thought modes.[3] To contextualise this analysis, two other ursine examples are used. One is a decorated initial in Jerome's *Commentary on the Old Testament* from *c*. 1120 (figure 2: see page 17).[4] The other comes from an illustrated chapter on the bear in an early bestiary manuscript of *c*. 1180, London, British Library Additional 11283 (figure 3: see page 22).[5] How should the doubts in D.10 (which are expressed in the marginal notations of *dubito,* meaning 'I doubt that', in the same hand as the text) be interpreted? How does this manuscript's scribal scepticism, as well as the ambiguity of those doubts, undermine the normative evidence for piety and authority contained in the bestiary?

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texts through contextualisation, Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: the Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts*, (Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2] For bestiary studies, see among others, Willene B. Clark, *A Medieval Book of Beasts: the Second-Family Bestiary* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), Ron Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users in the Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing 1998), *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature*, ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), particularly Jan Ziolkowski, 'Literary Genre and Animal Symbolism' pp. 1-24, and Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). Briefly, Clark sees the bestiary as being principally used as a schoolbook in a lay environment, Baxter as having been used primarily for sermons in a monastic environment, while Hassig uses illustrations in bestiaries to connect to medieval areas of concern, e.g. forest laws and Ziolkowski examines the symbolism in the bestiary.

[3] Mentioned by L. Sandler *Gothic Art*, no. 20, Hassig 1995, Baxter, and by Clark 2006 in most detail on p. 230, CCA Lit Ms D. 10 begins imperfectly at *cervus* or stag, ends at *baleine* or whale, not *aspidochelone* as per Clark 2006, whose page sizes are also slightly wrong and should read 230 x 155 mm page area and 184 x 124 mm text area.

[4] Cambridge, Trinity College Ms O.4.7, f.75 'I have little doubt that the book was written at Canterbury and bought for Rochester', M.R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Cambridge University Press, 1900), «http://rabbit.trin.cam.ac.uk/James/O.4.7.html». See also Michael Camille, 'Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy' in *Art History* Vol. 8, No. 1 (March, 1985), pp. 26-49.

[5] London, British Library Ms Additional 11283, *c*.1180, containing 123 chapters, is the earliest extant Second-family bestiary. See Clark 2006: the whole volume is a complete transcription, translation, description and comparison of this manuscript. See M. R. James, *The Ancient Libraries of Canterbury and Dover* (Cambridge University Press, 1903), which mentions three Christ Church bestiaries 151, 483 and 484. See also Baxter, p. 217. For works belonging to St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury; see *St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury Catalogue*, ed. Bruce C. Barker-Benfield (The British Library, 2008).

FIGURE 1: LATIN BESTIARY MANUSCRIPT, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL ARCHIVES LITERARY MANUSCRIPT D10 FOLIO 3 RECTO ©

However, for those readers not familiar with such works, this article begins with a definition of 'bestiary'. Willene Clark defines it simply as 'a medieval book of beasts', Charles Dodwell, rather more vigorously, as 'the more credulous ideas of antiquity embalmed in the winding sheets of medieval theology'.[6] Yet this latter commentator's disparagement of the natural history in the 'simple' bestiary is contested by evidence in D.10 which suggests that not all medieval people took such texts on animal lore literally.[7] More precisely, if less colourfully, the bestiary is a spiritual work which uses animals as *exempla* and employs rhetorical devices and mnemonic techniques as part of its exegesis. It is based on a *c*. fourth-century text, called the *Physiologus*, which probably originated in Alexandria. Over time, references were increasingly added, drawn from Isidore of Seville's seventh century *Etymologiae* as well as from other works, including those by Ambrose and Solinus, and later from the *Aviarium* of Hugh of Fouilloy. The text evolved through a number of sometimes concurrent recensions,

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[6]   Clark 2006. See also C.R. Dodwell, *The Canterbury School of Illumination* (Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 71.

[7]   'simple' quoted from M.R. James, *The Bestiary* (Oxford, Roxburghe Club, 1928) p. 1.

including the well-known, and most numerous, Second-family Latin bestiary.[8] Some fifty manuscripts from this family, including some deluxe versions, are extant. In its various recensions; in Latin, the vernacular or even pure illustration; and in the forms of prose, poetry, encyclopaedic extract, or courtly romance, the bestiary enjoyed great medieval popularity, particularly in England.

1.   The ursine-inhabited initial in Jerome's *Commentary on the Old Testament*

To understand exactly how D.10 problematises and renders ambiguous the interpretation and the transmission of ideas from Late Antiquity, it is, of course, necessary to discuss, albeit briefly, those ideas and how they were interpreted in early medieval monasticism. I begin with the *exemplum* of the bear and, in particular, the bear drawn in a decorated capital initial letter from Jerome's *Commentary on the Old Testament*.[9] The bear is not mentioned in the *Physiologus* or First-family bestiaries, so this illustration is key in linking the *Etymologiae* to its first appearance in the Second-family bestiary, the earliest extant version being BL Additional 11283.[10] The text of D.10 is in essence (although we shall discuss the differences later) that of BL Additional 11283 and therefore D.10 is classed also as a Second-family Latin bestiary. These three ursine discussion points — the early twelfth-century decorated capital, and the bears from the two bestiaries; more memorably, the three bears — all proceed from Isidore's *Etymologiae*:[11]

> The bear (ursus) is said to be so-called because it shapes its offspring in its 'own mouth' (ore suo), as if the word were orsus, for people say that it produces unshaped offspring, and gives birth to some kind of flesh that the mother forms into limbs by licking it. Whence this is said, 'Thus with her tongue the bear shapes her offspring when she has borne it.' (Petronius, *Anthol. Latina*, 690.3) But prematurity is what causes this kind of offspring; the bear gives birth after at most thirty days, whence it happens that its hurried gestation creates unshaped offspring. Bears have weak heads; their greatest strength is in their forepaws and loins, whence they sometimes stand up erect.

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[8]   For the fullest description of the Second-family Latin bestiary, see Clark 2006. This recension expanded the First-family bestiary of *c.* 37 chapters to around 123 chapters, rearranging their order from the original *Physiologus* to follow that of Book XII of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* and including many details from this work. These bestiary manuscripts are frequently handsomely illustrated and some, such as Aberdeen University Library MS 24 «http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/bestiary.hti» and Oxford, Bodley MS Ashmole 1511 are luxurious gilded versions with exquisite illustrations using expensive pigments. The majority of these deluxe manuscripts date from the early to mid-thirteenth century and are English.

[9]   See James 1900 for Trinity College Ms O.4.7 details. See also Camille for an analysis of the decorated initial on f.75.

[10]   c. 1180, according to Clark 2006, but C.M. Kauffmann, *Romanesque Manuscripts 1066-1190* (London, 1975) no.105, thinks c.1170. If this is a Canterbury production then c.1170 is less likely given the probable situation there following the murder of the Archbishop Thomas Becket in that year. See Michael J. Curley's translation, *Physiologus* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1979) which contains 51 chapters on animals but no bear.

[11]   *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville,* Book XII, chapter 2, paragraph 22, trans. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp. 252–53.

FIGURE 2: DECORATED INITIAL FROM JEROME'S *COMMENTARY ON THE OLD TESTAMENT,* MS O.4.7, F.75. © TRINITY COLLEGE. REPRODUCED BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE MASTER AND FELLOWS OF TRINITY COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE

The decorated initial 'A' from Jerome shows a man with a stick, holding onto a lead which connects to the muzzle of the bear. The man is saying 'ABC' and the bear replies 'A'.[12] This image is well known, having been used by Michael Camille to illustrate his article on medieval visual interpretation, in which he showed that the text used the 'etymological method of translating lists of Hebrew names as a basis for spiritual interpretation'. He took this initial as an example, calling it:

> a playful admonition to the monastic user of the text to learn through repeating these interminable lists [...], not with the bear's dumb animal mimicry but also with human understanding.[13]

However, I contend this initial is also much more, being not only a 'playful admonition' but also a pun on etymological translation itself, as well as a practical lesson in memory training by name association.[14] We learn this from the *Etymologiae* to which this initial doubtless refers, for here we are told that the bear, *ursus*, derives its name from the tradition that the mother bear licks her unformed cubs into shape: 'Ursus fertur dictus quod ore suo formet fetus quasi orsus [The bear *ursus* [also known as *orsus*] is so called because she formed her young by her own mouth, as if *orsus* were *ore suo*]'. So, in this decorated initial there is a pun on 'bear' and 'mouth', known from Isidore and later used in the bestiary, *ursus* and *orsus* being homophones. This use of puns brings ambivalence and duality of meaning to word and image, in a medieval typology where one sign stands for another, as in the prefiguring of the New Testament in the Old, so beloved in the exegetic works of St. Anselm.[15]

Using the standard medieval exegetic process of examining texts and images for their literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical meanings, this illustration develops the image of the unformed bear into the symbol of the unformed mind. The unformed nature of the bear cub then becomes a reference to a novice or student, someone yet to be licked into shape, a phrase we still use today. The decorated initial is telling us, as readers, that it is only by using our mouths, by *ruminatio*, by reading aloud, that we may learn and understand the meaning of these long lists of strange words. And it shows us how to do this, by linking the unknown word to a word we already know and connecting them with a strong visual image. Here, as we have seen,

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[12] John Lowden at the Leuven-Lille-London Colloquium held in Canterbury in 2008 mentioned that he felt this was more of an 'Aaargh' or growl. See also Laura Cleaver, 'Taming the Beast: Teaching Bears and Boys in the Art of the Twelfth Century' *Ikon*, Volume 1, Issue 2 (Spring 2009), pp. 243–52

[13] Camille, pp. 29-30.

[14] See Carruthers, p. 127 which has an example from a vernacular bestiary.

[15] T.A. Heslop, *St Anselm and the Visual Arts at Canterbury Cathedral, 1093-1109*, Lecture in Honour of St Anselm's 900th Anniversary held at the British Archaeological Association Annual Conference, 2009, forthcoming in Conference proceedings, but see also T. A. Heslop, 'Contemplating Chimera in Medieval Imagination: St. Anselm's Crypt at Canterbury', *Raising the Eyebrow: John Onians and World Art Studies: An Album Amicorum in his honour*, ed. Lauren Golden (Oxford: BAR International, 2001).

mouth, via Isidore's etymology of *ursus* as being derived through its variant form *orsus* from *ore suo* (by her mouth), connects to bear. Further, the novice student has his foot upon a bear cub in order to climb up the letter and eat part of its foliate structure. In so doing, he actively becomes a learned man and, therefore, more than a beast, since he is learning the Word of God and so accessing the divine, a parallel to transubstantiation in the Mass, where base bread becomes the body of Christ. The initial shows the importance of obedience to the teaching of the Word of God, so it is a reminder of the monastic vows of obedience while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of *signum* to *res*.[16] It demonstrates succinctly the *memoria spiritualis*, developed in monastic circles, drawing on the writings of St. Augustine, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and from Quintillian's ideas on *dispositio* and *memoria* and is perhaps best described as cognitive categorization, linking memory to sensory perception via a spiritual sense of direction and placement (or loci).[17]

This method of 'learning through seeing' is described by Paul Crossley as a Gregorian principle, similar to applying rhetoric to architecture, for example, through the flow of processing through a cathedral matched to the process or *ductus* of rhetorical arguments.[18] He has recently shown how similar lessons of *ductus* and rhetoric can be found in Chartres Cathedral;[19] similar ideas of procession and rhetoric may also inform the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral. There, some of the shaft capitals feature images from the *Physiologus,* later familiar from the bestiary (for example, the stag, the eagle and the snake). This use of figures and mnemonic techniques is evident in not only the *Physiologus* but also in the Second-family bestiary, which had its chapters substantially increased and reordered to follow Isidore's method of biblical exposition.[20] This problematises contemporary bestiary research as it demonstrates that the main reasons the bestiary in all its forms was so popular a text were not just because of its simple stories and appealing illustrations, but because it taught basic mnemonics and utilised rhetorical devices inherited by the monastic tradition from Late

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[16] Jean-Claude Schmitt 'Images, imagination and the orders of time' in *The Unorthodox Imagination in Late Medieval Britain, Neale Lecture and Colloquium, University College London, 1ˢᵗ April, 2006* (forthcoming).

[17] See, for example, St. Augustine's *Commentary on Confessiones 10.8.12*: *et venio in campos et lata praetoria memoriae, ubi sunt thesauri innumerabilium imaginum de cuiuscemodi rebus sensis invectarum. ibi reconditum est quidquid etiam cogitamus* [And I enter the fields and spacious halls of memory, where are stored as treasures the countless images that have been brought into them from all manner of things by the senses. There, in the memory, is likewise stored what we cogitate]. 'Cognitive categorization' is a reference to 'cognitive thinking, a categorising process', from Paul Crossley – see footnote 19.

[18] 'It is one thing to worship a picture, it is another by means of pictures to learn thoroughly the story that should be venerated […] Wherefore, and especially for the common people, picturing is the equivalent of reading' Pope Gregory I, quoted in Carruthers, p. 222.

[19] Paul Crossley, *Ductus and Memoria: Chartres cathedral as rhetoric*, Inaugural Anselm Lecture, University of Kent, April 2009.

[20] Clark 2006, pp. 34–36; Baxter, p. 84.

Antiquity to provide memorable lessons in exegesis and homiletics.[21] Mary Carruthers, who explicates this 'hooking process' so well, refers to bestiaries as:

> not 'natural history' or moralized instruction (all instruction in the Middle Ages was moralized) but mental imaging, the systematic forming of 'pictures' that would stick in the memory[22]

The ursine initial is thus an informed commentary on medieval exegesis, rendered easily accessible to novices and monks who knew their bestiary and had been taught how to read both texts and images for the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical and, crucially, then relate them to other works. They were indeed very well aware of what images they were using and why. Thus this initial is a good example of the pervasive influence of the bestiary in both Canterbury and wider monastic culture.[23] The bestiary bear was not only to be memorised as a link to the mouth and hence, via *ruminatio* and rote, to learning, but also via, as shall be seen, a mental image of ingesting poison and then receiving a cure a link to a standard Christological exegesis.

This analysis is now applied directly in a close reading of the *ursus* chapter of BL Additional 11283, our ur-text. It begins with Isidore's etymological description of the name, that strong visual image which links mouth to bear. Then the text mentions that sick bears are healed by mullein and by eating ants, a reference which comes from Ambrose. The bears appear almost human, copulating as humans, hugging and caring for their helpless offspring, having a liking for honey, sleeping heavily and then being blinded by light and lastly, having the cleverness to bite the most susceptible part of a bull. There is another reference to the curative properties of ants, this time as an antidote to mandrake poison.

What we have is a series of comments designed to show, just as chapters of the *Physiologus* do, the connections between the visible and invisible world, teaching how to understand 'the phenomenal world of nature and its heavenly archetype of which it is a likeness [*similitudo*]' through readily-memorised gobbets or *distinctiones*.[24] This may be based upon Origen's mystical and anagogical concept of correspondence between nature and heaven explored in Book 3 of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*:

> [J]ust as God made man in his own image and likeness, so also did he make remaining creatures after certain other heavenly images as a likeness.[25]

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[21] Widely known, including in the form of rhyming couplets, 'Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria/ Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia' quoted in Ziolkowski, p. 6.

[22] Carruther, p. 127.

[23] See James 1900 on Cambridge, Trinity College Ms O.4.7 having been produced in Canterbury for Rochester Cathedral Priory.

[24] *Similitudo* from Curley, p. xiv; *distinctiones* from Carruthers and Ziolkowski, pp. 4, 5.

[25] Curley, p. xiii.

Thus, in the chapter on the bear, we see reflections of the human and the heavenly in the actions of the beast. It is the human characteristics of the bear that are stressed, to draw out that comparison between the beastly, unformed nature of the uneducated and the divine path of righteousness, just as in the initial examined earlier. Furthermore, the figure of the bear is used to represent transubstantiation. The curative properties of mullein and ants refer to sin and to the redemptive power of the Eucharist. So animals are not to be investigated for their own behaviour but for the light they shed on the relationship between the human and the divine.[26] That meaning is expressed not through the animal itself but through the word for the animal. A further example would be the memorable *exemplum* of the beaver for its Latin name, *castor,* is linked to *castrare*, turning the hunting of the beaver for its scent glands into the quest for monastic celibacy.[27]

2.   Flaws, doubts and ambiguity in CCA Lit Ms D 10, f.3r *ursus*

Turning to the third bear, I shall examine those unusual features of D.10 which imply not only ambiguity towards but a contestation of the cultural norms to which the bestiary ur-text of BL Additional 11283 so studiously adheres. The illustration has been redrawn; the bear licks its cubs but these are formed, not 'unformed offspring'. The artist (probably also the scribe) has missed the anagogical importance of the unformed nature of the cubs. Not that this rendition of the bear is unique: British Library Harley 3244 also depicts a bear and formed cubs, while Cambridge, Gonville and Caius Ms 372.621, merely has a bear. There are also words missing from the text — for example, *nasci* 'to give birth to', while not essential provides clarification — and minor differences in wording.[28] Is the scribe just editing the text as he proceeds, is he following another exemplar, or is he careless? The handwriting is simplified, the 'm' has lost its serif feet, the bifurcation of ascenders is sometimes rushed and shows the connecting stroke, while the horizontal abbreviation marks are often pressed so hard that the nib has parted to

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[26]   'in an important sense animals are human constructions', Mullan, B. and Marvin, G., *Zoo Culture* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987). See also Lacan, *Seminar Book 1* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 225 on the word for elephant being vastly more important than the animal itself. As many medieval books were parchment, not paper, this enables us to see them as material culture, flayed animal skins here tattooed with their own images to emphasise their human construction. See also Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows*: *Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) on tattooed, flayed human skins in her chapter on *Silence of the Lambs*.

[27]   Ziolkowsk, p. 8, 'If nature is a book, then in a sense the animals with nature are words in the language of the text. This can be demonstrated readily by looking at the beaver (*fiber/castor*[sic]), whose purported behaviour in the *Physiologus* and the bestiary is meant to explain the verb *castro, -are* – the Origen-al [sic] sin.' See also Curley, pp. xxii-iii, n. 34 on the beaver mentioned in antiquity by Pliny, Juvenal, Herodotus, Aesop, Cicero and Apuleius.

[28]   e.g. *ut dicunt greci ulcera qua subicie[n]tes* instead of *ut Graeci appellant ulcera subientes sua* and occasional word order changes, e.g. *alie quadrupedes* rather than the usual *quadrupedes aliae*; these are not in other recensions, but others are, e.g. *caede* is replaced by *corde* (line 7).

make two thin lines. Furthermore, a whole paragraph on the bull has been entirely missed; there

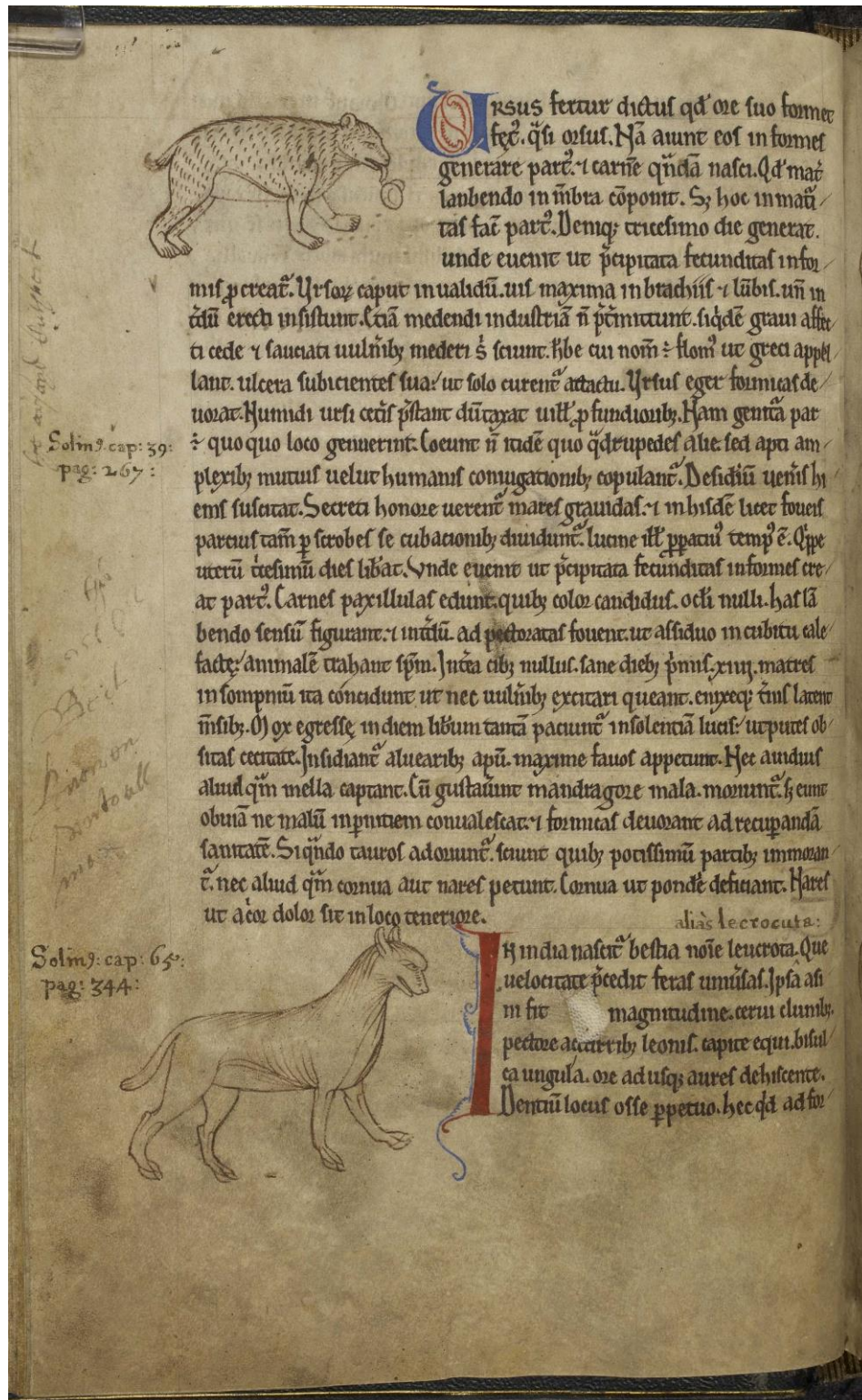is a tiny reference to the omission at the foot of the text.

FIGURE 3: EARLY BESTIARY MANUSCRIPT OF *C.* 1180. BL ADDITIONAL 11283 — URSUS.F.7. © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD (ADD. 11283 F7)

The page layout is poorly drawn up, the script itself is large, rounded and untidy and the chapter

finishes in mid-sentence. The careful attention to the teaching of the novice the transcendent

importance of the written Word, and the anagogical references which the other examples exhibit are here ignored. D.10 has been written by someone who has little time for the spiritual mysteries with which the bestiary was originally imbued. This evidences a deliberate distancing from the inherited texts.

However, the crux of my argument lies liminally and literally in the margins, where things generally tend to get more interesting.[29] For in these important margins, there is evidence of individual opinion in an ambiguous disagreement with the text. Not classical *disputatio* but scepticism occurs throughout D.10 and twice in this chapter. Here, it is the eating of ants which moves the scribe to write *dubito* [I doubt that]. These doubts harbour an ambiguity by questioning the text without revealing why it is questioned, as James Whitman discusses in terms of the legal framework of examining reasonable doubt:

> the ambiguous term 'doubt' will always carry subjective connotations for […] doubt will remain,
> at least in part, a subjective state of mind […] a hesitation to act, an anxiety.[30]

Thus, our subjectification in this bestiary, our relationship with it, is affected by its 'constitutional interpretative ambiguity',[31] in an anxiety to probe these doubts and to rescue meaning from ambiguity. Also, a further ambiguity has been introduced as it has been argued that the abbreviation stands not for *dubito* [I doubt that] but *dubium*, meaning doubtful, though the abbreviation has been expanded in one example to *dubito*, allowing the doubting of the content rather than the doubting of the *exemplum*, to be foregrounded.[32] These marginal notations of *du*, which appear some sixteen times throughout the manuscript, are assigned to the scribe since they are in the same colour ink, have the same distinctive bifurcation of the 'b', the same almost horizontal angle of the ascender of the 'd' and the same simple formation of the 'u' that is often shorter on the right than the left. That *dubito*, that questioning of an authoritative text is most unusual and does not occur in any other bestiary I have studied. It is different from the joyful grotesques and marvels that illuminate the margins of many later medieval works; with their puns and crudities they do not question the text as much as gloss it or provide a separate running narrative. It differs too from the *nota bene* marks more commonly found in bestiaries or the scowling faces and pointing fingers used as *aides-memoires* by

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29 M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art* (Harvard University Press, 1992) suggests that the margins 'give birth to meaning at the centre' p. 48, for the 'centre is […] dependent upon the margins for its continued existence. p. 10
30 Whitman, p. 206.
31 Ibid.
32 I am most grateful for Professor Ian Short's kind discussion with me via e-mail as to whether the abbreviation refers to *dubium* or *dubito*. It should be observed that A. Capelli, *Dizionario di Abbreviature Latine ed Italiani* (Milano, 1912) «http://www.hist.msu.ru/Departments/Medieval/Cappelli/CPLLI112.HTM» p. 112 is not definitive. However, *dubito* is written out in full on f.9r of D.10. I have interpreted it as *dubito* because of the expansion example on f.9r and the juxtaposition of many of these marginalia to textual references to Ambrose's *Hexaemeron*, which implies contestation of this aspect of the text.

Clement Canterbury in St. Augustine's Abbey's books in the fifteenth century.[33] If it seems doubtful that bears eat ants, it certainly seems farfetched to expect eating ants to provide an antidote to deadly poison. This is a rational, prosaic doubting, a refusal to accept the ancient and authoritative written word as necessarily the literal truth while ignoring the anagogical sense. This rejection is very interesting; it strikes at the heart of that great block of historical belief, the medieval period as the age of faith and authority, although, of course, medieval scepticism has been discussed at length by eminent historians such as Susan Reynolds and John Arnold.[34] In the context of medieval heresy, John Arnold has argued the case for the 'materiality of unbelief'.[35] Using D.10, I put forward here a parallel case for the materiality of disbelief. By doubting, the scribe rejects the authority of the past even while preserving it, becoming a precursor of reasoning doubters. Here, in this little tatty manuscript, we have further evidence that the monolith of historical belief is indeed cracked. Clearly, this is not heresy but nor is it that passive acceptance of instruction, the faithful following of Isidore and the *Physiologus*, that the very *exemplum* of the bear itself should have engendered.

That is why these marginal doubts are so important, even in their ambiguity, because they undermine the whole weight of the normative evidence, all those works which tell us what medieval people were supposed to think and believe about their world. As John Arnold has put it, 'Looking to what people were supposed to think is only one part of the picture'.[36] It is not surprising that scepticism should exist during this period, but I contend it is surprising to find it here, in a well-known and standard text. D.10's doubts are unusual because the cultural impact of the bestiary was founded on its construction of a cultural and literary memory from the faith of the Desert Fathers and the rhetoric of antiquity. Together these had formed part of the bedrock of faith, carved into the very crypt shafts supporting Canterbury Cathedral, to be meditated upon as the monks processed for their offices.[37] This is a scepticism directed at a

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[33] For example, marginalia in Oxford, Bodleian Rawlinson C 77, ff. 52–55.

[34] See Susan Reynolds, 'Social Mentalities and the Case of Medieval Scepticism', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th series, 1 (1991), p.25. The idea of the medieval period as an Age of Faith 'survives more or less unnoticed, rather like a shabby old chair in our mental sitting rooms'.

[35] John Arnold, 'The Materiality of Unbelief in Late Medieval England' in *The Unorthodox Imagination in Late Medieval Britain, Neale Lecture and Colloquium, University College London, 1st April, 2006* (forthcoming), discusses, as an example of this materiality, Margery Baxter who was reported in 1427 as saying that the sacrament 'is nothing but a cake of bread baked by a baker which [...] thus consecrated, the priests eat and emit through their rears into privies', which he quotes from N. Tanner, ed., *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428-31*, Camden Society, 4th ser., 20 (London: 1977) p. 50.

[36] John Arnold forthcoming.

[37] See T. Dale, 'Monsters, Corporeal Deformities, and Phantasms in the Cloister of St-Michel-de-Cuxa', in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Sep. 2001) pp. 402–43 .

huge intellectual and spiritual legacy, a staccato marking that disrupts and challenges *ductus* that sight of the divine in the natural world.[38]

3. Flaws and ambiguity in modern visual theory and their resonating prefiguration in D.10

Yet it is in the bestiary's exploration of seeing that we have the most interesting resonances with current visual theory, helping us to see the bestiary, and D.10 in particular, differently, and more ambiguously, problematizing its simplicity.[39] In the *Physiologus* and subsequently the bestiary, orthodox exegesis depicted the visible world as a flawed *similitudo* of heaven.[40] Using modern visual theory we can enter into a dialogue with the orthodox exegesis and challenge this concept. Flaws in the visual conception of the world have resonances with the 'mote in thy brother's eye' (Matthew 7. 3-6), as the speck of falseness we detect in others while failing to understand our own grave faults. Interrupting the *ductus* of rhetoric is the 'splinter' of modern visual theory. Theodor Adorno saw the flaw or the mote as a splinter not of wood but of glass, and hence as a lens. He spectacularly transmuted it into an Aphorism in his *Minima Moralia* as 'the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass'. This broken shard of glass in the eye has been described recently by Esther Leslie, as:

> a conduit between vision, eye and world – it juts out from the eye into the world and back into the eye, a slash, a flaw in vision which enlarges the error in the world.[41]

That flaw, or 'magnifying glass', provides a link to the medieval images of manuscripts now gracing our computer screens. These digitised manuscripts can be explored in ever greater detail, the new Harley images at the British Library being a recent case in point. Engaging with the ideas of philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin permits us to see how the 'Other Nature' they saw in the duplications and close-ups of photography allow productive dialectical tensions. For while Adorno used the splinter as a critical theory to cut into the concept

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[38] In a further example in D.10, the *turtur* (turtle dove) uses special leaves to line its nest which causes the wolf, improbably, to flee (*lupi fuges*, f.21r). This unlikely scenario overwhelms the anagogical point that Christians are defended from the Devil by leaves of the Holy Church, i.e. the Bible. The scribe's marginal comment, 'defecitur + dubito' ('defective and I doubt it'), not only casts doubt on his *exemplum*'s accuracy but also its veracity; a double ambiguity. I am grateful to Prof. R.M. Thomson for his kind advice on this transcription.

[39] Its connections between word and image mediated in memory, speech and movement, its relating of the visible to the invisible; its use of mental imaging and imagining; and in its eye of wonder the bestiary contains ideas from Neo-Platonists.

[40] Curley, pp. xiii–xiv.

[41] Esther Leslie continues, 'So sight is insight when it is seeing in and seeing inside, revelatory insight is deeply flawed, the flaw in what is seen and all that is flawed – yet flaw in vision might be truthful', 'Critical Theory, Crystal Tearing*', plenary address, In-Sight Conference, University of Sussex, April 2009 (Leslie, forthcoming). Prof. Leslie kindly confirmed, by email on 18 April 2009, that my thoughts on the connection between the biblical exegesis of the 'mote' and Theodor Adorno's splinter were sound: 'I certainly think Adorno was aware of the Biblical reference and placing it in that perspective adds a very particular light, amplifying the moral weight of the line.'

of vision, Benjamin produced an 'image–world which was not the illusioned partner of the actual world', examining micro-photographic images of snowflakes published by Gustav Hellman, who revealed that their beautiful structures are frequently, fragmented and deformed, although we often depict them as perfectly symmetrical.[42] As Hellman found warmth and humanity in these close-up images of imperfection, so too it is possible to find warmth and humanity in the flaws and imperfections of D.10, an imperfect replication of the Second-family bestiary text. This enables us to transform a standard appreciation of it as a poor, late fragment of a work which has many more complete, important and visually appealing manuscripts into something exciting *because* of its flaws, ambiguities and imperfections.

By magnifying those flaws and transposing them into digital images via that unconscious observation of the camera to the screen, one can make productive, challenging comparisons with other works. One can revisualise, in their digital closeness, the warmth and humanity of their original inception as cultural exchanges of knowledge evidenced as marks in books. It may not be possible to track down the scribe of D.10 — he may never have been a monk in Canterbury.[43] However, as this article demonstrates, through the use of digital images and Bruce Barker-Benfield's work on the St. Augustine's library volumes, D.10 may become a turning point for bestiary studies and not merely a footnote.[44] In conclusion, the nub of the issue is whether this bestiary's flaws and doubts problematise modern historiography's edifice of normative medieval hermeneutics and rhetorical ideas from Late Antiquity.[45] Does D.10 challenge current bestiary research by a doubting, an insertion of ambiguity which is an uncanny prefiguring of their ways of seeing?[46] Applying visual concepts to D.10 opens it up to reveal the mediation of the medieval image, which was initially replicated imperfectly, deformed and doubted and which is now splintered and duplicated through digital and printed reproduction, to be doubted and questioned again. The errors in copying, the marginal additions and the erasures become important because they point both to revelatory insight of the flaw,

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[42] The references to Benjamin and Hellman are in Leslie, forthcoming

[43] For a discussion on extant works from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Canterbury monks' books, see W. Knorr, 'Two Medieval Monks and their astronomy books', *Bodleian Record*, Vol. 14, part 4 (April 1993). Examples of the handwriting of other brethren, such as Thomas Sprot, also have been identified recently (see Barker-Benfield, pp. 1839-83) but formal identification of D.10's scribe remains elusive.

[44] See Mika Elo, 'Walter Benjamin on Photography: Towards Elemental Politics' *Transformations*, no. 15 (November 2007). See also «http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/GreenGovernance/papers/Leslie EP-Snowglobalism.pdf» and Leslie, forthcoming.

[45] For ideas disseminated by Isidore, Augustine, Jerome, Cassian, the Desert Fathers, Origen and the Alexandrine Neo-Platonists such as Clement of Alexandria, see Curley, introduction.

[46] For a discussion of the uncanny and medieval literature, see Michael Uebel, 'Unthinking the Monster: Twelfth Century Responses to Saracen Alterity' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) p. 268.

making D.10 the focus point for investigation by using the unconscious observer of the close-up camera to trace the signification of its marks, as well as perhaps tracing the path, flow or *ductus* of the human hand that once wrote it. Thus, its ambiguity does speak relevantly not only to current historiography but also to our contemporary perception of nature and modern visual theory. The bear as a memorable figure for the unformed mind has become here something more ambiguous, yet still powerful: a site of doubt.

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Acknowledgments

'Der Gehalt soll überall für mich [...] actuell sein': The Relevance of Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepsis* to his Choice of Genre

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Abstract

Of the variety of genres that Hofmannsthal (1875–1929) used throughout his literary career, three, lyric verse, the fictive letter and comedy, are associated with particular periods. The first is a product of what Hofmannsthal termed his *Jugendzeit*, the period which ended around the turn of the century. The fictive letter is a genre used by Hofmannsthal mainly, although not exclusively, during his late-twenties to mid-thirties, a transitional period during which Hofmannsthal was most troubled by *Sprachskepsis*, or doubt in the efficacy of language to express thought and abstract concepts, and doubted his own artistic ability. Hofmannsthal used comedy increasingly as he matured artistically, once he had come through this dark period. The article examines the relevance, during Hofmannsthal's transitional and mature periods, of his *Sprachskepsis* to his use of genres that seem to be quite disparate by considering three works, *Ein Brief* and *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten*, both fictive letters dating from the first decade of the twentieth century, and *Der Schwierige*, a late comedy from the final decade of his life.

The article first considers the relevance of *Sprachskepsis*, a phenomenon associated with not just Hofmannsthal but others among his intellectual contemporaries in *fin-de-siècle* Austria, to Hofmannsthal's personal philosophy and demonstrates that he regarded an inability to communicate as an issue that concerned not just the artist but any individual, since it impinged upon the ability of the individual to mature into a socially engaged adult or, in Hofmannsthal's terminology, achieve *Existenz*. Using examples from the three different works, the article argues that Hofmannsthal uses the onset of *Sprachskepsis* as the indication that the protagonist in question is beginning to experience the transition from the solipsistic world of his youth and early adulthood, or *Praeexistenz*, to *Existenz*.

Comparing and contrasting the two genres, the article argues that they share a common characteristic, which may not be immediately apparent; they are both forms of conversation. This makes both genres particularly apt for a depiction of *Sprachskepsis*, since conversation is predicated on an ability to communicate, a skill which *Sprachskepsis* effectively impairs.

Hofmannsthal's choice of comedy during his later years is readily explained. Hofmannsthal himself endorsed comedy as an effective medium in which to depict how the individual can

become socially engaged, not least because the convention, at least in classical comedy, that it concludes by uniting a pair of lovers who have been kept apart by a series of misunderstandings, chimed with Hofmannsthal's own observation that marriage, the union of two individuals, is a metaphor for the binding of the individual to Life by becoming socially engaged.

His choice of the fictive letter during a particularly difficult period of his literary development can be understood in the context of Freud's theories of psychology and psychoanalysis, in which Hofmannsthal was much interested. The fictive letter can be interpreted as a form of self-help therapy, as if Hofmannsthal were articulating his deeply felt and personal problems to a trusted confidant.

There is, therefore, a close relationship between Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepsis* and the two genres in which he chose to express himself at different periods of his literary career.[1]

Keywords: Hofmannsthal, *Sprachskepsis*, genre, fictive letter, comedy, *Existenz*, *Praeexistenz*

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As a consequence of the so-called *Chandoskrise* [Chandos-crisis] that followed the publication in 1902 of *Ein Brief* [A Letter] by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), this fictional letter, also known as *Brief des Lord Chandos an Francis Bacon* [Lord Chandos' Letter to Francis Bacon], is seen as exemplifying *Sprachskepsis* or *Sprachproblematik*; that is to say, doubt in the efficacy of words to express thought and abstract concepts.[2] *Sprachskepsis* is a phenomenon associated with not only Hofmannsthal but also *fin-de-siècle* Austrian intellectuals in general, intellectuals such as Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923), the Austrian journalist and essayist, and the philosopher Ludwig von Wittgenstein (1889–1951).[3]

However, although an upsurge of interest in *Sprachproblematik* coincided with the turn of the century, this was not its first appearance in German literature. Thirty years earlier, Nietzsche

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[1] This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

[2] *Ein Brief* was first published in the Berlin paper *Ein Tag* in October 1902. The terms *Sprachskepsis* and *Sprachproblematik* , being terms of art, will be used without further translation.

[3] Mauthner, who published his *Beiträge zur Kritik der Sprache* [Contributions to the critique of language] in 1901-2, maintained that language is an appropriate medium for communication in a social or artistic context but not for communicating truth and reality, since all language is metaphorical (Robinson, 2002: 165). His ideas and theories were taken up and developed by Wittgenstein, who, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* published in 1921, considers that all philosophy is, in essence, *Sprachkritik*, since thoughts can only be mediated through language, which not only 'dresses up' the original thought but has limited powers of expression. Robertson suggests that the idiosyncratic orthography and typography devised by Stefan George (1868–1933) for his poetry is another manifestation of *Sprachskepsis* (Robertson, 2002: 165).

(1844–1900) had raised the issue of *Sprachnot* [the inadequacy of language] in the course of his polemic against what he saw as German philistinism, in the four essays subsequently published together as *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* [Untimely Meditations]; in one of these he quoted Schopenhauer (1788–1860) when deploring the '*grenzenlose Dilapidation der deutschen Sprache der "Jetztzeit"* [the limitless deterioration of the German language of the "present day"]':

> "Wenn dies so fortgeht", sagt [Schopenhauer] einmal, "so wird man anno 1900 die deutschen Klassiker nicht mehr recht verstehen, indem man keine andere Sprache mehr kennen wird, als den Lumpen-Jargon der noblen 'Jetztzeit' — deren Grundcharakter Impotenz ist."[4]

> [*"If this continues," [Schopenhauer] says somewhere, "by 1900, people will no longer understand the German classics properly, since they will no longer know any language other than the ragged jargon of the elegant 'present day' — a language whose fundamental character is impotence."*][5]

One might wonder how a writer can express himself, if he doubts what is, essentially, the raw material of his art. This article is concerned with not that question but with a more subtle effect of Hofmannsthal's Sprachskepsis on his creativity: its possible influence on his choice of genre at different stages of his literary development. During his career, Hofmannsthal employed a variety of genres, ranging from the lyric poetry on which his precociously early reputation rested to the libretti written in collaboration with Richard Strauss, as well as the dramas of his mature work, including both fiction and much non-fiction — essays, critiques, monographs and other forms of writing. Of these, two proved, as this article will demonstrate, to be particularly appropriate vehicles for the *topos* of *Sprachskepsis*. These two genres are represented in this article by three works; comedy by *Der Schwierige* [The Difficult Man]; the fictive letter by *Ein Brief* and also *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* [The Letters from the Man who Returned].[6] The choice of these works is not arbitrary. As shall be seen, they are all particularly relevant to the question of *Sprachskepsis*. They also enjoy other thematic links in common. Those between *Ein Brief* and *Der Schwierige* were drawn by Hofmannsthal himself and this article will show that there may be a closer thematic link between the comedy and *Die Briefe* than might at first appear.

The next section will place these works in the context of Hofmannsthal's literary development and discuss the relevance of his personal philosophy and concept of *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz* to his artistic development; the following section will examine the effect of

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[4]   From the first essay, 'David Strauss, der Bekenner und der Schriftsteller', page 221.

[5]   Translations from German are my own. Verse quotations are rendered into prose. All quotations are only translated at their first appearance.

[6]   The titles will henceforth only be given in German, *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* being abbreviated to *Die Briefe*.

Sprachskepsis on each of the protagonists and the final section before the conclusion will compare and contrast both the two genres and the three texts.[7]

1. Background

1.1 Hofmannsthal's literary career

Writing to Max Pirker in 1921 (Aufzeichnungen 369–70), Hofmannsthal summarised his career as a dramatist by dividing it into three periods.[8] The first of these, his '*lyrische subjektive Epoche* [lyrical-subjective epoch]', comprises his '*Jugend-oeuvre bis zirka 1899* [youthful work up to around 1899]'; the final one, which began around 1907, he describes as the '*Epoche, worin die Erfüllung traditioneller Forderung deutlich als Ziel hervortritt* [epoch in which the realisation of traditional demands clearly emerges as the aim]'; and the period in between these two is characterised as the one in which he sought the '*Anschluß an große Form* [connection to high form (of art)]', in other words, an experimental period. A few years earlier, Hofmannsthal had reviewed his literary career to date in *Ad me ipsum*, the self-analytical notes which he began around 1916. Under the heading '*Zur Darstellung meines Lebens* [As a description of my life]', he noted that his *Jünglingszeit* [youth] ended in 1899 and his *Gegenwart* [present] began 'around 1912' but made no comment on the intervening years (A: 232).

Der Schwierige, which Hofmannsthal began writing in earnest in 1917 and which was first performed in 1921, is thus a mature work from his third and final epoch as defined in his letter to Pinker or his *Gegenwart* according to his 'Darstellung meines Lebens'. *Ein Brief*, published in 1902, and *Die Briefe,* published in two instalments in 1907–08, are, on the other hand, both from that intermediate period which Hofmannsthal saw as one when he was still searching for a high form of art as far as his development as a dramatist was concerned, and in which he discerned nothing noteworthy in his general literary career.[9] This is the decade described as a period which 'we think of as […] one of deep withdrawal: of the most tormenting doubts on the part of Hofmannsthal about […] the capacity of words *per se* to communicate' (Gilbert 1963: 31). These doubts were brought into the public domain by the publication of *Ein Brief*.

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[7] The terms *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz* are Hofmannsthal's own terms of art, for which there is no exact translation.

[8] Aufzeichnungen, Gedichte und Lyrische Dramen, Prosa I, Prosa II. *Der Schwierige* and *Briefe 1900—1909* will henceforth be designated 'A', 'GLD', 'P1', 'P2', 'DS' and 'B' respectively.

[9] The first three letters were first published in the Berlin paper *Morgen* in 1907 and the remaining two under the title 'Das Erlebnis des Sehens [The Experience of Seeing]' in *Kunst und Künstler* in 1908. The fifth letter, when published separately, is frequently given the title 'Farben [Colours]'.

1.2   Hofmannsthal and *Sprachskepsis*

Ein Brief was, however, neither the first manifestation nor the resolution of Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepis*. Requadt, who considers that Nietzsche must be counted as one of Hofmannsthal's forerunners in the matter of language criticism (1968: 41), observes that Hofmannsthal, born around the time that Nietzsche was publishing *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, '*kennt die Sprachnot seit seinen* [*d.h. Hofmannsthals*] *Anfängen und wird ihrer bis zuletzt nicht ledig* [was aware of the inadequacy of language from his [Hofmannsthal's] earliest days and to the end was never free from it]' (1968: 40). Furthermore, the *Chandoskrise* was:

> nichts Einmaliges und völlig Neues in Hofmannsthals Entwicklung, sondern die Verdichtung einer schon seit Jahren fälligen Entscheidung, die nun erst im Bereich des Sprachlichen akut wird, da die lyrische Schaffenskraft versiegt (Requadt 1968:52).
>
> [*neither an isolated nor a completely unprecedented incident in Hofmannsthal's development but the crystallisation of a long overdue decision, that was only then becoming acute as regards matters of language, as his facility to write lyric poetry declined*.]

Hofmannsthal's lyric verse had come to the attention of literary Vienna in the early 1890s, particularly after Hermann Bahr had quoted two poems by 'Loris' in his essay 'Symbolisten' and declared that they exemplified Symbolism.[10]

> [Das zweite Gedicht] enthält, rein und deutlich, den ganzen Symbolismus und es enthält nichts, das nicht Symbolismus wäre (Bahr, 1968:111).
>
> [[*The second poem*] *comprises, purely and clearly, complete Symbolism and nothing that would not be Symbolism*.]

It is a moot point whether Hofmannsthal abandoned lyric verse as a result of a decline in his facility to write lyric poetry or because he became dissatisfied with the genre, perhaps as his latent *Sprachskepsis* began to surface. For whatever reason, his output in this genre decreased significantly towards the end of the decade. It may, therefore, not be entirely coincidental that in 1895, some seven years before the appearance of *Ein Brief*, Hofmannsthal deplores the overuse of words in *Eine Monographie* [A Monograph], an appreciation of the actor Friedrich Mitterwurzer (1844–1897):

> Die Leute sind es nämlich müde, reden zu hören. Sie haben einen tiefen Ekel vor den Worten: Denn die Worte haben sich vor die Dinge gestellt. Das Hörensagen hat die Welt verschluckt.

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[10] 'Loris' was one of the pseudonyms under which Hofmannsthal published while still a student at the Akademische Gymnasium in Vienna. Hermann Bahr (1863–1934) considered Symbolism to be the literary movement that would supplant Naturalism, as discussed in his collection of essays published under the title *Zur Überwindung des Naturalismus* [On the Overcoming of Naturalism], one of which was 'Symbolisten [Symbolists]', first published separately in 1892. The poems Bahr quoted are 'Die Töchter der Gärtnerin [The Gardener's Daughters]' and 'Mein Garten [My Garden]'.

[…] so ist eine verzweifelte Liebe zu allen Künsten erwacht, die schweigend ausgeübt werden:die Musik, das Tanzen […] (P1:228.)[11]

[*People are indeed tired of listening to talk. They have a deep disgust of words, which have got in the way of things. Gossip has swallowed the world* […] *and so, in despair, people have begun to prefer all arts, which are practised without the use of words* […]]

1.3 Hofmannsthal's philosophy of *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz*

However, Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepsis* is not merely a concern about language in an artistic context. It is, rather, bound up with his personal philosophy which conceives life as, ideally, a progression from *Praeexistenz* to *Existenz*, Hofmannsthal's own terminology for, on the one hand, the solipsism and confidence of youth and early adulthood, and, on the other, the social consciousness of the mature adult. In *Ad me ipsum*, he describes this process of emerging from *Praeexistenz* and entering *Existenz* variously as: '*Verknüpfung mit dem Leben. Durchdringen aus der Praeexistenz zur Existenz* [Connection with Life. Getting Through from *Praeexistenz* to *Existenz*]' (A: 214); '*Weg zum Leben* [Way to Life]' (A: 217); '*Weg zum Sozialen* [Way to the Socially Engaged]' (A: 217).[12]

The relevance of this philosophy to *Sprachskepsis* is that Hofmannsthal considered *Praeexistenz* to be a period during which words have a magical power to enchant and intoxicate hearers and readers alike. This power, exercised by the poet himself, is illustrated when, in the 1892 verse drama *Gestern* [Yesterday], Fortunio says to the protagonist, the young aesthete Andrea, '*Dein Wort hat uns berauscht und nicht der Wein* [your word and not the wine intoxicated us]' (GLD: 154). There is also an earlier allusion to this '*Wort-magie* [magic of words]' in the following couplet from 'Für mich …' ['For me …'], a poem from 1890 in ghasel form, in which the aesthetic poet describes his 'special power to conjure magical properties from the apparently ordinary outside world' (Vilain, 2000: 191), with particular reference to words:[13]

Das Wort, das Andern Scheidemünze ist,
Mir ists der Bilderquell, der schimmernde reiche (GLD: 471)[14]

[*The word, which is like small change to other people, / is to me the shimmering and rich source of images*.]

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[11] First published in *Die Zeit* under the 'Loris' byline.

[12] The English terminology will be used henceforth.

[13] A ghasel is a verse form, originally found in Arab and Indian literature, in which the rhyme scheme is AA, BA, CA, DA etc. Each couplet must contain a complete thought. It was a popular verse form in nineteenth-century German literature, being used by, amongst others, Liliencron, Rückert and Heine as well as Hofmannsthal.

[14] Hofmannsthal's use of the term '*Scheidemünze*' for everyday talk anticipates a similar use of the term by Rilke in 1897, when he contrasts the poet's language with the '*Scheidemünze*' and '*Tauschmittel des Alltags* [everyday change]'. (Rainer Maria Rilke *Werke*, ed. Manfred Engel et al., 4 vols., Frankfurt and Leipzig: Insel, 1996. Vol IV, 54).

However, *Wort-magie* cannot be carried over into *Existenz*, as Hofmannsthal makes clear in this observation from *Ad me ipsum* in connection with another verse drama from the 1890s, *Der Kaiser und die Hexe* [The Emperor and the Witch].

> [Der Kaiser] besteht in einer Verfehlung gegen die Wort-magie. Die magische Herrschaft über das Wort das Bild das Zeichen darf nicht aus der Prae-existenz in die Existenz hinübergenommen werden (A: 215-6).
>
> [[*The emperor*] *is mistaken as regards the magic of words. The magical power over the word, the image, the symbol may not be carried over from Praeexistenz into Existenz.*]

Sprachskepsis, by indicating to the individual that he is beginning to doubt the power of the 'magic of words', is a sign that he needs consciously to make the transition from *Praeexistenz* to *Existenz.* In the context of this personal philosophy, the *Chandoskrise* marks the beginning of Hofmannsthal's own journey from the one, epitomised by the lyrical-subjective work of his *Jünglingzeit*, to the other, when he was able to produce work in what he regarded as a high form of art. The *Sprachkrise* he experienced around the turn of the century was not simply a prolonged case of writer's block but a crisis of style, necessary because 'development out of his aesthetic *Praeexistenz* as a poet involved abandoning the "Wort-magie" of his early poems' (Yates, 1966:6). Hofmannsthal needed to find, through a different style, the Way to Life which would enable him to escape from *Praeexistenz* and achieve *Existenz.* The constant central problem of Hofmannsthal's work is founded on the opposition between these two concepts (Yates, 1966:4-5).

'Getting Through from *Praeexistenz* to *Existenz*' was therefore essential to Hofmannsthal not merely *qua* artist but more importantly *qua* individual. It is the role of speech as a prime social element and the concept of 'Connection with Life' which are the 'threads' to which Hofmannsthal refers in this note from *Ad me ipsum*:

> —Es zielt auf die Rede als soziales Element, als *das* soziale Element—und so führen Fäden von hier zurück zu Claudio, nach vorne zu dem Lord Chandos des "Briefes" und zu dem "Schwierigen" (A: 231; added emphasis).
>
> [—*It is aimed as speech as social element, as* the *social element—and so threads lead from here back to Claudio and forward to Lord Chandos of the 'Brief' and to the 'Schwierigen'.*]

Claudio, the protagonist of *Der Tor und der Tod* [The Fool and Death], fails to achieve a 'Connection with Life', learning that his whole life has been nothing but an aesthetic experience only when Death claims him:[15]

> Warum, du Tod,
> Mußt du mich lehren erst das Leben sehen,
> Nicht wie durch einen Schleier, wach und ganz,

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[15] *Der Tor und der Tod*, a verse drama, was first published in 1894.

Da etwas weckend, so vorübergehen (GLD: 219)?

[*Why, Death, / must you only now teach me to see Life / awake and complete instead of through
a veil, / so that just as it wakes something in me, it passes me by?*]

2. Sprachskepsis and the protagonists

2.1   *Ein Brief*: Lord Chandos

Lord Chandos is a fictive early seventeenth-century young English nobleman and an established
writer, who happens to be roughly the same age as Hofmannsthal was in 1902. Chandos is
writing in response to an enquiry from Francis Bacon, his sometime mentor, who has expressed
his concern that Chandos has published nothing for two years. His short answer is, '*Es ist mir
völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder
zu sprechen* (P2: 11) [I have completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently]' — therefore
he cannot write. He concludes with the gloomy prognosis, '*daß ich auch im kommenden und
im folgenden und in allen Jahren dieses meines Lebens kein englisches und kein lateinisches
Buch schreiben werde* (P2:19) [that I shall write a book neither in English nor in Latin in the
coming, the following and all the years of this my life]'.

Thus far, one can appreciate why Hofmannsthal's contemporaries, noting certain
similarities between Chandos and his creator (their age and youthful success with a genre which
they had suddenly abandoned), assumed that *Ein Brief* was a personal apologia, thinly disguised
in an historical mask, for the sudden decline in Hofmannsthal's lyric verse already discussed.
Yet in a letter dated 16th January, 1903 to his friend Leopold von Andrian, Hofmannsthal insists
that this was not his purpose; his prime object in writing *Ein Brief* was to recreate the style of
the early seventeenth-century Bacon, whose *Essays* he had recently read (B:100).[16] To make
the work more than '*ein einziges bloß formales, costümiertes Totengespräch* [merely a stilted
dialogue between corpses in fancy dress]', the topic '*soll überall für mich und mir nahestehende
actuell sein* [must above all be topical for me and those close to me]'. However, it is clear from
Hofmannsthal's notes in *Ad me ipsum* that, with the benefit of hindsight as he developed his
theory of *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz*, he rationalised *Ein Brief* in the light of his personal
philosophy.

Chandos' problem is not simply an artistic one; it is also, and primarily, a social one. His
Sprachkrise first became apparent as an inability not to write but to discourse on any topic,
elevated or commonplace. He became incapable of pronouncing certain words, especially those
denoting abstract concepts, which seemed to crumble in his mouth '*wie modrige Pilze* [like

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[16]   Extracts from the letter are quoted both by Tarot (1970: 360, 362) and Gilbert (1963: 29).

mouldy mushrooms]'. This inability gradually spread like a '*fressender Rost* [corrosive rust]' so that he now finds social conversation unbearable, since he considers it to consist of nothing but formulaic trivialities about local worthies, and so he discharges his quotidian obligations in connection with the management of his estates in a manner that borders on the taciturn.

To add to his wretchedness, books, especially the classics to which he turns for comfort, no longer communicate anything to him, because he finds himself constantly sucked into a vain analysis of the individual words into which the texts fragment. Words, the medium whereby Chandos, like Hofmannsthal, once charmed his readers, now have an hypnotic power over him, becoming like:

> Augen, die mich ansstarrten und in die ich wieder hineinstarren muß: Wirbel sind sie, in die hinabzusehen mich schwindelt, die sich unaufhaltsam drehen und durch die hindurch man ins Leere kommt (P2: 13).

> [*eyes, which stared at me and into which I must stare back: they are whirlpools; to look into them makes me giddy; round and round they turn without ceasing; through them you come into a void.*]

Chandos contrasts his present unhappy state with '*Damals* [Then]', his years of early manhood, when not only did he enjoy mastery over words but also felt as though he were at one with a vast cosmos:

> mir erschien […] in einer Art von andauernder Trunkenheit das ganze Dasein als eine große Einheit; in allem fühlte ich Natur (P2:10).

> [*all existence seemed to me* […], *in a kind of permanent intoxication, like a great unity; I felt Nature in all*.]

If Hofmannsthal's concept of *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz* is applied to Chandos, it is clear that, having left behind his solipsistic *Praeexistenz*, he now needs to find the 'Way to Life' which will lead him to *Existenz* but is being prevented from doing so by his *Sprachskepsis*. In order to achieve mature social consciousness, Chandos must be able to connect with other people; this necessitates an ability to communicate, which in turn necessitates faith in language. Chandos' *Sprachskepsis* is limiting him not only as an artist but also as an individual, because he is unable to communicate with people except superficially.

Chandos faces the prospect of a lifelong '*Anstand des Schweigens* [decency of silence]'.[17] The dreariness of a life in which he can no longer even think coherently is relieved only by

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17   See for example:

> Die Intro-version als Weg in die Existenz. (Der mystische Weg.) [...] Chandos-brief. Die Situation des Mystikers ohne Mystik. [...] der Anstand des Schweigens als Resultat (A:215). [*Introversion as the way to Existenz (the mystic way.) […] The Chandos letter. […] The situation of the mystic without mystique. […] the result, the decency of silence.*]

moments which he is unable to explain other than in terms of a mystic or quasi-religious experience but which he finds intensely invigorating.[18] They are moments when he experiences an overwhelming empathy with commonplace objects around him, animate and inanimate, which seem to be communicating wordlessly with him. If Chandos is to write again, it can only be in the language of these mute things, but, he sadly concludes, that is unlikely to happen this side of the grave.[19]

2.2 *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten*: the Zurückgekehrter[20]

Perhaps Hofmannsthal was partially motivated to return to the topic of *Sprachskepsis* in order to correct the impression that *Ein Brief* was simply the expression of a personal problem affecting him as an artist. Be this as it may, given that he, as already discussed, made no distinction between artist and non-artist, it is unsurprising that, when he does return to the theme five years later in *Die Briefe*, he makes it clear that the problem is neither confined to the artist nor to a bygone age. The Zurückgekehrter (being anonymous, he is a cipher for every man) is both contemporary (the five letters are dated April/May 1901) and, although not without culture, not a man of letters.[21]

Like Chandos, the Zurückgekehrter, who is returning to Austria via Germany after an absence of eighteen years, is increasingly troubled by a sense of being unable to communicate with the people he meets, in contrast to the ease with which he was able to converse with anyone he met the world over during his travels. This he attributes to a lack in his German contemporaries of both precision in what they say, as if they are thinking about too much at the same time, and what Heine terms 'non-verbal communication' skills, expression, gesture, tone of voice:

> Wo soll ich eines Menschen Wesen suchen, wenn nicht in seinem Gesicht, in seiner Rede, in seinen Gebärden? Meiner Seel, in ihren Gesichtern, ihren Gebärden, ihren Reden find ich die gegenwärtigen Deutschen nicht (P2: 287).
>
> [*Where should I look for the essence of a person, if not in his face, his talk, his gestures? Upon my soul, I find the Germans of today in neither their faces, nor their gestures, nor their talk*.]

Hofmannsthal's concept of the '*Anstand des Schweigens*' is echoed by Wittgenstein in his foreword to the *Tractatus* when he observes that '[...] *wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen* [[…] one must remain silent with regard to that about which one cannot speak.]'

[18] In *Ad me ipsum*, Hofmannsthal refers to such episodes as 'Momente der Erhöhung' (A:216), which roughly equates to Joyce's 'moments of epiphany'.

[19] '[...] *eine Sprache, in welcher die stummen Dinge zu weilen zu mir sprechen* [[...] a language, in which mute things from time to time speak to me] (P2:20)'.

[20] Since the protagonist of *Die Briefe* is anonymous, I shall refer to him as 'the Zurückgekehrter'.

[21] According to Gilbert (1963:30 fn. 6), the Zurückgekehrter is 'a composite figure, embodying moods, experiences and reactions of Hofmannsthal as well as of his friends […]'. He admits to having passed forty, so is somewhat older than Hofmannsthal was in 1907/8.

The Zurückgekehrter's *Sprachskepsis* can again be interpreted as coinciding with the transition from *Praeexistenz* (in this case the long absence abroad) to *Existenz*. He also has an experience like Chandos' 'moments of epiphany' when he chances upon an exhibition of paintings by Van Gogh and is overwhelmed by the artist's ability to capture the essence of the objects he depicts. He describes the paintings in words which echo Hofmannsthal's own when he wrote in his *Tagebuch* in 1904:

> Über Farbe: [...] Bleistiftstriche so wie Worte: [...] Das grenzenlos Relative der Farbe: jede Farbe existiert nur durch ihre Nachbarschaft (A:138).

> [*About colour:* […] *Marks of a pencil like words:* […] *The limitless relativity of colour: each colour exists only through its surroundings.*]

In between 'dem dumpfen rohen Menschen, der nichts von dem allen spürt, und dem mit gebildeter Seele, der hier entziffert und liest, wo ich nur die Zeichen anstaune [the dull, uncultured person, who feels nothing about all of this and the one with an educated soul, who deciphers and reads the symbols at which I only wonder]' (P2:309), the Zurückgekehrter sees colour, with its raw power, as a medium for communication that does not entail the use of words and whereby he can experience the transcendental:[22]

> Warum, wenn nicht die Farben eine Sprache sind, in der das Wortlose, das Ewige, das Ungeheure sich hergibt, eine Sprache, erhabener als die Töne, weil sie wie eine Ewigskeitsflamme unmittelbar hervorschlägt aus den stummen Dasein und uns die Seele erneuert (P2:308).

> [*Why, if colours are not a language, in which that without words, the eternal, the immense reveals itself, a language more refined than sounds, because it immediately flares up from mute existence like an eternal flame and renews our soul.*]

Just as Chandos' moments of empathy with mute things will not help him to make a 'Connection with Life', neither will the Zurückgekehrter's 'language more refined than sounds' — painting may well bring the relief he needs from moments when he experiences a sense of extreme dislocation from his surroundings but it will not of itself reconnect him to his social obligations. The fifth letter, though, ends with no indication as to whether, and if so how, this will change in the future.

However, it is possible that Hofmannsthal may not have intended this to be the final word. Gilbert suggests, 'based on information of H. Steiner' that 'the letters were to be continued and were to end with the marriage of the correspondent, thus being modelled on the structure of the

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[22] The first exhibition of Van Gogh's work in Vienna, before he became widely known, was held in 1906, sixteen years after his death. The fourth and fifth letters were first published in 1908. Coincidentally, Rilke had discovered the paintings of Cézanne the year before and described the experience in a series of letters written between June and November 1907 to Clara Rilke (Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Schriften' *Werke (Band 4)* M. Engel, U. Fulleborn, H. Nalewski & H. Stahl, eds. (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag 1996) pp. 594–636).

"Bildingsroman"' (Gilbert,1963:33).[23] If Steiner's information is correct, the intended conclusion, namely the marriage of the protagonist, would, as shall be seen, reinforce thematic links between *Die Briefe* and *Der Schwierige*, a prototype of which, coincidentally, Hofmannsthal began around July, 1908, not long after the publication of the fourth and fifth letters.[24]

2.3   *Der Schwierige*: Hans Karl Bühl

The second chance that Death denied Claudio is granted to Hans Karl, the eponymous *Schwierige*, after a near-fatal incident in a First World War trench gives him pause for thought:

> Die Genesung ist so ein merkwürdiger Zustand. Darin ist mir die ganze Welt wiedergekommen, wie etwas Reines, Neues und dabei so Selbstverständliches. Ich hab' da auf einmal ausdenken können, was das ist: ein Mensch. Und wie das sein muß: zwei Menschen, die ihr Leben aufeinanderlegen und werden wie *ein* Mensch (DS, II,14: 86 – original emphasis).

> [*Convalescence is such a strange condition. While I was convalescing, the whole world came back to me like something pure and new and at the same time so obvious. All at once, I was able to think about what it is: a person. And how it must be: two people, who bind their lives together and become like* one *person.*]

In Hans Karl, Hofmannsthal presents an individual whose *Sprachskepsis* is such that he is convinced:

> daß es unmöglich ist, den Mund aufzumachen, ohne die heillosesten Konfusionen anzurichten (DS, III,13: 114).

> [*that it's impossible to open one's mouth without causing the most terrible confusion.*]

Hans Karl has earned his soubriquet as a result of his extreme reluctance to commit himself to any social engagement. This, as he explains to Cresence when trying to avoid making an appearance at Altenwyl's soirée, is because he is so acutely sensitive to nuances that could give rise to these confusions:

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[23] Steiner was the editor of the edition of the *Gesammelte Werke* cited in the Bibliography. Gilbert does not formally cite the source of this information but notes that, at the time of writing, 1963, she had been unable to follow up this information in detail (1963:33 fn. 18). The following statement concerning *Die Briefe* is made in the 'Anmerkung' in 'Prosa II': '*Die nicht fortgeführen* (*und bisher nie zusammen veröffentlichten*) "*Briefe des Zurückgekehrten*" *wurden wohl 1907 geschrieben* [the 'Letters of the Man who Returned', which were not continued (and until now have not been published together), were probably written in 1907]' (P2: 386). However, the 'Chronik zum Leben und Werk' on the Hofmannsthal Gesellschaft website suggests that the letters were written between June and August 1906. Possibly since the publication of 'Prosa II' in 1959, Steiner had discovered evidence that the letters were written earlier than he had at first supposed and the reference to them in a letter to his father a year after this earlier supposed date of composition (see further section 3 and footnote 31) suggested that Hofmannsthal still regarded *Die Briefe* as 'work in progress' in 1907.

[24] See Norton's examination of the genesis of *Der Schwierige*, which Hofmannsthal developed from sketches for a play to be called *Die Mißverständnisse*. Material 'which apparently related to 'Der Schwierige' […] in a folder of unpublished notes dated "Ab Juli 1908"' is amongst Hofmannsthal's *Nachlaß*. Norton observes that 'although fragmentarily expressed, the ideas of the sketch are unmistakably allied with key words, concepts and characters in *Der Schwierige*' (Norton, 1964: 98).

> Mir können über eine Dummheit die Tränen in die Augen kommen – oder es wird mir heiß vor Gene über eine ganze Kleinigkeit, über eine Nuance, die kein Mensch merkt, oder es passiert mir, daß ich ganz laut sag', was ich mir denk' – das sind doch unmögliche Zuständ', um unter Leut' zu gehen (DS, I,3: 19).

> [*Something stupid can make tears come to my eyes – or some triviality, a nuance that no one else notices, makes me blush with embarrassment, or it happens that I actually say out loud what I'm thinking – in these circumstances, it's impossible to mix with people.*]

His reluctance to speak even extends to his obligations in society; he has yet to make his maiden speech in the *Herrenhaus*, despite taking his seat there some eighteen months earlier.[25]

The misunderstandings and confusions he deplores are caused because most people in his social circle fail to notice conflicts between verbal and non-verbal communications. Like the Zurückgekehrter, Hans Karl is adept at interpreting the language of gesture and expression, even intonation; he is aware of the 'Nuance, die kein Mensch merkt'. This language, being spontaneous 'proves capable of expressing innermost feelings' as opposed to verbal communication, which is 'intentional but unreliable' (Heine 1983:408). Hans Karl considers spoken words, the stuff of verbal communication, to be an impediment to understanding; one learns more about people by looking at than listening to them:

> ich versteh' mich selbst viel schlechter, wenn ich red', als wenn ich still bin. [...] es is halt etwas, was ich draußen begreifen gelernt habe: daß in den Gesichtern der Menschen etwas geschrieben steht (DS, II,14:84).[26]

> [*I understand myself far worse when I'm talking than when I keep quiet. [...] it's something that I learned to grasp out there (i.e. while at the Front): that something is written in men's faces.*]

Hans Karl's sensitivity to non-verbal communication explains his fascination with the clown Furlani, a consummate mime artist. This in turn recalls Hofmannsthal's reference to the arts, 'die schweigend ausgeübt werden', in *Eine Monographie*.

> Er spielt seine Rolle: er ist der, der alle begreifen, der allen helfen möchte und dabei alles in größte Konfusion bringt. [...] das, was der Furlani macht, ist noch um eine ganze Stufe höher, als was alle andern tun. [...] Er aber tut scheinbar nichts mit Absicht – er geht immer auf die Absicht der andern ein (DS, II,1: 59).

> [*He plays this role, the man who wants to understand everyone, to help everyone and in so doing, brings everything into the utmost confusion. […] what Furlani does goes a full notch higher than what other clowns do. […] He doesn't seem to do anything for his own purpose — he always takes notice of other people's intentions.*]

Hans Karl's *Sprachskepsis*, however, goes beyond a reluctance to make conversation. In his opinion:

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[25] The *Herrenhaus* was the Upper Chamber of Parliament (equivalent to the House of Lords) in Habsburg Austria. Hans Karl does have an ulterior motive for avoiding the Altenwyl's soirée. He is anxious to avoid Altenwyl, who is determined to get him to speak in a debate '*über Völkerversöhnung und über das Zusammenleben der Nationen* [over international reconciliation and the co-existence of nations]'.

[26] Cf. the Zurückgekehrter's exclamation, 'Meiner Seele, [...] (P2 287)', quoted earlier in 2.2.

alles, was man ausspricht, ist indezent. Das simple Faktum, daß man etwas ausspricht, ist indezent (DS, III,13: 118).

[*everything that you say out loud is indecent. The simple fact that you say something out loud is indecent.*]

There is a passing allusion to this 'impropriety' of putting thought into words in the quotation from the scene in Act I with Cresence above; '*oder es passiert mir, daß ich ganz laut sag', was ich mir denk*'. It is more than a mistrust of language *per se*; it is an abhorrence of the act of speech itself. Hans Karl's attitude to speech is negative. His *Sprachproblematik* differs from Chandos' in quality; the former is a 'crisis of "speech acts"', the latter a 'crisis of language *per se*' (Guidry 1982: 306). The attitudes of the two protagonists to their *Sprachproblematik* also differ. Hans Karl's condemnation of the speech act is absolute; he admits no concessions. Chandos' problem is only with the languages known to him. He at least concedes the possibility that there may be another language which is capable of truly expressing what he wants to say, the one in which mute things speak to him from time to time (P2: 20), even if he doubts that he will ever learn it.

Consciously choosing the 'seemliness' of silence is an easy option which merely avoids the 'indecency' of speech; it does not address the issue proactively and will achieve nothing; 'Self-effacing criticism is no more a foundation for social interaction than self-centred loquacity' (Guidry 1982: 306). Helene understands this, when, in response to Hans Karl's comment, '[*d*]*as Reden basiert auf einer indezenten Selbstüberschätzung* [talking is based on an indecent overestimation of one's worth]', she observes, '[*w*]*enn alle Menschen wüßten, wie unwichtig sie sind, würde keiner den Mund aufmachen* [if we all knew how unimportant we are, no one would open his mouth]' (DS, II,14: 82).

Despite his years, Hans Karl still has a childlike quality that endears him to all, even the women whom he lightly abandons after a brief flirtation and who need '*viel contenance dazu oder ein bißl Gewöhnlichkeit, um Ihre Freundin zu bleiben* [to be able to put a brave face on it or just get used to it, if they are to remain your friends]':

HANS KARL   Wenn Sie mich so sehen, dann bin ich Ihnen ja direkt unsympathisch!
HELENE   Gar nicht. Sie sind charmant. Sie sind bei all dem wie ein Kind (DS, II,14: 83).[27]

[HANS KARL   *If you see me like that, I must be thoroughly disagreeable to you!*

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[27] However, Helene's observation is an unwelcome reminder to Hans Karl of the growing discrepancy between his biological and moral ages, as his rejoinder indicates:

Wie ein Kind? Und dabei bin ich nahezu ein alter Mensch. Das ist doch ein *horreur*. (DS, II,14: 83)
[*Like a child? And yet I'm nearly an old man. That's a* horreur.]

HELENE   *Not at all. You are charming. Despite all that, you are like a child.*]

This indicates that, to some degree, Hans Karl is still living in his youthful *Praeexistenz* from which, like Chandos and the Zurückgekehrter, he has begun to emerge, but has not yet discovered the 'Way to Life' that will lead to *Existenz*. If he is to achieve *Existenz* and with it the social responsibilities of a mature adult, he needs to overcome his reluctance to commit, which extends also to personal relationships — approaching forty, he is still a bachelor. His predicament is that, unless he can find a way of doing so, his *Sprachskepsis* notwithstanding, he will remain trapped like Chandos and the Zurückgekehrter in the uncharted marches between *Praeexistenz* and *Existenz*, with nothing to comfort him except moments like those when he was 'draußen' and felt as though Helene were very close to him.

The possible way out shown to Hans Karl comes with Helene's bold declaration of her love for and willingness to commit herself to him. Marriage, which would necessitate his committing himself to a long-term relationship, is a state which Hans Karl has so far studiously avoided. But marriage, for Hofmannsthal, is a step towards achieving a 'Connection with Life' precisely because it entails this commitment, which in turn requires learning how to communicate with another individual so that the two become one, as Hans Karl contemplated when convalescing.[28] It is this role of marriage in helping the individual to achieve a 'Connection with Life' that would provide an additional thematic link between *Der Schwierige* and *Die Briefe* had Hofmannsthal continued the latter and concluded them with the marriage of the Zurückgekehrter as discussed earlier in section 2.2.

However, there is no instantaneous transformation. With almost his final words and having just inveighed against people whose overweening sense of self-worth prevents them from grasping that everything that they utter is indecent, Hans Karl declares:

> Aber es ist die letzte Soirée, auf der Sie mich erscheinen sieht (DS, III,13: 115).[29]
>
> [*But this is the last soirée you'll see me at.*]

3.   Comparisons and contrasts

Apart from a common theme, an inability to communicate, the three works share two characteristics that may not be immediately apparent. First, they are all works of fiction. That this point has not always been recognised, at least as regards *Ein Brief*, has been to the detriment

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[28] '*Verknüpfung mit der Welt durch Verknüpfung zweier Individuen* [Connection with the world through the joining of two individuals]' (A: 222). See also Hans Karl's observation that '[d]ie Genesung ist so ein merkwürdiger Zustand' from *Der Schwierige*, (II,14: 86), quoted earlier in this section.

[29]   And he is still determined not to speak in the *Herrenhaus*, despite Helene's assurance that he will only have to outline the principal points.

of our understanding of that work, so argues Tarot (Tarot 1970: 360 *et seq.*) He insists that Hofmannsthal's twin aims, on the one hand, to write on a topic that currently engaged him and, on the other, to create what is, effectively, a work of historical fiction, need not be mutually exclusive. In his opinion, *Ein Brief* has been misunderstood as an essay, hence non-fiction, as a result of the erroneous assumption of Hofmannsthal's contemporaries, that *Ein Brief* was Hofmannsthal's personal apologia for his abandoning lyric verse, an error which the editors of the *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelgaben* compounded when they consigned *Ein Brief* to one of the four volumes of 'Prosa', which, in this edition, comprise mainly Hofmannsthal's non-fiction prose (Tarot 1970: 361).[30]

This argument applies as well to *Die Briefe*, which is also included in 'Prosa II' but which Hofmannsthal clearly regarded as fiction, as is evidenced by his reference to the work as 'eine Art Novelle in Briefen [a kind of novella in letters]' in a letter to his father dated 17th July, 1907 (B. 283).[31] That Hofmannsthal conceived *Ein Brief* as a work of fiction is evidenced by his project, outlined in the letter to von Andrian referred to on page 36, to publish a collection of fictitious letters and imaginary conversations, of which *Ein Brief* would be one, under the title 'Erfundene Gespräche und Gedichte [Fictitious Conversations and Poems]'.[32]

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[30] Hofmannsthal's fiction in this edition is contained in the one volume 'Die Erzählungen'. The editors of the later *Kritische Ausgabe* s*ämtlicher Werke Hugo von Hofmannthals* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1975–2006) have included *Ein Brief* and *Die Briefe*, with other 'Gespräche und Briefe', in Volume XXXI entitled 'Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe', published in 1991. This suggests that they agreed with Tarot.

[31] The letter to Hofmannsthal's father is cited by Gilbert, (1963: 33). In contrast to *Ein Brief* and *Die Briefe*, the unfinished *Brief des letzen Contarin* [Letter of the last Contarini] is treated as fiction and therefore included in the volume 'Die Erzählungen' (pp. 87–95) in the *Gesammelte Werke*. Fragments and versions of this work were amongst Hofmannsthal's *Nachlaß* and first published in 1929 in *Berührung der Sphären*. They are believed to date from a period prior to 1914 and some may be as early as 1902/3. (Gilbert, 1963: 50, fn. 52).

[32] The project was never realised as envisaged, although most of the planned 'letters' and 'conversations' referred to in the letter were written. The '*Gespräch zwischen einem Menschen wie Bui und einem alten klugen mit Europa wohl vertrauten Japaner* [conversation between someone like Bui and an elderly Japanese gentleman well acquainted with Europe]' was realised in 1902 as '*Gespräch zwischen einem jungen Europäer und einem japanischen Edelmann* [Conversation between a young European and a Japanese nobleman]'. A conversation between Balzac and Hammer-Purgstall, '*das einzige, welches nicht über literarische und Artistenprobleme hinausgeht* [the only one which is not concerned with literary and artisitc problems]' was published (in the December 1902 issue of *Die Neue Freie Presse*) under the title '*Über Charaktere im Roman und im Drama (ein imaginäres Gespräch)* [About characters in novels and drama (an imaginary conversation)]' and is included in Prosa II (pp. 32–47). The '*Abschiedsbrief A. de Vignys an den Kronprinzen Max von Bayern* [Farewell letter from A. de Vigny to the Crown Prince Max of Bavaria]' was also written in 1902, as were some of the anticipated '*antike Briefe* [ancient letters]' (*Die Briefe des Paulus Silentianus* [Letters of Paulus Silentianus]) and a '*Gespräch zwischen einem einfachen Mensch und einem Schauspieler* [conversation between a simple person and an actor]' (*Der Schauspieler*). Only the '*Brief des letzen Contarin, der, bettlerarm, eine Rente ablehnt* [letter of the last Contarini, who, poor as a beggar, refuses a pension' remained unfinished (see footnote 31). It looks as though the project was another of Hofmannsthal's 'works in progress', since in 1904, he notes in his *Tagebuch*: '*Ferner entworfen eine Anzahl "Briefe des kaiserlichen Verwandten Gallienus"* (A: 134) [sketched further a number of "letters of the emperor's relative Gallienus"]'.

Secondly, the two genres represented are both forms of conversation. Comedy, as all drama, comprises a series of conversations, whether between several characters (dialogue) or one character and either himself or the audience (monologue). Is not an exchange of letters also, in effect, a 'conversation', albeit one in which communication is not instantaneous because it is between parties, writer and intended recipient, who are separated both spatially and temporally?

The significance of conversation in the context of *Sprachskepsis* is that it is a form, 'which entirely depends on the capability of the figures to communicate with *words*' (Gilbert 1963: 31 – added emphasis).[33] As the summaries of the three works have demonstrated, they are all concerned with the inability of the protagonist to communicate with other people through the *spoken* word, i.e. conversation.[34]

Despite this, however, the two genres are clearly quite disparate. The fictive letter, a type of first-person narrative, is mediated through (and only through) the *written* word; comedy, an audio-visual art form, through the *spoken* word (which includes tone of voice) and spectacle (which includes gesture and facial expression).

This basic difference between the two genres is reflected in their language. That of *Der Schwierige*, with a simple sentence structure, ellipsis, hesitations, parataxis, colloquialisms, fashionable jargon, abbreviations, etc., reflects the rhythm, syntax and lexis of everyday speech, in this case a contemporary Viennese *Alltagssprache* peppered with *au courant* French expressions. As has already been noted, Hofmannsthal intended the language of *Ein Brief* to be archaic; that of *Die Briefe*, while contemporary, is literary. None of the letters gives the appearance of having been dashed off spontaneously; their language is polished and honed, the sentence structure complex.

This highlights the apparent paradox of *Ein Brief*. Despite his conviction that he will never write again except in the unknown language of 'mute things', Chandos is clearly not incapable of creating prose that is both lucid and poetic. The answer is that, whilst he lacks neither artistic

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[33] Gilbert makes this observation in the context of her discussion of six imaginary 'Gespräche' and 'Unterhaltungen' which Hofmannsthal wrote between 1902 and 1905, but it is equally valid for drama and no less for a letter, which is written in order to communicate something.

[34] However, the written word is no less susceptible to being misconstrued. Hans Karl is discomfited by the construction put on his last letter to Antoinette by her and by Agathe:

> HANS KARL: Aber so habe ich mich doch gar nicht ausgedrückt. Das waren doch niemals meine Gedanken!
> AGATHE: Aber das war der Sinn davon (DS, I,6: 28).
>
> [HANS KARL: *But I never expressed myself like that. Those were never my thoughts!*
> AGATHE: *But that was the sense of it.*]

inspiration nor the ability to formulate an aesthetic style of language, he dismisses his writing as nothing but '*l'art pour l'art*', exquisite form without essential meaning; internal reality must henceforth take precedence over external appearance. The same is, although to a lesser extent, true of the Zurückgekehrter, who despite his frequently expressed concern that he can no longer express himself clearly, writes both cogently and expressively.

In both *Ein Brief* and *Die Briefe* the voice of the writer/narrator never changes. The reader is, as it were, eavesdropping on one side of a particularly intimate conversation, in which the writer/narrator describes subjectively how he has been affected by his problems of communication and his moments of epiphany. In *Der Schwierige*, on the other hand, the spectator hears both sides of the conversation as it happens and, by watching the action on stage, is able to witness the effect of Hans Karl's reluctance to commit his thoughts to words, the misunderstandings against which he rails and the non-verbal communications of which Hans Karl is so acutely aware.[35]

Hofmannsthal's reasons for choosing comedy as a medium for the discussion of *Sprachskepsis* are clear. All drama, being a series of conversations between the characters, requires an ability on their part to communicate. Comedy, by making use of misunderstandings, double-entendres and the like for effect, illustrates the absence of communication. It is, therefore, an extremely effective medium for a more complex treatment of the problems of *Sprachskepsis* in a social context.

In addition, the convention that comedy, or at least classical comedy, must conclude with the uniting of a pair of lovers, usually the hero and heroine, after a series of misunderstandings, reversals and sundry complications, ties in neatly with Hofmannsthal's solution to Hans Karl's predicament, as already discussed. Small wonder, then, that comedy, of all drama forms, was for Hofmannsthal the one in which he could most effectively depict a character finding the 'Way to the Socially Engaged', as is suggested by this somewhat elliptic note in *Ad me ipsum*:

> *Das* erreichte Soziale: die Komödien (A: 226 – original emphasis).
>
> [The *socially engaged attained: the comedies*].

As previously discussed, both the fictive letters date from a period during which, by his own estimation, Hofmannsthal was still experimenting with drama and which was 'one of deep

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[35] A strict but sensitive observance of the stage directions, particularly those indicating silence, is, therefore, crucial to a successful performance of *Der Schwierige*. This explains why the first performance of the play was in Munich, not Vienna. Hofmannsthal doubted that any Austrian actor of the day was skilled enough to take on the role of Hans Karl, which was, therefore, played by the German actor, Gustav Waldau, 'the only actor capable, in Hofmannsthal's view, of playing the title part', at the first performance in November 1921 and again at the first performance in Vienna in 1924' (Yates, 1966: 20).

withdrawal' (Gilbert 1963: 31). The fact that, despite starting the prototype of *Der Schwierige* not long after finishing *Die Briefe*, he abandoned the project and waited nearly ten years before taking it up again, suggests that Hofmannsthal was not yet ready to use drama as a medium for a discussion of the topic, perhaps because the problem was still one that affected him too personally and for which he had not yet worked out a solution. The intimacy of a letter may have seemed more appropriate.

Gilbert seems to suggest that Hofmannsthal's problems during this period may be attributable, at least in part, to a psychological cause when she comments that:

> It is true that at this juncture Hofmannsthal could not bring himself to employ the 'Ich-Form' for experiences which he makes his figures discuss. He could no longer bring himself to make the simple statement which had become an extremely difficult statement: 'I communicate. I respond to the world around me. I am a poet.' (Gilbert,1963: 33)

Hofmannsthal himself makes a similar implication, with regard both to Chandos, who does not gainsay the suggestion that he is more in need of medicine '*um* [*s*]*einen Sinn für den Zustand* [*s*]*eines Innern zu schärfen* [in order to sharpen up his awareness of the state of his inner being]' (P2:7), and the Zurückgekehrter, who more than once refers to his problem as a '*Krise eines inneren Übelfindens* [a crisis of an inner sense of unease]' (P2: 208).

The influence of Freudian psychology on Hofmannsthal's work is well documented.[36] He uses Freudian terminology in *Ad me ipsum* and clearly had more than a passing acquaintance with the works on psycho-analysis that Freud published from the 1890s on, since, in an undated letter to Bahr, Hofmannsthal asks if he may borrow a specific book by Freud and Breuer.[37] This was *Studien in Hysterie* (published in 1895) the first edition of which, together with Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* (published in 1900), was in his personal library (Hamburger 1961:27). Having regard to this, I suggest that the medium of a letter might commend itself as a means of

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[36] See, for example, Martens.
[37] '*Können Sie mir eventuell nur für einige Tage das Buch von Freud und Breuer über Heilung der Hysterie durch Freimachung einer unterdrückten Erinnerung leihen (schicken)?* [...] *Ich weiß, daß ich darin Dinge finden werde, die mich im Leben ein Traum sehr fördern müssen* [...] [could you possibly lend (send) me, only for a few days, the book by Freud and Breuer about curing hysteria through the releasing of a suppressed memory? I know that I'll find material in it, which is bound to help me with 'Life is a Dream']' (B:142 — quoted by Wood (1940: 254 fn. 4). The editors date the letter between November 1903 and May 1904 but it may well have been written a year earlier (Martens, 1987: 50, note 4). The fact that he asks for a specific book suggests that Hofmannsthal was already familiar with Freud's writings. For the use of Freudian terminology in *Ad me ipsum*, see, for example, '*das Ich* [Ego]' (A:213 & 216) and '*das Über-ich* [Super-ego]' (A: 213 & 219). However, Hofmannsthal's interest in psychology goes back earlier; his reading matter in July 1892 included the first volume of Stanislaw Pryzbyszwecki's *Zur Psychologie des Individuums* which had just been published (Vilain, 2000: 208, quoting Eugene Weber, 'A Chronology of Hofmannsthal's Poems', *Euphorion* 63 (1969),. 284–328). The reference to '*Leben ein Traum*' is to Calderón's play *La vida es sueno*, published in 1636 or 1637. This was the inspiration for Hofmannsthal's tragedy *Der Turm* [The Tower] (1920–27), a project which he began in the early 1900s.

therapy to someone who wanted to examine his own deep-seated problem without recourse to the psycho-analyst's couch.

A letter, as discussed, is a form of conversation between writer and reader. Since the parties to this conversation are separated spatially and temporally and communication is not instantaneous, the writer may feel encouraged to express himself more freely and more intimately than would be the case, were the parties in each other's presence, particularly if the intended recipient is someone who has the writer's interests at heart. The 'conversations' in both of the works discussed have the appearance of being intensely private, since the letters are addressed to a particular person to whom the writer confides intimate concerns and experiences. The fictive letter was therefore an appropriate form for Hofmannsthal to choose in order to discuss a personal problem.

4. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that not only do the three works discussed stem from different periods of Hofmannsthal's literary career but also that during these periods the effect on him of his *Sprachskepsis* differed: the fictive letters date from his third decade, the period when he was troubled most acutely by a *Sprachkrise* and even doubted his own ability as a poet; the comedy from the final decade of his life, by which time he had developed his personal philosophy of *Praeexistenz* and *Existenz* and saw *Sprachskepsis* as part of the necessary transition from one to the other. Hofmannsthal's reasons for his choice of different genres in which to give expression to *Sprachskepsis* can be postulated as follows. During the years when his *Sprachskepsis* was most troubling, Hofmannsthal found the fictive letter the ideal medium for an intimate, subjective treatment of the subject. He would never be entirely free from *Sprachskepsis* but, as he matured both artistically and personally and assimilated *Sprachskepsis* into his personal philosophy, he came to regard comedy as the ideal medium for a complex, objective treatment of *Sprachskepsis*, not least because the convention of the 'happy end' chimed well with his personal philosophy of making the 'Connection with Life'. At least as far as the three works discussed in this article are concerned, therefore, Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepsis* was, arguably, an important factor which influenced his choice of genre.

What is beyond doubt is that, unlike Chandos, Hofmannsthal did not, in consequence of his *Sprachskepsis*, abandon creative writing, as his considerable *oeuvre* published after *Ein Brief* or left unpublished at his death testifies.[38]

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[38] In addition to some eleven plays and seven libretti, Hofmannsthal published after 1902 a vast quantity of essays on a wide variety of topics. He was also a prolific letter writer and 'the most wonderful of conversationalists' (Gilbert, 1963: 31).

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Ambiguity of Textual Portraiture in Realism and Modernism

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Abstract

The article seeks to prove that literary representations of the face are effective in several ways. It will propose that the realist approach to textual portraiture (Leo Tolstoy) foregrounds the interactive role of the face and emphasizes both its spontaneous self-expression and deliberate self-creation; thus, in the semiotic sense, the face reveals and conceals simultaneously. Modernist writers (Virginia Woolf, Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz) still employ the face as an instrument of characterization but simultaneously utilize its familiar image on the level of form, as a meta-commentary or a stylistic device. In consequence, in modernism the ambiguity of its portraiture arises in both the content and form of the text, while in realism, only on the level of content. The article identifies and compares selected literary strategies that generate these ambiguities.[1]

Keywords:

This article will demonstrate that realist and modernist representations of the face can function in several, sometimes contradictory ways. These contradictions are generated by literary techniques characteristic of realism and modernism. Realism and modernism serve here as heuristic categories by providing models for different types of physiognomic representations.

In nineteenth-century literary texts the face generally complements characterization and facilitates communication, being therefore limited to the content of the text. As an instrument in the 'semiotics of gesture',[2] it is often taken for granted, all too familiar, invisible. The reader's attention penetrates the image of the face not for itself but to reach the hidden depth of the character's personality, intentions, and emotions. This surface-depth model developed in nineteenth-century western literature under the influence of phrenology and physiognomy.[3] This article will comprise a comparative analysis of ambiguities arising within the surface-depth model prevailing in realism and other models characteristic of modernism.

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[1] This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).
[2] David K. Danov quoted in Leslie A. Johnson, 'The Face of the Other in Idiot', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Winter 1991), p. 868**.**
[3] Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

Modernist texts of the early twentieth century explore the face beyond its phenomenal make-up, exposing its ambiguous character in relation to the form and content of the text. In other words, modernists separate surface and depth as elements of physiognomic dichotomy. Realists, on the other hand, explore their correspondence, emphasizing ambiguous functions of the face: as an outlet for spontaneous self-expression and as careful self-fashioning. I will argue that these two contradictory functions of the face co-exist in Leo Tolstoy's realism, in particular in his short stories 'Family Happiness' and 'The Kreutzer Sonata'. Tolstoy employs the surface-depth model but avoids physiognomic determinism by seeking alternative modes of representation. Similar explorations take place in the modernist prose of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* and Bruno Schulz's 'Street of Crocodiles' where the departure from the surface-depth model results in ambiguities transgressing the boundaries of narrative content.

1.   Ambiguity in Realism

In Tolstoy's 'Family Happiness' (1859) the face facilitates and legitimizes narrative progress; it discloses and anticipates characters' intentions and plot events. This short story is narrated by Masha, who gives an account of her relationship with Sergei. In order to disambiguate long discursive sequences, Tolstoy manufactures a close correspondence between the signifier (facial expression) and the signified (sensation); he carefully contextualizes facial expression to test its efficacy against the semiotic capacity of verbal signifiers. The sensation 'written' in the face structures the narrative by marking stages of partners' communication. Their emotional proximity (the leading theme of the narrative) is measured by their progress in learning the art of 'reading' each other's face. Masha deciphers her future husband's identity by keenly interpreting his physiognomy: 'I noticed now for the first time that his face, which gave one at first the impression of high spirits, had also an expression peculiar to himself — bright at first and then more and more attentive and rather sad.'[4] Sergei's facial expression anticipates the future marital discord, disclosing tale-telling 'attentiveness' and 'sadness' which later aggravate Masha as 'irritating composure'. At this early stage, Masha seeks confirmation of the growing affection between them; she finds the evidence for this not in Sergei's words but in his face:

> He tried to speak, but in vain; again and again his face positively flamed up. Still he smiled as he looked at me, and I smiled too. Then his whole face grew radiant with happiness. He ceased to be the old uncle who spoiled or scolded me; he was a man on my level, who loved and feared me as I loved and feared him. We looked at one another without speaking. (p. 22)

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[4]   Leo Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories*, ed. and with rev. trans. by Michael R. Katz (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 20. Further references to this text will be given in parenthesis.

Transformations of the face guide the reader through the turning point of the narrative, indicating and emphasizing psychological change. This change is not indicated by the physical properties of Sergei's face but by his facial expressions already interpreted by Masha. Thus, her ability to read the face is synonymous with her narrative power, and structures the narrative. This is most evident in the scene of the non-verbal declaration of passion which takes place in the garden. While the couple exchange remarks about frogs, Masha discovers another meaning in the paralanguage of Sergei's face: 'Though he had spoken of my fear of frogs, I knew that he meant to say, "I love you, my dear one!" "I love you, I love you" was repeated by his look […].' (p. 27) This juxtaposition of the subjects of verbal and non-verbal exchanges implies the limited capacity of verbal signifiers to denote abstract concepts and the face's special aptitude for it.

In each case, the 'meaning' of the face is determined by the subjective observations of the first-person narrator (Masha) and by narrative contextualization. This latter method proves to be efficient as it reduces the semiotic openness of the facial expression. For instance, Tolstoy extensively employs a smiling face to indicate qualitative dynamics of interaction but always carefully contextualizes it. The potential ambiguity of a smile draws the attention of Tolstoy's enthusiast, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, after discovering Tolstoy in 1914, remained strongly influenced by the latter's moral and religious views.[5] Wittgenstein emphasizes the uncertainty of the smile and the dangers of its misinterpretation:

> I see a picture which represents a smiling face. What do I do if I take the smile now as a kind one, now as malicious? Don't I often imagine it with a spatial and temporal context which is one either of kindness or malice? Thus I might supply the picture with the fancy that the smiler was smiling down on a child at play, or again on the suffering of an enemy.[6]

Wittgenstein promotes contextualization as a means of reducing the semiotic ambiguity of facial expression since it is, he argues, potentially ambivalent: flexible and rigid, and simultaneously open and accurate.[7] Though decontextualized facial expressions may be interpreted correctly enough to sustain interaction, they can also convey a rich variety of shades of feeling and do not easily submit to classification into 'negative' or 'positive'. Tolstoy could

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[5] The reading of Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief* transformed Wittgenstein from an atheist into an ardent Christian. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 11, 32, 213.

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 539.

[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 4.

not read Wittgenstein, but a mystic's intuition (the same that Wittgenstein was said to have developed after reading Tolstoy) prompted him to seek control over the ambiguous signifier. [8]

Indeed, in Tolstoy's short stories the face can both mislead its interpreter and erupt with untold stories. In 'The Kreutzer Sonata' the protagonist Pozdnyshev tells a story and simultaneously carefully conceals his face in the shade as if it could reveal his tale before he narrates it.[9] Pozdnyshev advocates the view that the face is both an uncontrollable vehicle for manifestations of desire and an efficient instrument of deception. To prove it, he reports the first encounter of his wife and her lover-to-be, Tuchatchevsky: 'from the moment his eyes met my wife's, I saw that the animal in each of them, regardless of all conditions of their position and of society, asked, "May I?" and answered, "Oh, yes, certainly".' (p. 212) During the first piano concert which Pozdnyshev's (the narrator's) wife plays with the young Tuchatchevsky, Pozdnyshev registers the face's capacity to camouflage real feelings:

> [H]er face reflected her pleasure. But catching sight of me she understood my feeling at once and changed her expression; a game of mutual deception began. I smiled pleasantly to appear as if I liked it. […] she tried to seem indifferent, though my false smile of jealousy with which she was familiar, and his lustful gaze, evidently excited her. I saw that from their first encounter her eyes were particularly bright and […] it seemed as if an electric current had been established between them, evoking as it were an identity of expressions, looks, and smiles. She blushed and he blushed. She smiled and he smiled. […] Then he rose to go, and stood wearing a smile, holding his hat against his twitching thigh […]. (p. 211)

This encounter is dominated by an exchange of simulated and spontaneous facial signals. Within a fraction of a second the expression is attuned to the context, controlled and captured after having briefly escaped control. Physiological reactions (her blushing) mingle with impulsive reactions (Tuchatchevsky's unrestrained 'lustful gaze') which slip from beneath manufactured smiles. Each contender anticipates, interrupts and stimulates the stream of fleeting impressions; each is painfully aware of the role of the face but attempts to conceal this awareness; only one physiological impulse, the twitching thigh, escapes from beneath the thin veneer of social convention, betraying the pressure of underlying tension. In this semi-staged theatre, the face releases its ambiguous interactive potential for both revelation (self-expression) and camouflage (self-fashioning). This ambiguity generates the psychological power of the face, a power which best manifests itself in the contradictory feelings of Masha in 'Family Happiness', as she gazes into her husband's face:

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[8] In one of his letters Russell anxiously observes that, since reading Tolstoy, Wittgenstein's writing and behaviour had become characteristic of a mystic. See Brian McGuinness, G. H. von Wright, eds., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Cambridge Letters. Correspondence with Russell, Keynes, Moore, Ramsey and Sraffa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 140.

[9] Pozdnyshev narrates the story of his marriage which he ended by murdering his wife out of jealousy.

> I [...] involuntarily looked into his eyes. Suddenly a strange thing happened to me: first I ceased to see what was around me; then his face seemed to vanish till only the eyes seemed to be in my own head, and then all became confused – I could see nothing and was forced to shut my eyes, in order to break loose from the feeling of pleasure and fear which his gaze was producing in me [...]. (p. 40)

Sergei's face renders Masha vulnerable and dependent. She looks into his face 'involuntarily', and loses control since 'things [just] happen to her'. She is absorbed into her husband's physiognomy, which overshadows the forthcoming disappearance of her 'adolescent narcissism' and her future dependence on him.[10] Yet his face promises both pleasure (in anticipation of its expressiveness) and fear (in anticipation of what it may conceal). In this way Tolstoy not only represents the face as a vehicle for two mutually exclusive functions (revelation and concealment) but also exposes their psychological consequences. His realist techniques of representation are, however, limited to the content of the narrative and in this sense they contrast with modernist treatments of the face.

2. Ambiguity in Modernism

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the ambiguity of the face extends to both content and form. The face can complement characterization and communication, but it can also function as a literary device, for example a meta-commentary or self-reference. Released from its own image the face can move from the sphere of vision to the vibrant territory of discourse where it can 'speak'. 'Speech cuts across vision', according to Levinas.[11] Representation and vision are determining and oppressive, they invite a passive perceiver; discourse is living, undetermined and demands contribution; discourse involves exchanges and confrontations with others. It is through 'speech', not through image, that our understanding of the face opens up to otherness:

> Words are said, be it only by the silence kept, whose weight acknowledges [...] evasion of the Other. The knowledge that absorbs the Other is forthwith situated within the discourse I address to him. Speaking, rather than 'letting be', solicits the Other. In knowledge or vision the object can indeed determine the act, but it is an act that in some way appropriates the 'seen' to itself, integrates it into the world by endowing it with signification, and in the last analysis, constitutes it. (p. 195)

Levinas turns away from the signifying face (from the surface-depth model) and welcomes the ambiguous emancipated face that manifests itself in language. Modernists also distrusted the semiotic mosaic of the face and instead of focusing on its visual qualities they perceived it as a

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[10] Thus, contrary to Renato Poggioli's interpretation, Masha will never be 'the full partner of her husband'. See Renato Poggioli, 'Tolstoy's Domestic Happiness: Beyond Pastoral Love', in: Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute: Essays on the Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 265-284.

[11] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), p. 195.

movement, an event. Unlike in realist fiction, in modernism the face can 'speak' from beyond the narrative content, on the level of literary form.

In *Orlando* (1927), Virginia Woolf employs faces as vehicles for her critique of both romanticism and realism. Woolf portrays her eponymous hero with irony, focusing on those 'noble' characteristics of his physiognomy that 'predestine' him to an excellent career:

> The red of cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short tense flight; […] he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples.[12]

Woolf's detailed description of the thickness of down and the shape of the mouth forms an ironical overstatement. Expressions such as 'almond whiteness' and 'drenched violets' mock the affectedness of romantic clichés; the shape of the nose ironically refers to classical ideals of facial aesthetics. The eyes, brows and temples appear majestic and dignified due to the 'architectural' lexis ('marble dome', 'medallions'). As a result, Orlando's face is endowed with the status of a 'holy' edifice. The ambiguity of this portraiture is produced by the coexistence of an informative function (characterization) and a meta-commentary on the literary traditions of realism and romanticism. In the first sense Orlando's face implies inclinations to pomposity, hypersensitivity and excessive introspection; in a second, it imitates mimetic representation and romantic sensationalism. A similar twofold function has the face of a poet encountered by Orlando: the description is not just informative but also lodges a critique of aesthetic judgement. Orlando's free indirect speech reveals psychologically convincing desperation as he scrutinizes the poet's face in search of 'nobleness':

> There was something about him which belonged neither to servant, squire or a noble. The head with its rounded forehead and beaked nose was fine, but the chin receded. The eyes were brilliant, but the lips hung loose and slobbered. There was none of that stately composure which makes the faces of the nobility so pleasing to look at; nor had it anything of the dignified servility of a well-trained domestic face; it was a face seamed, puckered, and drawn together. (p. 82)

The meticulous, aesthetically oriented portraiture has some informative value but at the same time functions as literary criticism. It parodies the physiognomic tradition (the surface-depth model accepted by realists), social conceptualizations of human physiognomy and the rule of 'beauty mystique', i.e. the tendency to translate physical beauty into a moral category.[13] The face serves characterization but can also be read as a critical commentary. It functions as a

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[12] Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford; New York: OUP, 1998), p. 15.
[13] See Anthony Synnott, 'Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks Part II: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (March 1990), pp. 55–76.

vehicle for a meta-text, as a template which can be written into and imitate another structure than its own, simultaneously commenting on it.

The ambivalence of the face represented in Bruno Schulz's 'The Street of Crocodiles' (1934) is founded on the disruption of facial architectonics. In Schulz's ekphrasis of the face it loses its coherent spatial organization:

> The sales girls move [...] between the rows of books, grey and papery like prints, their faces full of pigment, the dark pigment of brunettes, of a glossy greasy blackness, which, lurking in the eyes, suddenly sprang out in a shiny zigzag like a cockroach. But in their burning blushes, in the spicy stigmatas of their beauty spots, in the timid patches of their dark dawn, a race of a congealed black blood betrayed itself. This hyper-intense colouring, this mocha, thick and aromatic, seemed to stain the books which the sales girls held in their olive hands, their touches seemed to dye the books and leave in the air a dark rain of freckles, a smudge of tobacco, as does a truffle with its exciting aromatic odour.[14]

Here the excessive plasticity of the face spills out from its source; fleeing from itself, it breaches its own formation. While realists speculated over the materialization or spiritualization of the face, Schulz introduces in-between forms such as 'liquidization' and dissemination. In his text, facial boundaries are blurred and their formal correspondences are liberated into a free play of autonomous elements. The ambiguity of this portraiture is generated by the coexistence of indexical value and the openness of surrealist description; as a result, the ekphrastic text, instead of focusing on a circumscribable object, not only departs from it but also provides a model for a systemic deconstruction. The face's imposition onto a given space would be a reverse operation. In Schulz's text it occurs when a city boulevard structurally resembles the face; it is compact, dense and cohesive in the centre, but turns indistinct at the periphery; its façade constitutes its sole content:

> in a little section in front of us everything falls correctly into a pointillist painting of the city boulevard while on the sides this improvised masquerade already thins out and disintegrates, incapable of enduring its role, falls into bits of plaster and oakum behind us, falls into a junk room of some enormous empty theatre. The tension of a pose, the artificial seriousness of the mask, the ironical pathos tremble on the surface of this skin. (p. 53)

Schulz understands the face as a metonymy for a spatial configuration in which the centripetal force which draws the elements together is weakened and no surface-depth dichotomy occurs; the paper-thin façade substitutes for the content. This façade manifests itself as a pure signifier, its substance corresponds to the exterior and it is no more than a 'pose', a 'mask', a 'surface' (p. 53). Yet, the 'trembling' on the skin surface announces the presence of sensation as if the boulevard and the face were forms of existence in themselves. The ambiguity of this portraiture resides in the face's familiar phenomenality ('the skin', 'the mask', 'surface')

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[14] Bruno Schulz, *Sklepy Cynamonowe Sanatorium pod Klepsydra* (Kraków: Zielona Sowa, 2002), p. 52 (my translation).

promising the referent (the depth) and simultaneously refusing to represent it, refusing to form a dichotomist structure of surface and depth. Schulz's text illustrates how the face loses its traditional signifying function but gains flexibility and independence in the process of becoming a unique and capacious template.

Formal variations trigger the co-existence of the familiar and a newly discovered otherness. In Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (1937), familiarity and otherness co-exist when the author 'formalizes' the familiar facial grimace by presenting the following scene: two students 'fight' the duel of grimaces: 'constructive and beautiful faces' against 'ugly and destructive counter-faces'.[15] Here, the grimaces do not appear in their ordinary context of social interaction but are intensified, compressed and distilled from it. The schoolboys' innocent game is transformed into a 'duel' in which the face becomes a deadly weapon. Ambiguity arises where decontextualized grimaces preserve indexical value (e.g. a smile still has positive connotations) but also open a vast hermeneutic space which allows Gombrowicz to generate his own theory of form. He sees the face as an allegory of a formative structure which violates the substance. The totality of the face, the formal correspondences between parts, the centripetal force that draws them together like a magnet — all represent structural interdependencies of an abstract form. Gombrowicz's theory of form proclaims formlessness and indicates 'innocence' and 'immaturity' as its allies; all these are symbolically destroyed by the grimaces in the course of the 'duel'. In *Ferdydurke* Gombrowicz announces the necessity to rebel against the 'face' as a symbol of a totalizing form; in *A Kind of Testament* he explains the terror of form itself:

> just as worms and insects creep and fly all day long in search of food, so we, without a moment's respite or relief, perpetually seek form and expression, struggle with other men for style, for our own way of being; and when we travel in a tram, or eat, or enjoy ourselves, or rest, or engage in business, we are perpetually in search of form, and we delight in it, suffer for it or adapt ourselves to it, we break or violate it, or let ourselves be violated by it […].[16]

Individuals who qualify for this last category, who surrender themselves to this 'formal imperative',[17] deform themselves in a negative sense. Gombrowicz encourages positive 'formlessness' — that is, 'heretical aggression' against the form — and insists that any 'revision of European Form could only be undertaken from an extra-European position, from where it is slacker and less perfect' (p. 68). One must 'shake free' from the form and renounce 'Western

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[15] Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke,* trans. by Eric Mosbacher (New York: Marion Boyars, 2005), p. 65.

[16] Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher (London; New York: Marion Boyars, 2005), pp. 81–82.

[17] Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, ed. by Dominique de Roux, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007), p. 73.

maturity'.[18] To face otherness is not only to face others but to accept oneself as containing this otherness. In Gombrowicz's view a liberated human being

> would no longer think of himself as a father but as simultaneously father and son, and he would no longer write as a clever, subtle, and mature man, but as a clever man always reduced to stupidity, as a subtle man reduced to crudity, an adult perpetually reduced to childhood.[19]

Gombrowicz presents himself as the hero of such an encounter with otherness. His 'romantic theory of incompleteness' invites multiplicity and difference, confrontation and exchange; in all of them the face has the qualities of an event.[20] Like Levinas, he wants to transcend the visual with its 'negation by representation' (typical to realists) because '[t]he permanent openness of the contours of its [the face's] form in expression imprisons this openness which breaks up form in a caricature.'[21] By deforming the representation of the face and transforming its political power into a theory of 'anti-facialization', he attempts to explain the ideology of form. Discourse rather than vision appropriates the face into its territory proper; while, in the visual, it submits to the power of its own imposed form obliterating itself, in the discursive, it speaks as an anti-formal manifesto.

Conclusion

Ambiguity of textual portraiture is produced in the course of both reading and writing. When the face is embedded within the content, ambiguity is inscribed within its semiotic potential as a sign. This ambiguity embraces two alternative interpretations of the function of the face: on the one hand, revealing arbitrary functions which are synonymous with the role of a reliable narrator, and, on the other, serving as an instrument for concealment and manipulation. These mutually exclusive functions are founded on the surface-depth model where the signified is an unobservable 'content' of the signifier. In modernist texts, the ambiguity of the face thrives on the interplay between form and content; the reader may wonder whether its meaning is literal or figurative. By the very application of the second type of reading the surface-depth dichotomy is broken (or opened up), exposing the full potential of facial heterogeneity. The ambiguity of the modernist face resides in its resistance to semantic closure and its escape from its own

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[18] Gombrowicz explains this in *A Kind of Testament*: 'when *Ferdydurke* was translated into other languages, I realized to what an extent its disrespect could irritate certain cultivated Germans or Frenchmen or all other representatives of western maturity. The book can be quite indigestible for those who attribute a certain importance to their person, their convictions and their beliefs, for a 'dedicated' painter, scientist, or ideologist.' (p. 68).

[19] Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke,* trans. by Eric Mosbacher (New York: Marion Boyars, 2005), p. 85.

[20] Valérie Deshoulières, 'Witold Gombrowicz: Toward a Romantic Theory of Incompleteness', in: Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek, ed., *Gombrowicz's Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 51–64.

[21] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), p. 198.

determining image. It ceases to signify in a traditional sense; instead, it is transformed into a flexible matrix, a template, a literary device or a critical meta-commentary and thus participates in meta-textual discourse. While in realism the face contains, in modernism it overflows; while in realism it conceals and reveals, in modernism it envelops. It is no longer just a layer in a binary structure, but an autonomous entity manifesting its ambiguous role in belonging to both content and form.

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Ambiguity and Idiosyncratic Syntax in the Poems of E. E. Cummings

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Abstract

The driving force of Cummings' poetry is the desire to turn language into a flexible material that is no longer subject to conventional rules of combination and principles of distribution. Apart from breaking the limitations imposed by the referential function of language and constructing a semantic universe that works independently of the extra-linguistic one, Cumming's poetic language also builds on an idiosyncrasy of syntax that is based on various forms and degrees of syntactic discontinuity, distortion and dislocation, in which the usual punctuation and word order rules are no longer respected, while the traditional world-building patterns are transgressed. However, they are not substituted by some new and thoroughly coherent system of principles that could justify the changes in the morphology that shape the syntax of the poems, since they only reflect the poet's 'ludicrous' approach to language and the need to break free from any form of limitation enforced by convention. Cummings also plays with the iconic potential of linguistic signs, as if asserting that the juxtaposition of graphemes according to some clear principles that engender meaning is not unidirectional, but equivocal and open to multiple 'readings'.

Keywords: poetic language, transgression, ambiguity, syntactic distortion, discontinuity, dislocation, conversion, iconic poetry, syntactic dispersal, contraction, semantic duplication, syntactic parallelism

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The preponderance of the poetic function, which in Jakobson's theory corresponds to a form of predominance over, not annihilation of, the other five functions, individualizes poetic language up to the extent of 'suspending' the relation between the message of a text and the referent-world.[1] Thus the relation between the text (as a succession of signs) and its content

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[1] According to Roman Jakobson, the six functions of language are: referential, poetic, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual. Roman Jakobson, *Grundlagen der Sprache*, quoted by Ion Coteanu (ed.) (Bucharest: Crestomatie de lingvistica generala, Romania de miine Foundation, 1998) Crestomatie de lingvistica generala, Romania de miine Foundation, Bucharest, 1998, p. 50-57. See also, for example, Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Columbia University Press, 1982), Groupe M (J. Dubois *et al.*), *Rhétorique de la poésie. Lecture linéaire, lecture tabulaire* (Bruxelles; Editions complexe, 1977) and Dumitru Irimia, *Introducere in stilistica* (*Introduction to Stylistics*) (Iaşi; Polirom, 1999).

becomes absolute and the semantic universe thereby created functions independently of extra-linguistic reality. Ambiguity may be considered one of the effects of the preponderance of the poetic function over the referential one as well as an intrinsic quality of poetic language, since the nature of the referent is no longer objective and determinate and the reference itself may be multivalent.

As Jacob Korg thought, poetry may be regarded as 'a way of stretching the resources of language beyond their ordinary power, in order to communicate what language seems unable to communicate'.[2] This 'inability' should be understood as corresponding to the vertical axis implied by this relation with the referent, since language as such is believed to have an unlimited potential for representing reality, yet impediments come from the norms and the rules of association assigned to it. The 'stretching' of the resources is thus equal to the predominance of the poetic function, which enables the construction of an autonomous semantic world. This does not mean that language becomes 'non-referential', but that it turns into a universe which is complementary to the extra-linguistic one, although they often develop a relation of opposition as well.

The transgression of the ordinary limitations imposed on language may be accomplished at not only the semantic but also the syntactic level. The tension in language (which cannot be separated from the tension in thought) results in a coherent and complex structure that usually reflects the organization and the rules of combination of the pre-existent semiotic system in which it is incorporated. However, the 'modern' understanding of poetry required the 'violation' of a larger series of rules that had been traditionally respected, in order to make use of, to the greatest extent, the latent and formerly unexplored potential of language.

Besides, the necessity of an even more revolutionary and permissive 'modernism' is embodied in postmodernist tendencies, which do not radically contradict the preceding trend of subscribing to the dialectics inherent in literary history, but rather seem to include and to complete it, enlarging the 'freedom' that has been gained hitherto. The transgression of norms and borders in post-modern tradition manifests itself not only as deconstructing and iconoclastic tendencies but also as a high tolerance for ambiguity and plurality of meaning. There is no longer a fixed set of expectations regarding direction, explicit significance and closure, except perhaps for the very code of flexibility and equivocality, which, in Jauss' terms, define the post-

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[2] Jacob Korg, *The Force of Few Words*, (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston Inc., 1966) quoted by Ştefan Avadanei, *Introduction to Poetics* (Iasi: Institutul European, 1999) p. 27.

modern horizon of expectations.[3] Thus, the original meaning of Eco's principle of 'opera aperta' may be extended in a reference not only to the variety of possible readings of a text but also to the absolute freedom of the act of creation, in which the author can play with signs, codes and representations at will.[4] Consequently, the quality of ambiguity intrinsic to poetic language is doubled along the addresser-addressee axis by the open nature of the text and the multiple possible readings.

The typically post-modern desire to turn language into as flexible a material as possible and cultivate ambiguity as if it were an unwritten poetic rule is reflected in the poems of E. E. Cummings.[5] An idiosyncrasy of syntax, the result of various forms and degrees of syntactic distortion and dislocation including some unusual use of word order and punctuation, is revealed in his work. At the same time, a series of changes in the morphology that shapes the syntax of the poems is relevant, since it reflects the poet's particular understanding of language and poetry.

Syntax is not mere juxtaposition; it also implies a relation between the items that are brought into proximity and a series of functions that correspond to each 'element' in a unitary construction. Cummings' innovations lie in the way in which the traditional, conventional linearity is broken and the result is a structure that does not lack coherence, despite the impression of disruption and discontinuity when compared to the usual 'patterns' of combination. The incongruity between certain units is eluded, new relations are built and the functions traditionally fulfilled by specific classes of words are now assigned to items belonging to a different part of speech.

As if going through a process of conversion, pronouns, adverbs and verbs are granted a function that usually corresponds to nouns, according to a new distribution principle. Not only are some semantic properties 'put into parentheses' in favour of other features that allow association with certain items as well as transfer of meaning (which, in a modern understanding, would be the very principles of metaphoric language), but also some grammatical categories that define a specific class are assigned to words of a different nature. Thus, it is possible to say:

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[3]   Hans Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) p. 125

[4]   Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milano: Bompiani, 2004) p. 33

[5]   Some publishers have preferred the atypical writing of his name in lower case — e. e. cummings — so as to mirror his unwillingness to conform to the rules and standards imposed in written language and typography.

> 2 little whos […] 2 little ams, […] incredible is
>
> a you or a me
>
> wills and weres
>
> magical maybes of certainly
> never the iswas
>
> a pretty how town
> […]
> he sang his didn't he danced his did
> […]
> little by little and was by was
> […]
> wish by spirit and if by yes.
> […]

This point is well illustrated by whole poems such as *two little whos*, *quick i the death of thing*, *)when what hugs stopping earth than silent is* or *the way to hump a cow is not*; a stanza from the last mentioned text is an appropriate example:[6]

> to multiply because and why
> dividing thens by nows
> and adding and(i understand)
> is hows to hump a cows

The discourse is often individualized by another type of change to the syntactic relations: either unusual coordination or the use of coordination instead of subordination. In the poem *maggie and milly and molly and may*, the conventionally required juxtaposition is replaced by copulative coordination,[7]-while in another poem, the atypical combination of the two relations is also likely to affect the logic of the sentences (which is already 'flawed' by the ambiguous relation of 'consequence'):

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[6]   E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems*, *1904-1962*, ed. by George J. Firmage, (New York: Liveright, 1991) pp. 83, 634, 502, 500. Contrary to normal practice, the titles of individual poems will be in italics. In many cases, the poems have no formal title other than the first line of the text. Given Cummings' idiosyncratic use of punctuation marks and non-use of capital letters, the use of italics without any inverted commas will make it clear when I am referring to the whole poem and when to a single line from a poem.
[7]   Ibid., p. 682.

> she being Brand
>
> -new;and you
>
> know consequently a
>
> little stiff i was
>
> careful of her and(having [8]

Moreover, some poems reflect a form of discontinuity as far as the sequence of tenses is concerned. In an apparently narrative structure (since the depiction of a succession of 'events' is far from being what Cummings primarily aimed at), the linearity of a 'narrated material' in the past tense is broken by the use of a verb in the present:

> […] i touched the accelerator and give
>
> her the juice,[…] [9]

The impression of disruption is amplified due to an instance of syntactic inversion that seems to have no emphatic function and to the insertion of a verbal form which reflects dialectal speech, but is not accepted by the norm:

> (it
>
> was the first ride and believe i we was
>
> happy [10]

Of course, the poet's pleasure in flouting convention requires his making best use of all the resources a language may have; a one-to-one signification is not regarded as the primary aim in Cummings poetics. The more ambiguous the syntax, the more levels of meaning are open; the more strongly multidimensional the signification, the richer is the creative potential of language.

Sometimes the text begins as if there were some larger discourse from which it had been extracted. The incipit consists of a conjunction corresponding to adversative coordination that introduces a sentence, although there is no preceding item to which it can be related, a point well illustrated by a poem entitled *but mr can you maybe listen there's*.[11] Similarly, the impression that a text is only the continuation of another that is unseen and may not even be yet be written derives from the use of brackets — in fact, only one of the pair of punctuation marks is present, as if the beginning of the poem were part of a parenthesis that is closed at a certain point. At the same time, the ending marks the opening of another parenthesis that will not be

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[8]   Ibid., p. 246.
[9]   Ibid.
[10]   Ibid.
[11]   Ibid., p. 316.

closed within the space of the poem. Thus, the brackets are deprived of their traditional function. They neither enclose any longer an explanatory construction nor do they mark some incidental or intercalated discourse conceived, nevertheless, as a necessary 'comment' Instead, they either adopt the function of other punctuation marks (such as comma or semicolon), or are used only for the sake of some 'ludicrous syntax'.

Particular instances of disrupting the syntax of the poetic discourse by means of parentheses are the poems in which these punctuation marks indicate the juxtaposition of two distinct dimensions of the text. Each of the two is independent of the other if taken as such — it has both coherence and wholeness. Nevertheless, their contiguity engenders a complex reading that is directed to multiple levels of significance. Probably the most relevant example would be the well-known poem 'depicting' the falling leaf:

> 1(a
>
> le
> af
> fa
> ll
> s)
> one
> l
> iness [12]

When read as a whole, the text consists of two units: a word and a sentence. What is syntactically atypical is the 'inverted' intercalation: it is not the word that is put into brackets and inserted in the sentence, but vice versa. The word 'loneliness' encapsulates the sentence 'a leaf falls'. The semantic association between them is obvious and not necessarily complex, but the stress falls on the syntax of the semantic worlds. The text is a representation of the very act of representing, since the abstract (the concept, the state of loneliness) is epitomized in the concrete (the movement of a single leaf from life into death). Thus, the syntax of the poem reflects both an act of repetition and a form of *mise en abyme*.

The semantic nucleus undergoes a process of syntactic dispersal that is intensified by a fragmentary reading of the text. The horizontal units may mirror the same quality of 'singleness', which is also an effect of the intersection of different systems of signs: the letter 'l' is almost identical to the numeral '1'. Indeed, the two signs may be considered homographs by virtue of the fact that they belong to distinct systems. At the same time, by 'taking over' the

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[12] Ibid., p. 673.

function of a numeral, the indefinite article 'a' becomes syntactically synonymous with the word 'one', hence the reiteration of the same concept in various forms.

Moreover, the graphic form engenders a signification that parallels the meaning of the text understood as a succession of linguistic signs. The iconic dimension represents the very movement of a falling leaf. The vertical 'reading' reveals a descendent movement in zigzag, while the horizontal image of the last line (seen as a succession of graphemes) 'depicts' the slow ending of the fall. Besides, the parentheses, regarded as graphic signs, may create an impression of isolation. Thus, the two systems of signs, linguistic and iconic, are brought together as in a relation of synonymy, since they are semantically convergent. Nevertheless, the poem is different from the so-called calligram, such as is to be found in, for example, Apollinaire's *Calligrammes,* subtitled *Poems of war and peace 1913-1916* and published in 1918.[13]

The graphic shape of Cummings' poems is usually complementary to the text as a whole made up of linguistic signs that generate meaning. Other examples of such 'semantic duplication' may be various texts such as the poems *warped this perhapsy* or *moan.*[14] Nevertheless, there are cases (though rare) in which this 'principle' of complementariness is broken. A poem entitled *Little Tree* that almost derisively refers to the 'loneliness' and 'littleness' of a Christmas tree apparently represented from a child's point of view has a graphic form that does not suggest smallness at all, since the lines are long and the spaces between them are large.[15] Although alluding to a different size, the iconic dimension of the text still evokes the shape of 'the object of contemplation'. Apart from playing with the potential expectations generated by his very (traditional) poetic 'games', Cummings aims at creating some ambiguity of intention by letting the shape contradict the content and the para-text gain independence from the text.

The graphic aspect is also emphasized by the use of capital letters either at the beginning of a word inside a sentence, or within a word:

once White&Gold — mOON Over tOwns mOOn — poor But TerFLY— ygUDuh [16]

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[13] A calligram is a poem in which the typeface, calligraphy or handwriting is an essential element, so that the themes presented aurally and textually are also presented visually; for example, in '2ᵉ Cannonier Conducteur' the stanza beginning 'salut m'onde […]' is presented in the shape of the Eiffel Tower (Guillaume Apollimaire, *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War* (1913-1916) bilingual edition, trans. by Anne Hyde Greet (Berkeley: Univiersity of Califormia Press, 2004) pp. 126-7.

[14] E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems*, pp. 495, 493.

[15] Ibid., p. 29.

[16] Ibid., pp. 690, 383, 322, 347.

Furthermore, the proliferation of punctuation marks in various texts should indicate the intention to intermingle signs belonging to different systems and the desire to fragment the discourse by means of syntactic disruption. The punctuation marks are deprived of their conventional function: an exclamation mark is the first grapheme of a text and is followed, at a couple of words distance, by a question mark. Two signs are juxtaposed in the middle of a phrase:

> stand-
> ;Still)

Even a single word is split:

> n,o;w:

The idiosyncrasy of Cummings' works is also reflected in the recurrent syntactic dislocation. In this case, ambiguity is no longer generated by the multitude of possible readings, but by a form of clash in the usual 'order' of poetic language, as in a process in which syntactic games disrupt the wholeness and the coherence of the semantic world. The usual order of words in a sentence is broken, which requires a form of fragmented or 'reverse' reading in order to reach the logic or potential logic of a whole text. The following poem illustrated this point:

> !blac
> k
> agains
> t
> (whi)
> te sky
> ?t
> rees whic
> h fr
> om droppe
> d
> ,
> le
> af
> a:;go
> e
> s wh
> IrlI

n

.g [17]

It is obvious that, in this case, the syntactic distortion is not partial but over the full extent of the entire poem. Language is thus is granted absolute flexibility and the highest position in the hierarchy is assigned, not to the semantic dimension, but to the syntactic aspect, completed by the graphic form.

However, if, in the poems of E. E. Cummings, phrases or clauses are dislocated and words fragmented by 'the intrusion' of punctuation marks, the reverse process can also be found. There is a form of syntactic contraction whereby the traditionally required spaces between words are omitted; this leads to the formation of new verbal structures such as 'greasedlightning' or 'floaded-the-carburator' (the hyphen plays only the formal role required by the 'poetic game', since such a compound word would be grammatically impossible to create).

Some instances reflect the 'pattern' of derivation, which is most likely to be derided, since the morphemes that make up a word only result in semantic redundancy, but, of course, the device is a prolific 'means of enriching the lexicon' (by way of illustration, the word 'ultraomnipotence', for example). A hybrid mixture of derivation and conversion may be found in constructions like 'perhapsy', 'singless', 'hereless', in which the rules of combining morphemes in order to generate a meaningful unit are evidently broken. Other verbal structures coined out of the desire to use the full potential of language as well as to ridicule the traditional rules of word formation are 'plusorminus', 'hyperexclusevely,' 'ultravoluptuous,' 'superpalazzo', 'deadfromtheneckup', 'squarefootofminusone', 'internalexpanding' or 'externalcontracting'.

Sometimes the norm is broken by the use of abbreviations such as 'mr', 'mrs' or even 'r s v p'. The last one appears in a poem that claims to give a quotation from a letter starting '"dearest we"', which contains the following:

> "i cordially invite me to become
> noone except yourselves r s v p" [18]

Apart from the deconstruction of the two entities involved in any communicational act, namely the addresser and the addressee, generally corresponding respectively to the first and second person forms of the personal pronoun, the text mirrors the combination of two different

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[17] Ibid., p. 487.
[18] Ibid., p. 504.

linguistic codes. The likelihood is that the reader will interpret this as standing for *répondez, s'il vous plait*; the poem contains several other words in French, in which connection the phrase 'la moon' must be mentioned, since it reflects on a micro-level the juxtaposition of two distinct codes in a single linguistic sign made-up of two morphemes belonging to different languages.

There are, however, some cases in which traditional syntactic patterns, rather than being disrupted, are overemphasized. Such instances may be found in poems that are based on syntactic parallelism, that is, on a set of relations that should be considered both horizontally and vertically (the principles of distribution also include the prosodic aspect).

Sometimes the syntax reflects a form of gradation, in a movement from complex to simple, as in the following poem, which also suggests the form of a dialogue and in which, despite the absence of punctuation marks, the logic of the text implies that certain structures should be read as questions:

> he isn't looking at anything
>
> he isn't looking for something
>
> he isn't looking
>
> he is seeing
>
> what
>
> not something outside himself
>
> not anything inside himself
>
> but himself
>
> himself how
>
> not as some anyone
>
> not as any someone
>
> only as a noone(who is everyone) [19]

In other cases, the syntax of the text is highly simplified and the dialogue, although not marked by punctuation, is this time rendered by means of the presence of the verb and the pronouns corresponding to the incidental level of the discourse. At the same time and on the vertical axis, the syntax both results in a series of prosodic elements (rhyme, rhythm, meter etc.) and imparts some euphonic qualities to the lines:

> may i feel said he
>
> (i'll squeal said she
>
> just once said he)
>
> it's fun said she

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[19]   Ibid., p. 904.

(may i touch said he

how much said she

a lot said he)

why not said she

(let's go said he

not too far said she

what's too far said he

where you are said she)

[…] [20]

Ambiguity is thus a major effect of the idiosyncrasy of syntax in the works of E. E. Cummings and is shaped not only by the innovatory way in which he makes use of a considerable part of resources that lie in language but also by a particular manner of using traditional devices and structures. Quite often, the text is constructed according to some principle of harmony and equilibrium only for the sake of a disruption or a dislocation that is to occur at some point. Thus, linearity seems to be a pretext and a fertile ground for the subsequent syntactic distortion that is emphasized by means of a relation of contrast, since it functions as a deviation from the context.

For instance, 'the intrusion' of a typically paratextual element, namely the signature, inside the text is far from being a modern device. Nevertheless, Cummings inserts his name at the end of some poems in an atypical manner, as he uses only lower case. The fact that this device is not found in all his poems is another proof of his reluctance to adhere to any form of linearity. In the same time, in most of the texts the first line is used as a title, which reflects the intersection between the two dimensions, textual and paratextual, yet in an inverted form.

Cummings' poems may sometimes require a reading that should be simultaneously directed towards several levels of significance. Profitably turned to use as a quality of poetic language, ambiguity has intrinsic creative potential, but this is intensified by the existence of multiple possible readings of a text. At the same time, ambiguity is generated by the coexistence and the interaction of multiple systems of signs that start from the same material. In a seemingly paradoxical manner, both ambiguity and poetic meaning are emphasized through the interdependence of multiple dimensions of significance. Apart from the interaction of iconic and linguistic systems, there is another aspect that should be considered, namely the sonorous correspondent of the linguistic sign. The succession of graphemes and the whole shape thus formed do represent a major aspect of his poetic language, yet in some texts the euphonic level

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[20]   Ibid., p. 399.

must also be taken into consideration (despite the poet's preference for a form of euphony that, somehow paradoxically, does not function according to the so-called 'classical' principles of association).

The impression of disharmony, disorder or discontinuity and ambiguity reflects Cummings' poetics of reducing the incongruities between structural units and of making use of language as if it were some utterly flexible material. Besides, he also insists on the comic potential of his poetic language, which often derives from a sort of mockery at the very devices that he uses. When it comes to artistic creation, Cummings is less interested in the product than in the process, which may also be seen as 'an obsession with Making', which he believed to lie in the very nature of a poet.

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Ambiguous Exhibitions, Ambiguous Institutions

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Abstract

The institutional theory of art seeks to answer the question "what is art?" with the following ambiguous formula: something is art if conferred the status art by an art world. This position eliminates the issue of the ambiguity of art status by establishing a clear framework within which artefacts are considered art. Accordingly the concern of institutional theorists, such as Danto and Dickie *et al*, has been directed towards outlining those institutional apparatus of the art world such as galleries, museums and critics that confer the status of art and frame meaning. Once the institutional framework is accounted for, the ambiguity concerning art status is considered resolved. Although Howard Becker describes a pluralist vision of art worlds, art is still understood to be whatever is deemed art within such frameworks.

This approach however, in overlooking the key role and changing nature of the institution itself, is problematic. Specifically the ambiguous nature of the art institution is missed. Using the relationship of graffiti and installation to the art institution I will discuss what could be called "ambiguous exhibitions". These art forms maintain an unclear relationship to the established art world yet instances of exhibition and institutional structure are often visible. It is this realty that posits the problematic of the ambiguous nature of the art institution.

The issue of what counts as an exhibition heralds a new debate concerning institutional aesthetics and ambiguity. In short it shows that there is scope for ambiguity in the meaning of the term "art world". Instead of ambiguity operating on the level of art status, it is here operating on the level of institutional status. Consequently, the ambiguous nature of such exhibitions brings back into the play the nature of the curator, the gallery, the critic, the museum, etc.[1]

Keywords: Ambiguous, Artefact, Art world, Curator, Gallery, Graffiti, Immaterial, Installation, Institution, Material, Re-evaluation, Street Art.

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Institutional theorists have been keen to offer an unambiguous account of the art world. This desire is problematic, insofar as it overlooks the ever-changing nature of both the artefacts

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[1] This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

and the practices upon which are conferred the status of art. I will focus on examples of installation art, such as street art and graffiti, that blur the distinctions between what is considered art and what is considered non-art (rubbish) as instances of institutional ambiguity.

Initially defined by Arthur Danto, the concept of the 'art world' is characterized like so: 'to see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry — an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art; an artworld.' (Danto, 1964, p. 580) Institutional theory thus takes a seemingly unambiguous approach to the question of art, whereby something is art, if the art world or an art institution confers on it the status of art. Steven Davies offers a useful definition of this approach to art. 'To be an artwork, an artefact must be appropriately placed within a web of practices, roles, and frameworks that comprise an informally organised institution, the art world.' (Davies, 2006, p. 38)

Therefore, the logic of institutional theory runs as follows: art institutions confer art status by naming and framing artefacts (and by extension related practices). But most importantly art institutions confer art status by distinguishing certain artefacts from others because this clarifies what is an art institution in the first place. As such, the art institution becomes a site of value, because it contains valuable objects and hosts valuable events. In this system, artefacts, defined by art institutions as art, belong to the highest class of objects to be both produced and consumed within capitalism. This is the case insofar as objects considered as art are showcased by the art world as ideal economic goods by being unending in the scope for increased value and removed from the coarse depreciation of use.

Furthermore, the institutional classification that occurs in the practice of the art world is responsible for what is excluded as much as what is included. Rubbish, metaphorically speaking, is that which is no longer an economic good and also not art, as the lowest category of object, is disqualified from the gallery. Both classifications, namely art and rubbish, derive from the same institutional activity. Thus, in defining what counts as an object of art, institutions are equally responsible for the creation of rubbish 'as much as' they are responsible for the creation of quality. It can consequently be observed that the traditional aesthetics of the art institution establishes a political dynamic, which draws a clear distinction between outside and inside. For example, location within the art world is confirmed by presence in the gallery, whereas identity as an aesthetic artefact is established through the use of the frame.

The purpose of this article is not to catalogue what is contained within the gallery or outside the gallery but to understand the operations of the distinction itself and specifically how the terms of this distinction are subject to re-evaluation. It is this possibility of re-evaluation that I

will focus on. Here, I will show that the unambiguous approach of the art world to artefacts is disrupted by challenging the very essence of what an art world and art institution are. Specifically, I will claim that the operation of the art world, in distinguishing between the artwork and the non-artwork, is subject to a certain ambiguity. This ambiguity is the sense that such distinctions are fluid, as is witnessed in the advent of the ambiguous exhibition. An exhibition can be ambiguous in so far as it interrupts the clear structured operation of the art world. Installation art is a case of such ambiguity because it disrupts the usual distinctions of the art world by forcing the issue of immateriality as a concern when it comes to defining art. The significance of this can be seen in the central role that the idea of that the artefact itself was allotted in the definitions of the art world cited above.

Essential to the notion of installation art is the distinction (and this distinction is one of the art world distinctions alluded to earlier) between installation art itself and the installation *of* art. Put simply, in the installation of art, the arrangement is secondary to the works contained therein. Herein lies an implied distinction between materiality and immateriality. For example, the *Mona Lisa* can be seen to possess the same aesthetic qualities when it is hung in the National Gallery in Washington as it does in the Louvre in Paris. Idealised here, is the role of the curator as arbitrator of taste, operating devoid of ideology and practicing a sort of neutral hanging of artefacts. Whereas, in the case of installation art, it is the positioning of the work that is central to its essence and how it is to be interpreted.

In Bishop's words: 'Installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer' (Bishop, 2005, p. 6). By embodied viewer Bishop is referring to the phenomenological subject posited in the writings of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty *et al*. Briefly, for phenomenologists, the subject and the object is but an artificial division. It is also a division that we see replicated in the institutional accounts above. Embodied perception, however, is where both the object and the perceiver co-exist. Ascribing to a piece a certain immaterial and ambiguous quality, or at the very least something beyond mere material qualities, is made central to the operation of the piece as art. The issue could be put like this: the work is ambiguous insofar as it is interactive. It is this indeterminacy, in the shape of the embodied viewer that is seen to be the grounds on which installation art can supersede the economy (and distinctions) of the art world. It is in this context that the use of actual rubbish as art makes sense because it is precisely because of the disqualification of rubbish from the gallery that artists have been keen to engage it as an artistic material.

I am taking it as given that such an account equally applies to graffiti. Here the work is equally ambiguous insofar as it is open to embodied perception. Moreover, as it is illegal and

is also seen to break with the culture industry, the ambiguity of the status of graffiti as art is also at play. The dilemma for the institutional theorist in these cases is whether to regard such work as art or as rubbish. However, I maintain, that instead of superseding the art world, the institutional ambiguity inherent in graffiti and installation art is better understood as developing as well as disrupting the operation (and distinctions) of the art world.

In disruption, we should not classify installation art as being independent from the art world economy but rather as a political challenge to the operational development of the art world. Installation is, after all, a category of the art world, just as the movement from graffiti as vandalism (or, in other words, rubbish or non-art) to graffiti as street art (or simply art) is a reversal art world categories or values. In other words, to incorporate graffiti as street art (or art) is to reverse the existing definitions of art. In short, disruption accommodated is but a part of the institutional game and a common stage in the recognition of avant-garde practices in the history of the art world.

By focusing on these ambiguous practices, I am proposing that all art is (in some way) installation art and all installation art is institutional. Considering this claim, we can see that it is a restating of the premise of the institutional theory of art. But the purpose of restating its premise in this way is to take account of the avant-garde tendency to offer us an anti-art position. Why then merge installation art with institutional practice? By merging these two, we see that the avant-garde is equally tied to the distinctions of the art world, just as the idea of trash is tied to the idea of what art is. It is worth noting that, although a highly contested term, one aspect of the avant-garde is a movement that proposes a new formulation for what art can be. While there are other formulations of the term, it is in this sense that I will refer to the avant-garde. It is not anti-art in a general sense; rather it is anti-art in the sense of its reformulation of the institutional categories of distinction. The avant-garde, thus, allows new forms of creation to be given voice, in order to claim the status art, by changing the boundaries of what counts as art from within the art-world.

Installation art, like graffiti, may be considered not only as overcoming the simple installation of an artefact to be looked at, but also as a kind of avant-garde exhibition. As such, while they embrace an ambiguous status in relation to the art world, they remain institutional by proposing new ways of exhibiting. An example of this is what I call *The Graffiti Gallery* at the baths in Blackrock, Co. Dublin

THE GRAFFITI GALLERY
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Here we see an exhibition that operates with a blurring of the distinction between installation art and the installation of art. In other words, here we see an ambiguous exhibition, which is ambiguous insofar as it poses the following questions: is it institutional, anti-institutional, art, or the display of art?

The overcoming of the distinction between what is exhibited and the way it is exhibited as essential is perhaps easier to view when we consider the agents of each. The installation of art is the work of the curator. Installation art, however, claims some degree of artistic creation or generation. As such, contemporary practice (installation art and graffiti/street art) points to a merging of these notions in the example of the artist as curator and curator as artist.

In other words, just as installation art is institutional, the installation of art is no neutral practice. The curator is artist as much as the artist is curator. As Robert Hughes notes, '[i]n America the *Mona Lisa* turned into its own facsimile, (Hughes, 2008). The possibility of a neutral hanging or installation of art should be considered as naïve. Thus, in moving beyond the opposition of installation art and the installation of art, we are beginning to develop the concept of the artist as curator. The graffiti artist is a good example of this person. They decide where to hang their work. This is what (or more precisely who) is at stake in the ambiguous exhibition.

This curator/artist is the new agent in the contemporary art world. Whereas artists traditionally traded in terms of artefacts, this new person operates where the exhibition is the unit of artistic meaning. Thus, beyond the distinction of installation and institution, I wish to focus on the role of exhibition. This captures the merging of both of the two and their site of ambiguity better. It is worth asking what kind of artistic unit the exhibition is. The exhibition is both the installation of art and a piece of installation art. That the exhibition itself would be an example of the installation of art is clear, but that the installation of art would be an instance of art only makes sense when one considers the possibility of installation art. The traditional installation of art may ostensibly lack the embodied viewer, but on the scale of an exhibition it, like installation art, presupposes such an embodied viewer.

By equating exhibition with installation, I hope to offer a new way of thinking about both. Thus, when Bishop writes that installation, in terms of 'site-specificity […] is a way to circumvent the market' operations of the art world (Bishop, 2005, pp 17-20), I believe we can now see the limits of such circumvention. These limits are first and foremost temporal, as installation offers the art world market a new dynamic of exhibiting to exploit. That dynamic is the ambiguous exhibition being, in time, subject to circumvention it initially sought to overcome. It is through the development of graffiti into street art that we witness this new market practice. In fact, the emergence of graffiti into a practice of installation art is the revenge of the market. No longer can practices such as installation art or graffiti be considered as wholly ambiguous forms of exhibition. There now exists the firm suspicion that the work is somewhere institutionally certified as art.

It is clear that graffiti offers us the bulk of the features of installation art; namely site-specificity, destructibility and space for varieties of embodied experience, etc. However, the institutionalisation of graffiti (by this I mean the presentation of graffiti in galleries) presents us with a different art object; an art object that is closer to the traditional reified painting. Often images are sprayed canvases instead of walls. In fact, that is the difference between the gallery and other locations; in the institutional setting we are presented with graffiti as art object. These installations of graffiti as art come with the standard restrictions of the art institution: 'look but don't touch'.

In the case of the curator as artist and the aesthetics of exhibition, we have moved beyond another distinction of the art world: not only are curators the artists of the gallery, but graffiti artists are curators of the city. In a way, they are curators of trash; they are vandals. As such, the site of the art institution is unlimited. Thus, by recognising the exhibition as the unit of

meaning in the art world and as something that has space for ambiguity, as opposed to the artefact, we can include those practices that challenge the artefact centred operation of the art world. In other words, when the exhibition is considered as the unit of meaning in the art world, the scope for ambiguity is also the scope for institutional change. This shift from the artefact to the exhibition better allows us to account for the advent of avant-garde practices by enabling institutional theory to treat of institutional change and re-evaluation.

Nowhere is the idea that the exhibition is the limit of the concept of what counts as art better expressed than in Robert Barry's work entitled *during the exhibition, the gallery will be closed*. Here, every element of the art world (as embodied in the gallery) can be discarded, yet the exhibition remains. It is in this context of playing with what can be in an exhibition and how an exhibition can be staged that the movement from graffiti to street art makes sense.

Like graffiti, the prospect of installation art has seen a recent flourishing in the idea of what an exhibition can be. Here, we find an ever-increased emphasis on site-specificity, trans-nationality, trans-disciplinarity, intersectionality, temporality, etc. Exhibitions are increasingly *ad hoc* projects that are valued for their ability to move across boundaries, these being physical or theoretical.

At one end of the scale of institutional incorporation we can find the example of what I call a graffiti gallery, and at the other we find *The Grand Tour*. In June 2007, the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square in London had life-size waterproof vinyl reproductions of some of its most famous paintings (including the works of John Constable and Leonardo da Vinci) displayed on the streets of central London. The exhibition was called *The Grand Tour* and ran for twelve weeks in the West End. This exhibition demonstrates the degree to which the established art world is consumed with a passion for the alternative approaches to exhibiting that graffiti offers. Another example is the *Street and Studio* exhibition held in the Tate Modern in London in the summer of 2008. Here graffiti artists were invited to decorate the exterior walls of the museum. These exhibitions succeed insofar as they challenge preconceptions of what an exhibition can be. However, they also mark an increased monitoring of the visual landscape of the urban space.

As a result, we are presented with the reality of legitimate vandalism. For the most part the type of work that attains gallery approval is complex and far removed from the natural occurrence of graffiti on the street. Rarely, for example, are the initial and rudimentary signatures ('tags') of graffiti writers presented in galleries. Instead more physical and pictorial works, such as stencil work and woodblocks, are showcased by galleries. The implication of this development is that the works associated with the formal art world are to be still considered

as art, whereas the simple 'tag' often remains beyond the limit of acceptability. After all, the simple act of tagging is the instinct that the surveillance of gallery works seeks to prevent.

In practice, we can see that such curating and artistic activity does not exist beyond the capitalist infrastructure that marks the institutionalised art world. Rather, it currently operates an avant-garde movement, and like all avant-garde movements, it becomes the dominant mode of artistic appreciation (that is to say the institutional mode). What does, then, characterise this approach in its institutional and economic manifestation?

The institutional aesthetic, when based on the exhibition, partly makes a commodity of the ambiguity. The artist can now engage the immaterial in their work for economic reasons. The curator/artist is a new agent in the art world. Or better yet, a new worker in the art world. So much of what makes an artist successful is also what makes a curator successful. This is now removed from the object that they can afford to trade in terms of their immaterial labour.

Maurizio Lazzarato has developed the concept of immaterial labour, albeit not in relation to the art world, which he defines as 'the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity.' (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 132) While the informational aspect refers to a new, digitised nature of labour and specifically to the way the average industrial worker has become intellectualised by their new interface based activities, the cultural aspect refers to "the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion.' (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 132) In other words, the labour of the curator is an economic labour even if it does not produce a material output. Here we can see that, in the context of this economic model, exhibitions are the commodity that frames the identity and the meaning of art. Exhibitions enable the trade of such labour.

In the ambiguous art exhibition and the accompanying merging of the artist and the curator, we see a new phenomenology of labour. No longer is that final documentable material piece vital but rather the situation and atmosphere will suffice as an economic good. By arriving at this account of the avant-garde through ambiguous exhibiting, as seen in the case of graffiti as installation art, we notice that instead of communicating art, the task of the artist is the task of the curator, namely, the facilitation of critical exchange. For Lazzarato, this mantra is 'become subjects'. The production process for the artist is thus no longer concerned with the artefact but with the generation of subjectivity (clearly a much more ambiguous goal). Again, it is worth remembering the words of Bishop: 'Installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer' (Bishop, 2005, p. 6). In so doing installation art, or better yet the exhibition as a unit of meaning,

presupposes the embodied subjectivity of the person who experiences art and a new economic model for the art world. Here the product is constructed as something that is living and active and open to multiple engagements.

To conclude: that installation art, as seen in the case of graffiti as street art, signals a new economic framework for the art world. This is a framework that thrives on the ambiguity inherent in the revised implications of 'exhibition' to give the art world a feel of *shinhatsubai* (that is the feel of something new, improved and now on sale). However, this does not mean that a new, extraordinary mode of critical engagement is sweeping the art world. While the merging of the roles of the artist and the curator and the increased focus on activated spectatorship could be seen as the triumph of the avant-garde, they can also be used by the institutional apparatus of the art world in order to control installation art, graffiti etc. Here the co-optation of graffiti, as seen in *The Grand Tour* and beyond, is striking. No doubt, what we see in the acceptance of the interactive as art is but another stage in the increased documentation of the visual world beyond the traditional art institution by the art world. What such developments suggest is that the relationship between what is not included in the category of 'art' has at all times the nature of a game that is always institutional. Between the two, vandalism and fine art for example, exists the ambiguous exhibition that enables institutional change and re-evaluation.

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'Is that what Pop Art is all about?' Visual Ambiguities in Pop Art Collage

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Abstract

In the conditions when generic borders were blurred and significant cultural codes were almost exploited, the technique of collage became a universal substitute for artistic forms and their visual language. Without a doubt, this artistic expression was a remedy for conventional aesthetics and a way to stave off meanings accepted and fixed by society. The infinite number of discursive negations, contradictions, ambiguities, incoherence and lack of unified representation, deconstruction, intertextuality, textual and visual plurisignation, mingled with one another to reflect limitless heterogeneity and relativity of consumer society.

The aim of this article is to explore selected works by British pop artists (Richard Hamilton, Peter Blake and Eduardo Paollozi) in which unified representation of the outside reality was replaced by a multimodal reconstruction of meanings. Words, objects and variable materials presented in Pop Art works gained a new signification thanks to the replacement of their prime context with the images produced by the mass media. The semantic shift in pop representations showed the way in which signs were coming to be regarded by a society exposed to a multitude of visual data. In such conditions, the categories of 'real' and 'artificial' became fluid notions. As there is no longer any division between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' arts, pop artists' visual imagery is an attempt to accentuate and comment on the presence of simulacrum formed by the consumer industry.[1]

Keywords: Collage, Pop Art, representation, popular culture, consumerism, the Swinging Sixties, visual perception, the loss of real, heterogeneity

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> Collage's heterogeneity, even if it is reduced to be every operation of composition, imposes itself on the reading as stimulation to produce signification which could be neither univocal nor stable. Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to an ambiguity and a double reading [...] of never entirely suppressing alterity of the elements reunited in a temporary composition. Thus

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the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation.[2]

As Gregory Ulmer points out, a technique of collage with its multimodal visual character was perceived by artists as a l*ingua franca* to depict the inadequacy of traditional representations. Together with the upheaval of Post-Impressionism and Cubism, collage became an antidote for the illusory perspective dominant in Western painting since the Renaissance. In fact, it was a break with the concept of mimesis, the values of the established canon of art, the Modernist concept of pictorial space and the assumptions of realism. What is more, a direct incorporation of visual material borrowed from the everyday environment, which was formerly alien to a painting technique, now accentuated the interplay between artistic expressions and common imagery. The idea that portrayals of the modern world should contain, according to Rudolf Arnheim, 'an expression of a fundamental disorder that exists in the incompatibility inherent in space when self-contained, separate units are not part of a continuous whole but rather interact blindly and irrationally dominated the artistic world'.[3] This method of visualization served as a medium of materiality, recording our civilization, its differentiation between humanity and inhumanity, capturing the topical, the transitory and the absurd. Inevitably, the discontinuity of an image, its transfer of materials from one context to another and the dissemination of the particular content emphasized the importance of the relative experience of an artistic vision and brought 'art and life closer to being a simultaneous experience', a combination that previously created perceptual ambiguities. [4]

1.   The Spirit of Pluralism — Collage in the UK

In the course of time, collage became a visual language of young British painters of the 1950s. The Independent Group, formed during the decade at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, observed and studied an existing tension between highbrow and lowbrow culture and blurred the boundaries between art and everyday life.[5] The IG consisted of a new generation of artists, architects and theorists, among them Lawrence Alloway, John McHale, Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paollozi, and Alison and Peter Smithson. These artists applied a variety of signs and elements taken from a popular background to comment on the consumer society of post-war Britain and a former attitude towards visual arts. Soon, Pop artists began to treat this

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[2]   Gregory L. Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism' in *Postmodern Culture,* ed. by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985) p. 88.
[3]   Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1974) p. 302.
[4]   Ibid., p. 84.
[5]   The Independent Group is known also as the IG and will be so referred to henceforth in this article.

kind of representation as a method of reflection of the new conditions of metropolitan life, a life transformed to a large extent by the impact of the mass media. 'Popular, transient, expandable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, media dependent [...]'; these markers, among other things, aptly describe the source material used by British pop artists to depict the emergence of mass culture and its consequences upon the perception of reality.[6] The world of art was presented independent of any interpretations, accessible to a modern citizen. A variety of artistic means, vernacular aspects of newly produced artworks, representations of the different environments mainly from the urban areas were appealing to wider audience. As Lucy Lipard observes, 'Pop is a hybrid, a product of new humanism, known also as *New Image of Man*'.[7] This image is transformed largely by the complex and heterogeneous aesthetics of advertising industry.

2   British Culture and New Sensibility

In the conditions of consumer society 'we are witnessing a creation of a new kind of sensibility' as Susan Sontag claims in her essay *One Culture and New Sensibility*.[8] The new approach to life was largely rooted in mass production that multiplied its commodities at unbelievable rate and, as Sontag adds, 'in the pan-cultural perspective on the arts that is possible through the mass production of art objects'.[9] The process of mass production exerted a profound effect upon aesthetics. As Walter Benjamin highlights in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, modern technology meant that a picture no longer needed to be unique; a single image, reprinted over and over again, could flood the urban environment; art had developed forms in which there was no actual original. Hence, a unified, coherent image was replaced by a multi-modal representation, the repetition of brand names, copies of designer goods constantly blurring the distinction between actual and virtual. Just like widely promoted products, the image of a human being from the Fifties and Sixties reminds us of a picture of consumer goods. As a result, we receive a dehumanized picture with its hostility towards traditional visual categories. The image is deformed, multimodal, constructed mainly for marketing purposes. It seems that the term 'pop' is doubtless 'riddled with ambiguity for it stands poised somewhere between the IG's present and some imagined future, between artistic

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[6]   Gablik Suzi and John Russell, *Pop Art Redefined* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969) p. 82.
[7]   Lucy Lipard, *Pop Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004) p. 63.
[8]   Susan Sontag, 'One Culture and New Sensibility' in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing CO, 1969) p. 296.
[9]   Ibid, p. 299.

aspirations and their cultural deprivation in Britain in the early Fifties.'[10] The article presented gives insights into works that are motivated by a common pledge not only to produce a new kind of visual environment but also to analyse critically 'the fabric of life and mass-produced imagery,' its perceptual ambiguity, imitation and gradual loss of the 'real'.[11]

3. Richard Hamilton's 'Pop-Fine-Art' perspective[12]

Richard Hamilton's works of art from the late 1950s rely mainly on collage as the device to deconstruct the traditional mimesis. As an influential intellectual force of the IG, the artist's major concern was with popular sources, which constituted a large part of his iconography. Assemblage, joining, adding, combining, linking, constructing, organising — these are the methods used by Hamilton to complete his final vision of a given representation. He constructs an object and mounts a process 'in order to intervene in the world, not to reflect but to change reality'.[13] His works can be perceived as a constant motion to capture the exteriority, taste formation and the presence of opposite forces of formal and informal visual language. The spheres of coincidence and predictability are mixed to explore every kind of reversal, comparison between one of the systems of representation against another. This principle enables Hamilton to grasp the clash between realm of fine art and readymade metaphors to signalize changes within the visual arts. As the artist points out in his text published in *Collected Words (1953-1982),* 'perhaps [Pop Art] is Mama – a cross-fertilization of Futurism and Dada which upholds a respect for the culture of the masses and a conviction that the artist in twentieth century urban life is inevitably a consumer of mass culture and potentially a contributor to it'.[14] It appears that the role of an artist in popular culture is ambivalent as it is very difficult if not impossible to clarify their position in the creative act. Is he an artist or simply a creator working on a manufacturing scale?

Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?, Hamilton's small iconic collage displayed in 1956 during the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition, illustrates his creative reply to the problem of a mass society and the double faced relation between mass society and the world of art. It pictures the world of human beings yearning for the complete satisfaction that can be obtained only by commodities. The work consists of a wide range of signs and

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[10] Dick Hebdige, 'In Poor Taste: Notes on Pop' in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop* (Cambridge and Massachussetts: MIT Press, 1988) p. 80.

[11] Ibid., p. 81.

[12] By Pop-Fine-Art I mean here an expression of popular culture in fine art terms. This term appeared in texts referring to the *This Is Tomorrow* exhibition.

[13] Ulmer. op.cit., p. 86.

[14] Richard Hamilton, 'For the Finest Art, Try Pop.' In *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) p. 743.

symbols borrowed from glossy magazines, advertisements and posters. A body-builder, a pinup queen and a television set are placed in the latest version of home design. All these images with their attractiveness become the embodiment of consumers' needs from the Fifties. 'In Hamilton's collage, virtually every aspect of kitsch and camp are touched on. Among its most notable features are tongue-in-cheek irreverence and a sense of irony, qualities that were to become a trademark of Pop art'.[15] Inevitably, Hamilton insists on a 'reference to verifiable reality, but the result should be an insight which goes beyond the level simply of fact'.[16] The presented interior design appears to conceptualize strategies of desire produced by the mass media mechanisms. The artist here depicts not only an alluring image, a view of objects and bodies but also the system of signs and representations through which desires and needs are voiced and interpreted, produced and satisfied by the consumer society. However, as Jean Baudrillard posited in his book *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures*, it is not so much commodities that we consume but the myths they stand for, the styles of consumption known to everyone.[17] The artist's canvas is an environment in which categories of 'real' and 'artificial' become relative and it is extremely difficult to differentiate between these two elements. The collage with its infinite number of discursive ambiguities reflects limitless heterogeneity of mass society.

Additionally, the tension in the work of art is accentuated by interplay of textual messages that are placed on the same visual level with the other scraps taken from glossy magazines and advertisements. They replace the objects from traditional interior designs. The Ford logo is substituted here for a conventional lampshade; a billboard with Al Jonson in *The Jazz Singer* takes the place of the view from a window; a cover of comic book masquerades as a framed painting, a black arrow (indicating that 'ordinary cleaners reach only this far') directed at a vacuum cleaner describes its functions. There is a typical self-reference element in the tin labelled 'ham' placed on the table. Undoubtedly, there is no place for non-manufactured elements, since the whole representation is constructed with already existing objects and their designations. According to Derrida's montage practice, the nature of language does not function in terms of matched pairs (signifier/signified) but of couplers or couplings. In Umberto Eco's words, 'this continual circularity is the normal condition of signification and even allows

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[15] Diane Waldman, 'Assemblage and Pop Art' in *Collage, Assemblage and the Fund Object* (London: Phaidon, 1992) p. 269.

[16] Richard Morphet, "Richard Hamilton: The Longer View". In *Richard Hamilton* (London: Tate Gallery, 1992) p. 18.

[17] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures*. (London: Sage Publications, 1998) p. 49.

communicational process to use signs in order to mention things and states of the world'.[18] Here the textual layer of Hamilton's work of art highlights that 'signified and signifiers are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations', changing their primary value.[19] All the pictorial elements are in constant motion producing new meanings. Therefore, we are not able to face a univocal picture in the frame but have to read and interpret simultaneously contrasting, ambiguous messages consisting of text, object and the message. The confrontation with the picture has become a many-channelled activity. The critical voice about the consumer society and its shift from traditional vision and fascination with the mechanisms of visual formation are expressed here.

4. Peter Blake's Rejuvenated Pop Representations[20]

Peter Blake's collage *On the Balcony*, completed between 1955 and 1957, is similar to the Hamilton work in that it aptly illustrates the mechanisms that contributed to the formation of multi-levelled representation. Even though Blake was an independent artist, working outside the IG, his output is to a large extent influenced by the artistic forms of post-war painting in Britain. As a representative of rejuvenated culture, he found himself in the focal point of the main artistic arena. As a result, his output from this time is embedded in the popular imagery that constituted 'Swinging London'.

The collage depicts within the frames of the canvas a vast accumulation of objects and figures associated with the decade of cultural changes. Apart from a small part of a path that cuts across the upper edge, the background of the picture is almost entirely taken up by a flat, green lawn Though Blake applies traditional means of artistic expression, oil on canvas, the unification of both new and older symbols of British culture resemble a collage composition. There is no denying the fact that the objects gathered together in the painting represent a social and cultural background of the Fifties. This multiplicity of sources, including not only the work of other artists but also magazine covers, postcards, photographs of the Royal Family; cigarette packets highlight the materials around which a consumer identity is constructed. There is no distinct division and contrast between the presented images; everything merges and becomes equal in value. Moreover, this work of art presents pictures in which other visual images are attached to the bodies of figures, as either badges or elements of their clothes. We can arrive at

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[18] Peter E. Bondanella, 'From Semiotics to Narrative Theory in a Decade of Radical Social Change' In *Umberto Eco and The Open Text: Semiotics, Fiction and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 82.

[19] Ulmer, op. cit., p. 89.

[20] Here the heading refers to the rejuvenated culture at the turn of the Fifties and Sixties.

the conclusion that Blake's paintings are about the excitement of looking at pictures, about how we collect them, display them, form them and finally treat them simply like objects.

As the artist's work shows the eclecticism of images borrowed from formerly separate spheres, popular aesthetics appears to govern the visual experience of the viewers. As Kerry Freedman observes, visual culture in the Fifties became 'inherently, interdisciplinary and increasingly multi-modal'. In such conditions, as he adds, 'visual culture images and objects are continuously seen and instantaneously interpreted, forming new knowledge and new images of identity and environment'.[21] A self-image is seen in relation to other forms of visual production and social communication. Therefore, Blake's popular iconography indicates that there is no longer any attachment to one grand narrative, a universal truth that will influence our perception of reality. On the contrary, we have to face a new visual system that will enable us to cross traditional perceptual barriers.

Blake expresses his outlook upon the times through the use of portraits of young, well-behaved people who were becoming the major cultural and social force of the Fifties and Sixties. For instance, this tendency is visible in Blake's other works such as *Got a Girl* with the dominant figure of Elvis and a mixed media work *Locker* that contains photographs of Kim Novak, Bridget Bardot and Marilyn Monroe. Without a doubt, the picture *On the Balcony* appears to be the artist's attempt to define a variety of discourses that exerted an impact upon the young generation in Great Britain. Youths are presented standing or sitting motionless, submissively on a kind of stage, hemmed in by a vast accumulation of images taken from popular culture and traditional art. Moreover, Blake decides to introduce into his canvas slightly deformed faces. This strategy eventually contributes to the fact that the people depicted are a little bit older or perhaps even more mature. Their representation is to a large extent influenced by the techniques, overused by technological solutions and the mass media that construct young people's identity for purely marketing and economical purposes. Besides, their involvement in the surroundings appears to be passive; they become puppets adopting the symbols and icons served by the popular culture. They are performing roles suggested and imposed on them by the consumer society. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, in a consumer society a desire 'is not so much related to achieve a particular type of identity, but rather to keep one's identity open so as not to miss any options that can be added to one's final image'.[22] Blake's application of variable materials implies that the border between original and artificial is blurred and identity

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[21]   Kerry Freedman. Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art. (New York: Teachers Collage Press, 2003), p. 260.
[22]   Zygmunt Bauman. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. (London: Routledge, 1992) p. 24.

created in the era of consumer culture is liquid. There is no stability in artistic creation. Illusory powers of representation combined with touchable materials govern our visual space in the mass society.

Conclusion

The analyzed works of art are intertextual spaces that absorb and modify other representations. The complex nature of the image as object, illusion as reality, and reality as illusion is predicated on a reconciliation of opposites on the picture plane. The dichotomies between high and low art, mimesis and the loss of the real explored in this paper define the visual tendencies of Pop Art. Thus, drawing on James Haywood Rolling, 'representation can be understood as an ongoing interpretation, an action that proliferates an expanding urban sprawl from diverse and loosely associated neighbourhoods, streets and centres'[23] Popular culture and market-driven commodities borrow multi-evocative imagery that is an integral part of the city life with an aim of constructing an adequate visual identity. This is an expression of a mass culture easily accessible through variable registers more often than not represented via the decontextualisation of certain forms. Nonetheless, the partial, deformed representations illustrate the condition of a consumer world that is governed by global capitalism 'which replicates the same chain stores, fast food outlets, brand names in every High Street across the land.'[24] In such conditions the mass culture imagery is usually based on a mosaic form, various and even contradictory criteria that ultimately highlight the artificiality of the visual material served to the viewers. Even though the distance between the artwork and audience has been shortened owing to the familiarity of the presented material, the technique of collage, as Ryszard Nycz notices in his conception towards signs, becomes a simulacrum that limits our direct access to the reality.[25]

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[24] Tim Woods. *Beginning Postmodernism.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p. 16.

[25] Ryszard Nycz. *Tekstowy Świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze.* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000, p. 288.

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Irony, Authority and Interpretation

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Abstract

Philosophical hermeneutics and theories of interpretation have often struggled to account consistently for ironic ambiguity in a text or an event. As a trope which is both dependent upon and undermines the notion of 'authority', it seems that we are forced into a choice of either presenting a 'serious' account of irony, whereby the possibilities of ironic meaning are restricted by the accountable figure of an author, or else resign ourselves to the free play of ambiguity, whereby any statement can be 'ironic'. The former risks over-determining the limit of ironic possibility, and losing the sense of ambiguity which gives rise to irony in the first place; the latter, conversely, risks losing any sense of 'seriousness' to the hermeneutic. In both, the significance of ambiguity can be lost.

The article explores the significance of ironic ambiguity to methods of interpretation, and in particular focuses on the reliance on 'intentionalism' as a means to rendering irony accountable to 'serious' hermeneutics. It argues that the problem which ironic ambiguity poses to hermeneutics is situated on a constructive tension between the challenge to authority in the identifying irony and the investment in a pre-given authority, or authorities, which enables such identification. The paper argues that the problem with applying the traditional author/critic dispute to the concept of irony is that the notions of authorial intention and critical reception are often presumed to be stable entities upon which the ambiguity of irony is shaped. The paper suggests that, on the contrary, attempts to reconstruct hermeneutically the value of irony involves drawing on two distinct notions of 'intention': one as a figurative 'frame' of meaning which is exterior to the text or event itself, the other as an interior 'unity' of the text or event. By extricating these two forms of intention, the paper aims to show that the traditional recourse to intention in the interpretation of irony is neither as straightforward nor stable as is often presumed.[1]

Keywords: Irony, Interpretation, Hermeneutic Circle, Ambiguity

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[1]   This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

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Philosophical hermeneutics has often struggled to account consistently for ironic ambiguity in a text or event. Irony poses particular problems for interpretation regarding both the demarcation of possible meanings, and how we account for our selection of one meaning over another. In other words, the problem of consistency is one of identifying an authority to our claim that a text or event is 'ironic'. In general terms, the prospect of irony suggests that meaning lies beyond the immediate statement, text or event: as such, this dissatisfaction with 'given' meaning both undermines, and yet remains dependent upon, the notion of an intentional 'authority'. This is reflected in the way that 'the problem of irony' identifies an entire history of tension within philosophical, literary and ethical enterprises, concerning the 'seriousness' of discourse related to irony and its potential for critique: from Socrates' ironic questioning of received tradition to Roger Rosenblatt's post-9/11 dismissal of the 'age of irony' as incapable of forming a serious moral position, the value of irony has been held in question over this issue of authority. [2]

The problem for hermeneutic theories of interpretation is thus to account for this tension between meaning and authority within the ironic event. Initially, this problem seems to present us with a limited choice: we are forced into either presenting a 'serious' account of irony, whereby the possibilities of ironic meaning are restricted by or reduced to a supplemental accountable figure (such as an intentional author), or else resign ourselves to the free play of ambiguity, whereby just about any statement can be considered 'ironic', and meaning itself becomes relative to each interpreter's reading.[3] The former risks over-determining the limit of ironic possibility and losing the sense of ambiguity which gives rise to irony in the first place; the latter, conversely, risks losing any sense of 'seriousness' to the hermeneutic. As such, neither approach is satisfactory for a hermeneutic account of ironic meaning, because in both the creative and productive significance of ironic ambiguity can be lost.

In this article, I want to outline a way of thinking through this impasse by examining the specific idea of authority within an ironic text or event. In other words, the paper approaches thematically the question of who has the authority to declare a text or event 'ironic', and on what grounds is this authority based. Situating the criteria for judging the impasse within the

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[2]   For a more detailed discussion of Rosenblatt's claim, and its relationship to the history of philosophy, see T. Grimwood, 'The Problems of Irony: Philosophical Reflection on Method, Discourse and Interpretation', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 12:4, pp. 349–64.

[3]   Both approaches have been argued for and against: representatives of the former approach would be the likes of E.D. Hirsch and John Searle; representatives of the latter can be found with Paul de Man and Richard Rorty.

traditional author/critic dispute risks positing both the notions of authorial intention and critical reception as stable entities upon which the ambiguity of irony is shaped. [4] I will suggest that, on the contrary, attempts to reconstruct hermeneutically the *value* of irony involves drawing on two distinct notions of 'intention': one as a figurative 'frame' of meaning which is exterior to the text or event itself, the other as an interior 'unity' of the text or event. By extricating these two forms of intention, the paper will show that the traditional recourse to intention in the interpretation of irony is neither as straightforward nor as stable as is often presumed. However, by unpacking the figurative and thematic structures upon which such explanations of meaning are grounded, the paper suggests ways in which it is possible to theorise a consistent hermeneutic account of irony which does not exclude the formative role that ambiguity plays.

1. Three Ideas

By way of introduction, I will put forward three general ideas surrounding the relationship between irony and authority in terms of interpretation, which will frame the rest of my study.

First, if we were to examine thematically the various attempts to deal with irony with regards to interpretation, we would find a persistent association of ironic meaning with intention.[5] Even theories of irony that do not employ a directly intentionalist canon are nevertheless prone to involve figures such as 'the ironist' that operate, at the very least, as an order or measure of the study.[6] Indeed, Norman Knox notes that the intentional author of irony is analogous to 'a superhuman power in some field of observation.'[7] 'Until an ironic message is interpreted as *intended*,' Muecke argues, 'it has only the sound of one hand clapping' (my emphasis).[8] Clapping is a significant metaphor for Muecke to use, since the bringing together of hands enacts the sense of *closure* that grounding ironic interpretation on 'intention' produces. One can see the difficulties faced by interpretation without such a closure: an ironic statement might mean *x*, but may also and at the same time mean *y*.

Second, the problem with this — and the intentionalist account in general — is that this doesn't really seem to explain what ironic ambiguity does to communication, which is precisely

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[4]   Paul Ricoeur explains this in terms of the 'intentionalist fallacy' and the 'fallacy of the absolute text': the former reducing meaning to the intentions of the author, the latter ignoring the contextual genesis of any text or event (P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory.* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976, p. 30). In this article,I aim to show how both these approaches demonstrate a particular aspect of the referential ambiguity of irony, which produces ironic meaning.

[5]   See L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge* (London, Routledge, 1994), p. 118; C. Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (London, University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 44.

[6]   See Grimwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 357–58.

[7]   N. Knox, 'Irony' in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas Vol. II*, ed. by P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), pp. 627–634), p. 627.

[8]   D. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (London, Methuen, 1982), p. 39.

to *introduce* risk and the possibility of misunderstanding. The easiest way is to think of the analogy of explaining a joke to somebody after telling it: one can point to all of the references, puns and reasons that a joke might be considered funny in order to express its meaning — very rarely will the joke then appear to be funny in any way. The same is the case for irony: once we have identified the intention of the irony, the whole gamble of ironic ambiguity seems to lose its risk and, consequently, its irony. If one merely identifies *what* the ironist meant to say, this effectively removes the *how* of the ironic communication. This is why one cannot help but be suspicious of, for example, Haraway or Rorty, when they claim from the off that they are 'being ironic', or talk of 'we ironists':[9] however justifiable their claims are in relation to their individual work, there is something akin to the liar's paradox within such an assertion. If you tell me that you are being ironic, irony ceases to be a part of the conversation. In explaining irony in this way, we have in fact explained something quite different to what first prompted our interest. We would be left wondering, in effect, why the intentional author bothered with irony in the first place, if there was already a straightforward meaning to be had. The association of irony and intention, then, cannot be a simple intentionalist model of understanding.

Third, we cannot, however, simply discard all previous work on ironic ambiguity as wrong. It is far more likely that there is something *within* the alignment of irony and intention which is crucial to the constitutive ambiguity of ironic meaning. The problem which ironic ambiguity poses to hermeneutics is situated on a constructive tension between the challenge to authority in the identifying irony and the investment in a pre-given authority or authorities, which enable such identification. The most interesting aspect of ironic ambiguity, after all, is not that it *simply* negates meaning; rather, it depends upon the very form of communication which it disrupts in order to *produce* meaning. This would suggest that 'intention' signifies something more than the standard sense of an 'author's intended meaning' when it comes to interpreting irony.

The key question that these three ideas raise, then, is how the speculative 'open-ness' of ironic possibility is reconciled with the closure of interpretative understanding. My general hypothesis is that irony disrupts communication, or at least the forms of communication which underlies the hermeneutic criteria of 'understanding', and, as such, to read ironically is to go beyond the usual requirements of interpretation. Because irony suggests, in its most basic definitions, a distrust of the immediate meaning of a text or event, it does not demand simple understanding, but what Jonathan Culler (following Wayne Booth) terms 'overstanding'.

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9   See D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* London: Free Association Books, 1985); R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge, CUP, 1989).

Interpreting irony is not just a case of 'asking the questions… that the text insists on', but rather asks 'about what the text does and how', and 'what it conceals or represses'.[10] We are not simply reconstructing a given meaning; rather, as Claire Colebrook argues, reading irony is 'a matter of determining the possible positions opened up by an utterance and the subsequent question of who is speaking.'[11]

These points considered, I would argue that it is perhaps the notion of 'intention' as a singular entity which causes some of the interpretative tensions here. If irony demands that we go beyond a simple reconstruction of meaning, then it draws out the figural, schematic and metaphorical uses of authority we invoke within the interpretative process. For the rest of this paper, I will argue that attempts to reconstruct hermeneutically the value of irony involve drawing on (at least) *two* distinct notions of 'intention': one as a figurative 'frame' of meaning which is exterior to the text or event itself, the other as an interior 'unity' of the text or event. By extricating these two forms of intention, I will show that the traditional recourse to intention in the interpretation of irony is neither as straightforward nor stable as is often presumed.

2.   External Authority — the Author Function

Perhaps the most obvious way in which the figure of 'intention' is used in ironic discourse is as a mode of authority which operates as a frame of meaning external to the text itself. This points to a recognisably straightforward 'author figure' that would identify irony's meaning, summarised paradigmatically by Simon Gaunt's proclamation:

> The only way to be sure that a statement was intended ironically is to have a detailed knowledge
> of the personal, linguistic, cultural and social references of the speaker *and* his audience.[12]

Gaunt's quotation is emblematic of a certain strand of ironological literature that privileges this author figure as a site of meaning. As such, the quote suggests two points about the location of authority with the general author figure.

1. The meaning of the text (here, 'statement') operates within a fixed set of parameters (the immediate context) that are, theoretically at least, open to a 'detailed knowledge'; presumably, an historical-empirical knowledge which is discoverable. The author function here becomes a mode of establishing such parameters by situating the cultural references of ironist and audience. In this sense, the figural element of 'the author' enacts a certain boundary for the interpreter's purpose. This 'Author Function', to borrow Foucault's term, is characterised by

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[10]   J. Culler, 'In Defense of Overinterpretation' in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. by U. Eco and S. Collini (Cambridge, CUP, 1992, pp. 109-124), pp. 114–15.
[11]   C. Colebrook, *op.cit.,* p. 75.
[12]   S. Gaunt, *Troubadours and Irony* (Cambridge, CUP, 1989), p. 25.

two basic features. First, the figurative representation of the function within interpretation (referencing accompanied by personal pronouns, etc.); second, there is a lack of specific reference within the ironic text or event itself.[13] That is to say, the external authority is given meaning within secondary interpretative literature rather than the interpreted text itself. When this serves as a representation of the author beyond the limits of the text itself, this non-specific reference is to an extent necessary: as Foucault argues, *because* this figure of the author is a 'proper name', 'one *cannot* turn a proper name into a pure and simple reference' (my emphasis).[14] In short, when employing such a figure, we are already turning half an eye away from the object of interpretation, and towards the wider framing interpretative schema.

2. For Gaunt the prospect of irony moves the interpreter to look *beyond* the initial ironic statement of the text, and to the referential frame of meaning that *enables* such a statement to be classed as 'ironic'. While the immediate irony manifests itself in the authorial performance, the possibility of this authorial irony, and the meaning it produces, lies not in the immediate image but the sense of the 'beyond' which frames the text. In other words, the facticity of the text's 'origin', which Gaunt employs here, frames the text by virtue of its being 'beyond' the text.

The constitutive element of ironic meaning is then situated within this linear movement 'beyond' the immediate text. But it is important to see that this sense of the 'beyond' works in two ways. On the one hand, the legitimacy of positing a lived authorial body within a particular time and space is a matter of objective certification. From this, the notion of the historical author — an embodied, intentional actor — as a schematic root for the interpreter is justified. On the other hand, on a purely pragmatic basis, it is rare, if not impossible, that the means of attaining such claims to 'reality' satisfy the ends demanded by the interpretation's use of such a figure. To establish, Gaunt suggests, a 'detailed knowledge of the personal, linguistic, cultural and social references of the speaker *and* his audience' is a far more extensive task than first appears,

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[13] We can think here in particular of the way many interpretations of more ambiguous authorities utilise an author's private and unpublished texts as a reference point, such as journals or letters. Given that such references occur outside of the author's published work and away from the texts in question, the specific grounds for the *authority* of such reference points, in relation to the interpretation of the specific text, is rarely clarified in hermeneutic terms.

[14] M. Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by P. Rabinow (London, Penguin, 1991, pp.101–120), p. 105. In more detail:

> [A]n author's name is not simply an element in a discourse […] it performs a certain role with regards to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others […] The author's name serves to characterise a certain mode of being of discourse […] (p. 107)

even before we consider that the presupposition within the claim that there is a coherent and relatively stable speaker-audience relationship at work in every case of irony.[15] In this sense, the historical author is 'beyond', not only the text, but also the limits of the interpreter's justification.

If treating these two senses as the same notion of the 'beyond' is an equivocation, it is a formative equivocation. In the case of interpreting irony, the first sense entails the second. The very authority of the external author-figure is constituted within the postponement of 'immediate' meaning within the ambiguous text; meaning, therefore, lies not in the reductive act of reference, but in the gesture *towards* a reference. But this reference is not simply unfulfilled: rather, the intentionalist gesture allows the text to be framed within a particular purpose and direction based on that reference (i.e. the meaning of irony is rooted in the empirical references of the speaker's intention). In this way, the value of such a gesture is not the 'completing' the reference itself, but the framing of the text or event within a particular relation between meaning and intention. It is such a framing which allows certain possibilities of meaning to be authorised, and others precluded.

3. 'Literal Meaning' and Stability

It is relatively clear, of course, why the 'problem of irony' in relation to interpretation should be dealt with through the figure of an intentional author. Structuring meaning around an authorial intention 'behind' the text itself enables irony to be considered as a figurative trope, reducible to the 'literal meaning' of the communication.[16] Consequently, the non-literal meaning of figurative language — its playful ambiguity — is assessed by virtue of the literal ordering of the text. But such an ordering presupposes certain hermeneutic commitments. Ambiguity does not invite a 'neutral' interpretation, when interpretation is concerned with *understanding*: the two are already at odds. It is true that the appeal to authorial intention allows the interpreter to resist the relativism of 'total irony', whereby everything and anything can be claimed to be ironic. But it follows that, if this is the case, the role of the 'literal meaning' of a text must be seen as bearing a strategic relation to the ironic excess of meaning. As Gibbs argues, the process of interpreting irony does not rest on a 'single point' of literal meaning, as the notion of what constitutes 'literal meaning' is itself an ambiguous area: unproblematic

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[15]   Of course, this is far from a justified presupposition. One can easily find quotations which are ironic only in hindsight or when juxtaposed with related yet contextually distinct events. Awarding Henry Kissinger the Nobel Peace Prize, for example, may well only be considered an ironic event when juxtaposed with evidence of U.S-sanctioned political subversion in South America under Kissinger's jurisdiction.

[16]   As Hutcheon notes, 'the understandable urge to anchor the slipperiness of meaning in the intention of the encoder is evident in most studies of figurative language or indirect expression' (*op. cit.*, p. 116).

references to any such literal point are 'no more stable than the eventual interpretation it supposedly authorises.'[17] This strategic relation is of the utmost importance to a productive ironic interpretation, because it raises the question of *how* the value of 'literal meaning' is constructed from the ironic event.

If we reverse the linear approach represented by Gaunt,[18] and ask not how irony arises from the a given author, but instead how a given author arises from an ambiguously ironic event, then we can see that the apparent stability of 'literal meaning' as a counter-balance to ironic ambiguity is supported only by a particular repression of certain ambiguities at crucial moments. That is to say, the ambiguity is illuminated at a certain stage of interpretation, a stage which is *already* subordinated by the figure of the 'ironist'. In other words, for irony to be reduced to the 'literal', a certain hierarchy of value is being presupposed in the hermeneutic approach. Such a hierarchy may be grounded on 'knowledge' (for example, Hirsch's claim that authorial meaning is the only basis on which proper *knowledge* of a text can be built[19]), or on 'necessity' (for example, Searle's argument that a sentence cannot have both a literal and a distinct figurative meaning, because 'sentences and words have only the meanings that they have.'[20]); but in any case, such reductive organisations are brought into focus by the challenge of ironic ambiguity.

The key point here is that these two apparently conflicting motifs — reference, on the one hand, and 'the beyond', or the ambiguous spaces between references, on the other — do not simply overrule one or the other in the case of ironic interpretation. As I have argued in the previous sections, merely positing a reference to an intentional author does not solve the problems of ambiguity, as it relies on the same notion of the 'beyond' for authority. In cases such as Gaunt's (or Hirsch's, or Searle's), we are seeing under the guise of a referential claim an hermeneutic organisation of possible meanings, which may or may not be entirely relevant to the specific ambiguity at work in the text or event. Conversely, however, to locate the meaning of an ironic text *is* a problem of reference — one cannot simply find irony wherever one pleases. Philosophical hermeneutics remains concerned with justifying and accounting for our understanding, in which cases the problems raised so far by the 'superhuman figure' of

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[17] R. Gibbs, 'Process and Products in Making Sense of Tropes' in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed by A. Ortony (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), pp. 252–276), p. 263.

[18] We can include here similar intentionalist approaches, which suggest a philosophy of mind is more useful than a philosophy of interpretation in cases of irony: for example, S. Knapp and W. Michaels, 'Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction' in *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 14, No. 1, 1987) pp. 49–68.

[19] See E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (London: Yale University Press, 1967).

[20] J. Searle 'Metaphor' in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. by A. Ortony (Cambridge: CUP, 1993, pp. 83–111), p. 84.

intentionality must be both traceable and accountable. In order to understand this, we must probe deeper into the internal authority of the text itself.

4. Internal Authority — the Hermeneutic Circle

Umberto Eco suggests that such notions of 'intentional author', 'implied author', etc. are only projections from the *internal* coherence of the text (or, in this case, the text's irony), or what he terms 'the intention of the text':

> Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result […]. I am so defining the old and still valid "hermeneutic circle".[21]

The meaning of a text is restricted by a certain sense of internal coherence. As Ricoeur notes, even though there is 'always more than one way of construing a text,' the text nevertheless presents only a 'limited field of possible constructions'.[22] As an object of interpretation, each unit of that object must itself be unitary, representing the single order of that object. This single order is not discoverable in a linear manner, though, as with the case of referencing an author outside of the text.[23] The internal meaning of a work is, rather, a circular process. A word has multiple meanings, but the possibility of its meaning must cohere with the text at large: 'In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader'.[24] The interpreter constructs a meaning by circulating between the part and the whole, a circulation which operates at every level of interpretation (from word to sentence, sentence to text, text to corpus, corpus to genre, etc.) and thus 'expand[s] the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally'.[25] This is, in essence, the structure of the hermeneutic circle. However, even in its most traditional representations, the hermeneutic circle is not only a schematic means of interpretative understanding, but also a mode of signifying the lack of absolute meaning in a text, the separation of the text from its origin inherent to the act of inscription; a separation that imposes the need for interpretation in the first place.[26] The circle

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[21] U. Eco, 'Overinterpreting Texts' in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. by U. Eco and S. Collini, (Cambridge: CUP, 1992, pp. 45–66), p. 64.

[22] P. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

[23] W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 234.

[24] Eco, *op. cit*., p. 65.

[25] H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* trans.by J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 291.

[26] See, amongst others, W. Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 53.

thus not only signifies the contradictory progression of interpretation that involves movement from part to whole and back, but further, both the presence and absence of understanding.

Such is the case of interpretation in general, but what of ironic interpretation? The ironic question is different from the traditional formulations of the hermeneutic circle because of the constructive tension we have already seen between the challenge to authority given in the terms of identifying the ironic, and the investment in a pre-given authority, or authorities, which enable the focus on irony in a text. The most important point to note is that the use of the circle as a trope in ironic interpretation is not necessarily a descriptive figure, but rather represents the presupposition of unity within the act of interpretation.[27] The circle is not only a schema, but a vital metaphor for the construction of an interpretation. In order to close the circle, there exists a certain inevitable imbalance towards particular points of reference, which become central for locating the resistance to the ironic possibilities of the text. As a unity, the circle *contains* the 'space' of ambiguity. By containing it, it can define ambiguity. But the metaphorical completion of the circle has reconstructed the ambiguity by providing a context, an ordering, and an orientation. The ways in which schema and metaphor conflate within the hermeneutic circle are thus vital for organising the possibilities of meaning.

5. Intention and Beyond

I started this article with the general hypothesis that irony disrupts the forms of communication which underlies the hermeneutic criteria for understanding. The persistent thematic emphasis on 'intention' as a criterion for assessing ironic meaning, however, often produced an impasse between author and critic over who has the authority to claim a text or event is ironic. Rather than dismiss this theme, I argued that closer analysis of the relationship between intention, interpretation and authority could point to ways in which quite an accountable hermeneutic of irony might be produced. In this final section, I will briefly outline how the previous discussion would point towards this.

As a hermeneutic concern, the essential problem lies with attempting to explain irony in terms of the very models of successful communication which it disrupts. This inevitably reduces ironic ambiguity. Such a problem gives rise to the need for not just understanding, but Culler's concept of 'overstanding'. The way through this was to expand on Colebrook's idea that irony calls into question 'who is speaking', by suggesting that irony exposes the hermeneutic framework for understanding as a *frame*. Irony models communication not in terms of a closed

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[27] Gadamer calls this the hermeneutic circle's implication of a 'fore-conception of completeness.' *Op. cit.*, p. 294.

linear references or circulations of meaning, but in terms of the spaces opened up between these points of reference: shifts in context, gaps in reference, and so on. There is thus a constructive tension between a) the challenge to authority given in the terms of identifying the ironic, and b) the investment in a pre-given authority, or authorities, which enable the focus on irony in a text. So, when Rorty claims that the 'opposite of irony is common sense', this is in fact only half the story, because the common-sense structures of authority nevertheless remain *affective*.[28] I read Linda Hutcheon's argument over the situating of 'intention' as supporting this:

> To call something ironic is to frame or contextualize it in such a way that, in fact, an intentionalist statement has already been made — either by the ironist *or* by the interpreter (or by both).
> In other words, intentional/non-intentional may be a false distinction: all irony happens intentionally, whether the attribution be made by the encoder or the decoder. Interpretation is, in a sense, an intentional act on the part of the interpreter.[29]

While Hutcheon enlarges the limiting correlation of intention with empirical author to include the interpreter, we can see that, in fact, 'intention' is not an empirical factor but a schematic *and* metaphorical structure; or, at the very least, it is as a trope of coherence that 'intention' is employed in the interpretation of irony. Identifying the importance of intention to the understanding of irony is, then, not merely to posit a context by which irony might 'make sense' in terms of its historical or social significance. The hermeneutic expression of the author function — how the interpreter re-presents such an intention — crucially reveals the ways in which the various possibilities of what irony might mean is constructed, organised and prioritised. In this sense, 'intention' can operate in at least two ways: as exterior to the text itself (as the 'author function'), or as the interior 'unity' of the text. While irony disrupts models of communication — whether through appeal to a separate, distinct author figure, or to a circular interpretative process — these models nevertheless remain in play. But their signification is more pronounced once we attempt to account for the specific ambiguity of the ironic event, rather than for the 'proper' meaning behind it. In such cases, the metaphorical aspects of such models become as relevant as their schematic aspects. Intention is not simply an empirical question, but one of hermeneutic structure: it is invoked as an organising principle to justify an interpretative claim that a text or event is ironic or not.

We can see now how the impasse between the absolute authority of the author's intention and the apparent relativism of the critics reading is not an endpoint in the discussion. Rather, it is a mistake to see the author's figure operating as a single reference point in the interpretative presentation of irony. The 'intention' of the author is instead facilitated within the coherence of

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[28] Rorty, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
[29] Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

the text-interpreter relation. 'Intention' is not an empirical factor but a schematic *and* metaphorical structure; or, at the very least, it is as a trope of coherence that 'intention' is employed in the interpretation of irony. Thus, the interpretation of irony is not investing in the 'given' authority as a governing schema which would bring closure to the ambiguous meaning of irony, but is rather investing in the tropological shape of interpretation. The importance of intention is not*,* as was first presumed, as some kind of 'original' position 'beyond' the ironic moment, which would guarantee its limitation. It follows that the sense of non-immediacy in the ironic text is, similarly, not in some way 'beyond' the inscription, but contained within the structures of interpretation that give it meaning. If this is the case, then the sense of an immanent 'beyond' contained within the ironic mode is clearly an essential element to an interpretative strategy. Irony works to reveal — and, perhaps, account for — such a strategy.

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Coping with the Security Dilemma: A Fundamental Ambiguity of State Behaviour

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Abstract

The wording of international treaties, the language and actions of statesmen are often ambiguous, even controversial. But there is a different, more fundamental ambiguity underlying international relations; one that is independent of human nature or the cognitive limitations of decision makers but instead results from the correct adjustment of state behaviour to the uncertainties of an anarchical international system.

Due to the anarchical nature of the international system — the lack of a sovereign — states can only rely on their own strength for self-defence. But self-protection often threatens other states. If a state purchases armaments, even if it claims not to have aggressive intents, there is no sovereign to enforce these commitments and there is no way of being certain that the purchasing state is telling the truth, or that it will not develop such intents in the future. The so-called security dilemma has a number of effects on state behaviour. First, states often worry about implausible threats (see e.g. British defence plans against a possible French invasion in the 1930s) and/or get caught in arms races. Second, states develop an inherent mistrust in the language of the other, requiring commitments to be firm and unambiguous in order to be credible, since ambiguity invites conflicts and renders cooperation more difficult.

Still, on the one hand, instead of a world of constant mistrust, we register instances of institutionalized inter-state cooperation. On the other hand, states often choose to make commitments that are deliberately ambiguous and outperform more transparent commitments.

This paper seeks to explain how states are trying to cope with the ambiguity that is the security dilemma by both signalling peaceful intents in order to facilitate cooperation and deliberately using ambiguity in their discourse. The analysis will rely on a number of examples taken from the Cold War where superpower confrontation was resolved through either of these means.[1]

Keywords:

Skepsi

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The wording of international treaties, the language and actions of statesmen are often ambiguous, or controversial. But there is a different, more fundamental ambiguity underlying International Relations (IR). This ambiguity is independent of human nature or the cognitive limitations of decision makers but instead results from the correct adjustments of state behaviour to the uncertainties of an anarchical international system.

According to the realist mainstream of strategic studies, due to this anarchical aspect of the international system, states can only rely on their own strength for self-defence. But self-protection often threatens other states. For example, if a state purchases armaments, even if it claims not to have aggressive intents, there is no supranational sovereign to enforce these commitments, and there is no way of being certain that the arming state's leaders are telling the truth, or that they will not develop aggressive goals in the future. This phenomenon, the so-called security dilemma has a number of effects on state behaviour. First, states often worry about implausible threats and/or get caught in arms races.[2] Second, states develop an inherent mistrust in the language of the other, requiring commitments to be firm and unambiguous in order to be credible, since ambiguity invites conflicts and renders cooperation more difficult.

Still, on the one hand, instead of a highly conflictual international political system, we register instances of institutionalized inter-state cooperation. On the other hand, in security dilemma-like crises states often choose to make commitments that are deliberately ambiguous and sometimes even supersede more transparent commitments. This paper seeks to explain how states are trying to cope with the ambiguity that is the security dilemma and why they still rely on ambiguous language in their relationships, even though they are aware of the risks involved.

The article is organized as follows: the first section presents an overview of the security dilemma, focusing on its inherent ambiguities derived from the limitations of the human mind and the indistinguishability of offensive and defensive weapons. The second section offers examples for how the negative effects of the dilemma can be mitigated, based on a rational choice representation of the dilemma. In the third section, an example of deliberate ambiguity in the discourse of statesmen caught in security dilemma-like scenarios will be presented: the failed cooperation between Dwight Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev. Through this example, the paper shows how ambiguity can lead to failed cooperative policies, and, curiously, why

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[2] Realist thinking presupposes an objective-subjective dichotomy of threats, i.e. that there are objectively identifiable threats to state security in the 'real world', independent of the subjective perceptions of statesmen. Based on this distinction, with hindsight, analysts can judge whether the threat was 'real' or not.

such seemingly counter-productive language might still be a perfectly rational policy tool. As a conclusion, the paper offers a way to combine these two facets of ambiguous language in order to provide a better understanding of security dilemma-like conflicts.

1.   The security dilemma

As is the case with many notions in International Relations, the security dilemma lacks a clear, universally accepted definition. However, numerous scholars of security agree that the phenomenon is one of the pervasive problems of IR[3] — Herbert Butterfield, who first conceptualized the security dilemma, even claims that it is the key variable the dynamics of international conflicts can be explained with.[4] Though critical approaches often question the validity and usefulness of the concept, the security dilemma is still a crucial variable in contemporary realist thinking about security.[5] But what exactly does the contested concept of security mean in this realist context? For realists and for the purpose of this paper, security means the absence of threats, meaning that one is free from danger and feels secure.[6] The referent object of this traditional framework is of course the state. Threats are existential (threats to sovereignty), come from other states and can be countered through military means.[7]

With security defined, it is useful to continue with the word 'dilemma' to offer a useful definition of the security dilemma for the purpose of this analysis. The word 'dilemma' itself implies choice, namely a difficult choice between equal, mutually exclusive alternatives. In ethics, often the outcome is seen as negative, irrespective of the alternative chosen. In the previous example the dilemma would mean that no matter which position state A takes towards state B's weapons acquisition (i.e. interpreting it as an act of aggression or as a purely defensive measure), it may still be wrong. If state B was aggressive, but state A thought it was not, state A can be overrun by B's army. If state B was not aggressive, but state A armed itself thinking the opposite, the two states can get caught in an arms race or even war. Thus, the security dilemma is primarily a dilemma of interpretation about the intentions, motives and capabilities of others.[8] Once the 'type' of the other states (i.e. aggressor or status quo/security seeker) has

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[3]   See for example the work of Robert Jervis, Paul Roe, Charles Glaser or Ken Booth.

[4]   Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951), p. 20.

[5]   See e.g. Randall Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, no. 3, 1996.

[6]   Steve Smith, 'The Contested Concept of Security' in *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, Ken Booth (ed.) (London: Lynne Rienner, 2005), p. 21.

[7]   For more on realism and security see Sean M. Lynn-Jones, 'Realism and Security Studies', in Craig A. Snyder (ed.) *Contemporary Security and Strategy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 53–77.

[8]   Ken Booth and Nick Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 4.

been decided upon, the response is practically automatic:[9] if the state sees the other as an aggressor, it will arm itself; if it sees the other as a status quo power, it will signal peaceful intentions.[10] The dilemma of interpretation can be traced back to two constitutive elements of the security dilemma: uncertainty and the ambiguous symbolism of weapons.

1.1.   Uncertainty: Ambiguity of motives and intentions

The limitations of the human condition make it impossible to know with absolute certainty the intentions and motives behind another person's actions. In the international arena, military preparations lead to 'an unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of another as to whether those [military] preparations are for defensive purposes only (to enhance [the state's] security), or whether they are for offensive purposes (to weaken [the other state's] security)'.[11] Due to the ambiguity of intentions, aggression can neither be excluded, nor guaranteed.

States try to resolve the uncertainty by 'rules of thumb' that largely correspond to IR's traditional levels-of-analysis.[12] Classical Realists like security dilemma pioneers Herbert Butterfield and John Herz reach back to a Hobbesian state of nature of greedy and fallible individuals, and offer a solution on the individual level: as all individuals have the potential to harm, cooperation is too risky and one should 'kill first or be killed'. Neorealists also advise states to opt for the worst, but due to systemic reasons. For them, anarchy and self-help in the international system force states to assume the worst: even if statesmen would realize the predicament they are in and would wish to cooperate, anarchy and self-help still would compel them not to enter into a cooperative agreement in fear of being cheated or taken advantage of. The third approach, the so-called liberal tradition looks for a solution on the domestic level: so-called 'overall national evaluative capabilities' — for example think tanks or intelligence agencies — interpret the actions of other states. Although these domestic institutions/groups are often plagued by parochial interests and may even contribute to an increase in international tensions; nevertheless, they represent a plausible solution for coping with the uncertainty of motives and intentions of other states.

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[9]   This article relies on the mainstream aggressor-security seeker dichotomy of state types. Note that attempts have been made to create a more comprehensive and nuanced taxonomy, see e.g. Charles Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models', *World Politics*, vol.44, no.4, 1992.

[10]   Booth and Wheeler mistakenly conceptualize the dilemma as a two-stage choice scenario: in their interpretation, if a state interprets the military posture of another state as that of an aggressor, it may still try to reassure it.

[11]   Paul Roe, *Ethnic Violence and the Societal Security Dilemma* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 9.

[12]   Ibid., Introduction.

1.2   Weapons: ambiguity of capabilities

The other important constituting element of the security dilemma is the inherent ambiguous symbolism of weapons. Arms are essentially ambiguous in nature, as Robert Jervis notes, 'Unless the requirements for offence and defence differ in kind or amount, a status quo power will desire a military posture that resembles that of an aggressor. For this reason others cannot infer from its military forces and preparations whether the state is aggressive'.[13] Simply put, offensive and defensive weapons are hard — some say impossible — to distinguish. Apart from immobile fortifications, practically all armaments (e.g. tanks, jet fighters) can be used both for defending and attacking a territory, and with the advent of nuclear weapons that are primarily deterrent weapons, this distinction appears even less tenable.[14] Thus, the inability of leaders to ascertain accurately intentions from the nature of the armaments of another state alone aggravates the uncertainty about the other's mind.[15]

1.3.   Unintended consequences

Once the arms purchase of another country has been interpreted as an act of aggression, the interpreter state will communicate resolve and arm itself, too. Thus, a spiral of hostility may ensue, leading to arms races, even to war. What is striking about these security paradoxes is that the consequences were unintended by the security seeking state: though it was only seeking to defend itself, its military preparations were interpreted like those of an aggressor. The resulting arms race then decreases the overall level of security in the system. These unintended consequences of the security dilemma, resulting from the action-reaction dynamics of arms races, are what Herbert Butterfield calls the tragic element of international conflict. He warns us that '[t]he greatest war in history could be produced without the intervention of any great criminals who might be out to do deliberate harm to the world. It could be produced between two Powers both of which were desperately anxious to avoid conflict of any sort'.[16]

Though the literature on the security dilemma is dominated by writings on the security paradox, as Booth and Wheeler note, the outcome of a security dilemma can also be positive.

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[13]   Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the security dilemma', *World Politics,* 30 (1978), p. 169.

[14]   Apart from the indistinguishability of defensive and offensive weapons, Jervis (1978) also adds another variable underlying the ambiguity of weapons: the offence defence balance. The so-called offence-defence theory argues that if offensive weapons have the advantage over defensive weapons (meaning that for the same amount of resources, more territory can be gained than defended), wars become more likely; while the opposite would make the system more prone to peace (see e.g. Lynne-Jones 1995). Combined with the indistinguishability of the very same weapons, the situation becomes more ambiguous.

[15]   Due to this peculiar characteristic of weapons, many scholars conceived the security dilemma in terms of capabilities. However, as Booth and Wheeler (2008) note, military doctrines are also important.

[16]   Quoted in Booth and Wheeler, p. 7.

Their example for such a scenario is the end of the Cold War, when U.S. President Ronald Reagan interpreted Gorbachev as a security seeker, leading to cooperative actions between the two superpowers and finally, to the end of the arms race. What is interesting about this case is that the action-reaction dynamics of the Cold War arms race could be reversed by a previously outspoken anti-Communist U.S. President. Due to the discussed inherent ambiguities of the security dilemma; there is nothing inevitable in neither the positive, nor in the negative outcomes. But as the above example shows, human agency is central in security dilemma situations, offering one important variable that is able to ameliorate the problem, a variable Booth and Wheeler call 'security dilemma sensibility'.[17] Security dilemma sensibility is 'an actor's intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness towards, the potential complexity of the military intentions of others. In particular, it refers to the ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including, crucially, the role that one's actions may play in provoking that fear'.[18]

1.4. Categorization

Booth and Wheeler organize the security dilemma literature along three *a priori* logical positions: fatalists, mitigators and transcenders.[19] Although these ideal types do not correspond to schools in the sense the word is used in IR, they can still roughly be equated with Classical Realism, Neorealism and Idealism/Constructivism respectively.[20]

Fatalists believe that insecurity cannot be escaped in international politics and thus the security dilemma is the *modus operandi* of the system. While classical Realists explain the inevitability of the dilemma with the human condition, Neorealists find the roots of the problem in the anarchical nature of the system that compels states to always opt for the worst.

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[17]   Booth and Wheeler.

[18]   Note that due to the still pervasive uncertainties of the predicament, even if both statesmen are security dilemma sensible, a security paradox may still occur. In some cases, security dilemma sensibility might be misconceived, impossible to operationalise, or can lead to unsustainable mitigator practices. Hence Booth and Wheeler (2008) argue that it still a necessary but not sufficient condition for building trust.

[19]   Booth and Wheeler.

[20]   While idealists believe that mutual hostility can be superseded by interstate cooperation, some constructivists (e.g. members of the Copenhagen School like Barry Buzan) question the very essence of the security dilemma when arguing for an intersubjective notion of security, thus rendering the whole concept of 'unnecessary conflict' meaningless. Others, like famous constructivist Alexander Wendt, argue that anarchy itself is also inter-subjectively constructed, thus it does not necessarily act as a source of a dilemma, as realists argue. Thus, in terms of their approach to mitigating and the eradicating the security dilemma, idealism and constructivism, these otherwise competing theories of IR can be grouped together.

Though mitigators — exemplified by defensive Neorealists and members of the English School[21] — still believe that human nature may be flawed and that the security dilemma cannot be eliminated from the anarchical system, they claim that at least the dilemma's most dire outcomes, war, politico-military crises and arms races can be avoided. Unlike offensive realists, mitigators believe that anarchy informed by rules, norms and institutions also introduces a certain level of predictability into the international system, which could bring security to the actors involved.[22] Security is still the primary concern of states, but does not come from fatalist logic, but the construction of a society of states. As means of constructing a society of states, mitigators look towards dialogue (primarily the institution of diplomacy) and the construction of norms (mainly international regimes) as ways of countering the dynamics of fear and insecurity.

It is important to note that some Neorealists — exemplified by the pioneering work of Robert Jervis — argue that the security dilemma dynamics cannot fully be explained by systemic constraining variables, such as anarchy alone. Though still committed to structural realist ontology, Jervis emphasizes the presence of psychological modifying variables, such as cognitive biases. Such variables in an actual security dilemma scenario may modify the perceptions of policy makers, possibly forcing them to misperceive the actions of other states and/or make suboptimal policy decisions.[23] Source of such psychological factors are, of course, the very limitations of the human mind upon which the security dilemma concept was originally was based. The presence of these modifying variables can of course distort the expected outcomes of mitigatory policies, as will be discussed later in this analysis.

The third stream of literature, that of the so-called transcenders, attacks the predetermined nature of the security dilemma. Proponents of such critical thinking on security find the existing conceptualization of the so-called human condition and anarchy itself problematic; and claim that traditional insecurities can be transcended by the extension of moral and political community globally — human society on a global scale can become whatever it wants to be.[24]

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[21] Defensive Neorealists believe that security can only be maximized by defensive measures. According to authors like Robert Jervis, the offensive realist idea of aggression as a means of maximizing power (greater power meaning more security) would have adverse consequences.
On the English School's approach to international politics see e.g. Richard Little, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 6, 2000, pp. 395-422.

[22] Booth and Wheeler, pp. 14–15.

[23] Robert Jervis *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976) Chapter 3: 'Deterrence, the Spiral Model, and Intentions of the Adversary'

[24] See e.g. Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46, 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 391–426.

Though ideal types, all three approaches are rooted in practice. As the mitigator logic (i.e. that goals of states can be maintained through institutions and norms, e.g. international law; not just through mere power politics) corresponds to the current international system and the conceptualization of security put forth in this chapter, the article will rely on this ideal type as the starting point for analysis.

2. Mitigation

For mitigators, anarchy permits a degree of shared security to be achieved through the development of international regimes through reassurance and cooperation. But how is this possible, given the uncertainties of interstate relations?

The security dilemma and international conflict have been analyzed through several theoretical approaches, ranging from political psychology to rational choice theory. Defensive realists — advocates of mitigation — have attempted to formalize the dilemma through game theory.[25] Robert Jervis, one of the most prominent analysts, emphasizes the international system's 'unforgiving' nature in his work: even if cooperation seems possible, the costs of miscalculation about the motives and intentions of the other are just too great, given that a single defection may mean the fall of a whole state.[26] This description of the dilemma corresponds to the logic of a simple prisoner's dilemma game (PD, for the graphic representation, see Figure 1.), where defecting on others yields the highest payoff, leading to a single Nash equilibrium where everyone defects. This outcome leaves the players in a position that is Pareto-inferior (i.e. there exists an outcome, where both players are better off) to mutual cooperation. The question for analysts and statesmen is then the following: if the security dilemma truly resembles the PD, then how does one make players cooperate?[27]

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[25] See e.g. Snyder, Glenn H. 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics' *World Politics*, Vol. 36. No. 4 (Jul. 1984), 461–95 or Andrew Kydd, 'Trust, Reassurance and Cooperation', *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 2. Spring (2000), 325–57.

[26] Robert Jervis, 'Security Regimes', *International Organization*, Spring (1982), 359.

[27] As Robert Axelrod (1984) found out, most arms races resemble not a single, but an iterated version of the PD where players interact in subsequent rounds. In this game, cooperative strategies like tit-for-tat yielded higher payoffs than defection. Nevertheless, the question of how to make cooperation more likely remains.

FIGURE 1: MATRIX REPRESENTATION OF A TWO-PLAYER PRISONER'S DILEMMA GAME, YIELDING A SINGLE NASH EQUILIBRIUM OF DEFECT-DEFECT. PAYOFFS REPRESENT A RANKING OF THE POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

Naturally, it is sensible to depart from game theoretical answers as they often present simple and compelling interpretations of complex decision problems. In the simple PD game, as Jervis argues, cooperation can be furthered if the payoffs of the game are altered.[28] In a PD game, cooperation becomes more likely when mutual cooperation is only slightly less attractive than exploiting the other, being exploited is only slightly worse than mutual competition and when mutual competition is far worse than mutual cooperation. These suggestions are not reserved to abstract mathematical analyses: empirical examples exist where analogous actions were actually taken. Historically, such changes to the original structure of the security dilemma 'game' were achieved by so-called security regimes, like the Vienna Concert or the Soviet-American *détente*.

Jervis defines security regimes as 'those principles, rules, and norms that permit nations to be restrained in their behaviour in the belief that others will reciprocate';[29] it is 'a form of co-operation that is more the following of short-run self-interests'.[30] In this framework, states are still rational egoists (they follow their own interests and do not care about others' payoffs), thus cooperation only occurs if they see it as their long term interest. He identifies four preconditions for a security regime to be created: great powers must show willingness and support (all great powers support the status quo and agree that any change should be arrived at cooperatively); governments must believe that others place the same value on cooperation and security; no individual states must assume that it can only be secure by making others insecure; and finally, war and unilateral pursuit of security must be seen as too costly.[31] Once a regime is formed, it offers a code of conduct for interstate relations, increasing mutual security by reassurance and

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[28]   Jervis, *Cooperation*, p. 170.
[29]   For an alternative approach to international regimes see Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
[30]   Jervis, *Security Regimes*, p. 357.
[31]   Ibid, pp. 360–62.

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cooperation. The benefits of long term cooperation become more secured and defection (e.g. wars among member states) gets penalized, thus becoming more costly. Importantly, even if a member state defects once, the other states may continue to cooperate with it if it abides by the rules of the regime.

International politics within a security regime resembles an iterated version of the PD game, where players (member states) face each other for longer periods of time — i.e. they replay the same game over and over again. In such a game, non-cooperative strategies (defection) yields lower expected utilities than in a single shot game, while mixed strategies like tit-for-tat (first cooperate then mirror the other player's move) yield higher payoffs. If the game also has negative and/or positive incentives and has rules for guiding player behaviour in case of a single transgression by a player (basically a rule for forgiveness), cooperation becomes much more likely than in the simple version of the game. However, though theoretically security regimes are able to mitigate the dilemma, in practice they can only be effective on the medium run and often fail due to mistrust among the players.

Another possibility for making cooperation more likely lies in decreasing mistrust among states, i.e. resolving — or at least mitigating — the ambiguity of motives and intentions. This can be done by credibly communicating peaceful intent, or in game theoretical terms, signalling 'type'.[32] The problem with signals is that, due to the inherent uncertainty (both cognitive and systemic), signals may be dismissed as 'cheap talk' (i.e. signals that do not come with any costs for the sender). To make signals credible, crisis bargaining theorists came up with the concept of costly signalling.[33] In a so-called reassurance game, costly signals are 'signals designed to persuade the other side that one is trustworthy by virtue of the fact that they are so costly that one would hesitate to send them if one were untrustworthy'.[34] Trust here is 'a belief that the other side is likely to be trustworthy and will therefore want to reciprocate cooperation rather than exploit it'.[35] Formally, trust is the probability, assigned by the receiver to the sender, of the sender's being a cooperative player. The closer the probability is to 1, the higher the level

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[32] If a player does not know the other player's payoff for outcomes, he or she is dealing with incomplete information. In such situations, the player is uncertain about the future actions of other players, making the construction of a strategy difficult. Games of imperfect information are modeled by assuming that the other player is one of several 'types', e.g. he or she is either cooperative or non-cooperative. The player then assigns a probability to each type and adjusts his or her strategy according to which type he or she is dealing with. For more on modeling games of incomplete information see for example James Morrow, 'A Rational Choice Approach to international conflict' in *Decision-making on War and Peace: The Cognitive-Rational Debate*, Nehemia Geva and Alex Mintz (eds.), (London: Lynne Rienner, 1997).
[33] See e.g. Kydd (2000)
[34] Kydd, p. 326.
[35] Ibid, p. 326.

of trust towards the sender.[36] In international politics, a costly signal can be, for example, withdrawing/reducing forces, lifting embargos or admitting wrong. If a signal is unilateral or not contingent on the adversary's initial response and if it is irrevocable, it is more likely to generate trust in others.

As we could see from this theoretical representation, in terms of as simple game, of how the security dilemma can be mitigated, building trust for cooperation to ameliorate tensions caused by the dilemma favours unambiguous, costly signals. All other signals can be dismissed as cheap talk, or even thought to be merely masking harmful intent. Given this requirement of avoiding unintentional arms races and wars, it is puzzling why statesmen still often rely on intentionally ambiguous discourse in such situations. As an illustration, in the next section I will present an example from the Cold War (the failed *rapprochement* between Khrushchev and Eisenhower in the late 1950s) where — contrary to the logic of reassurance games — ambiguous signals were used within the arms race security paradox. Naturally, ambiguous signals (i.e. signals that may decrease the level of trust, depending on their interpretation) are by virtue 'cheap talk' signals. It is thus important to see what underlying dynamics may compel security dilemma sensitive statesmen like Dwight Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev to resort to actions that may in fact worsen the spiral of mistrust.

3.   Ambiguous signals in the Cold War arms race

The Cold War is perhaps the most classic example for a security dilemma as the two superpowers were drawn into a vicious circle of arms racing and mutual mistrust. For analytical reasons, the Cold War is also important because its structure resembles that of an iterated PD: the two states were facing each other in several 'games' (crises and attempts at cooperation) where they could decide either to cooperate or to defect. This iteration, along with the fact that the threat of nuclear war makes coordination essential, gave the conflict a stable structure, guiding the expectations of leaders on both sides, and eventually enabling Gorbachev and Reagan to break out of the spiral by choosing cooperation and reassuring signals instead of mistrust and hostility.[37]

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[36]   Kydd also draws attention to the so-called 'margin of safety', beyond which costly signals may be exploited if the other side is indeed aggressive. To avoid the signals being exploited, the sender could wait for reciprocation from the received that would start a spiral of trust building.

[37]   In contemporary studies, dynamics of the Cold War are often explained through the mistrust between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, see e.g. Karin M. Fierke *Changing Games, Changing Strategies: Critical Investigations in Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). According to these scholars, there was nothing inevitable in the Cold War: orthodox views that explain the source of the conflict with aggressive Soviet goals in Europe and the irreconcilability of the two ideologies just mirror the enmity constructed in the postwar years on the elite decision maker level. Such works contribute to the stream of literature emphasizing the tragic character

Though the conflict often seemed desperately antagonistic, the cooperative record of the Cold War is not all blank: the two superpowers managed to sign cooperative agreements that restricted nuclear testing and nuclear defences, banned intermediate nuclear weapons or restricted the proliferation of atomic weapons. On the other hand, as Deborah Larson notes, the two superpowers failed to limit the construction of Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs), and only managed to agree on the status of Germany in the 1970s.[38] Also, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. could never truly agree on actually reducing the number of nuclear weapons — cooperation was only achieved in limiting the number of such arms. Given the security dilemma sensibility of some leaders, and the willingness of both sides to limit their wasteful military spending, the large number of these 'missed opportunities' is striking.[39]

From a pure rational choice perspective one could still argue that these cases are not really failures at all, since the two sides were involved in a zero-sum game where cooperation is by definition impossible. However, such an approach would be too simplistic as it neglects the fact that even if the global Cold War conflict itself could be modelled as a zero-sum game, issues such as the question of Berlin and halting the arms race offer common gains for both sides: lower military spending and decreased military presence in Europe with a neutral Germany. To explain why common gains were attained in some instances but not in others, the psychological variables that are an inherent feature of the human condition and feature heavily in the security dilemma as conceptualized both by Booth and Jervis can be invoked. As an illustration, a brief summary of the failed cooperation between Eisenhower and Khrushchev on the Berlin issue and a limited test ban treaty will be offered.

Viewed through a social psychological lens, one of the primary sources of failures is again the fact that even when interests overlap, leaders often draw incorrect inferences about the motives and intentions of others. Ambiguous language contributes to missed opportunities by breeding misunderstandings and consequentially mistrust. Curiously, however, it can also be a kind of rational policy. To understand why Cold War leaders might choose even though they support a cooperative outcome based on credible signals ambiguity — as did both Eisenhower and Khrushchev — the paper will look both below and beyond the analytical level of bilateral talks on the two issues. It presents two complementary explanations for the use of ambiguous signals using examples from the Cold War to illustrate their relevance for the missed

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of security dilemma scenarios: if conflict may result form mistrust i.e. a misinterpretation and exaggerated perception of hostility, then reassurance becomes crucial in avoiding security paradoxes.

[38] Deborah Welch Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[39] 'Missed opportunities' refers to counterfactuals where cooperation did not occur, even though both sides wanted it.

opportunity under scrutiny: two-level games (moving below the state level) and partial security regimes (going on the systemic level). Though both theories are rooted in rational choice, they represent an analytical move beyond game theoretical illustration and invoke variables that are outside of the PD game, i.e. variables that influence the preferences and beliefs of the players of PD-like games.

3.1.   Eisenhower and Khrushchev: a missed opportunity

Already from the early years of the Cold War onwards, both sides were claiming to be champions of international peace and leaders were repeatedly challenging each other to prove their peaceful intentions through deeds not words. As parity grew between the two camps, cooperation became both more imperative and more likely. Leaders had a number of methods at their disposal to make the other cooperate: persuasion, coercion, and accommodation.[40] Although often useful, coercion is not capable of building trust, and persuasion could easily be dismissed as cheap talk. Thus costly signalling was focused on accommodation, i.e. unilateral concessions to increase the other's security. Examples for such signalling are again numerous, perhaps the most emblematic being the failed attempt at settling the German question and nuclear testing during President Eisenhower's second term.

With his power consolidated in 1957, Khrushchev wanted to stabilize the status quo in Europe and cut defence spending to produce more consumer goods. Hence, he called for a meeting in 1959 as the peak of a steady process for cooperation on the German issue and a test ban. The General Secretary started a diplomatic offensive of trust building with unilateral force reductions and withdrawal, a unilateral ban on nuclear testing and a call for the adoption of the Rapacki plan for a nuclear free zone in Central Europe. As records now clearly show, Eisenhower also wanted an agreement, as he was aiming for a balanced budget, and wanted to be remembered as a peace builder.[41] To these ends, he wanted to halt the arms race. However, due to his mixed record of dealing with Khrushchev (e.g. dismissing previous force reductions as cheap talk), Eisenhower's rhetoric was ambiguous: while endorsing test bans and halting the arms race, he nevertheless gave orders to carry out the infamous U2 mission that set an end to the process. Though signalling peaceful intentions with the above costly signals, Khrushchev's language was also ambiguous: following the launch of Sputnik in 1957, he constantly

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[40]   See Paul Bennett, *The Soviet Union and Arms Control – Negotiating Strategy and Tactics* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

[41]   Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*, p. 1.

emphasized that Soviet Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) cancel the American deterrent and gave a number of fiery anti-American speeches domestically.

3.2. Ambiguity as rational policy: two-level games and partial security regimes

As the theory of two level games argues, statesmen engaged in international negotiations are not isolated from domestic influences as they try to satisfy both their international partners and their local constituency (even in non-democratic regimes) at the same time.[42] However, these goals often contradict each other. One action that seems rational on the international level may be irrational on the domestic level, leading to a loss of support for the statesman. To manage international negotiations, statesmen often pit the two levels against each other and argue for concessions domestically by explaining their limitations in the international arena ('we have to do this, or we will suffer losses in export'), or rely on domestic opposition as an argument for preferential treatment internationally ('you have to give me more, or I will not be able to ratify the agreement at home'). Of course, since the politician is maximizing his own utility, he may misrepresent the preferences of his or her domestic constituency and the international partners for greater leverage. However, as the two levels are often not isolated from each other, the politician often relies on ambiguous language for political manoeuvring.[43] In the case of the failed rapprochement during the late 1950s, Khrushchev had to rely not only on ambiguity to satisfy the Americans expecting costly signals but also his local hard-core opposition and the Soviet populace that could have interpreted concessions as a sign of weakness. Similarly, President Eisenhower had to deal with the mounting 'missile gap' hysteria in the U.S. (partly fuelled by Khrushchev's ambiguous rhetoric): even though the summit meeting in Paris was supported, the American people demanded a harder stance in defence issues and better intelligence on the Soviet ballistic missile programme.[44] Though this ambiguity was necessitated by the structure of the conflict on both sides, it nevertheless contributed to the failure of the negotiations as it decreased the trust on both sides.

Looking beyond the bilateral talks on Germany and the test ban, we have to go back to the security regime theory as both issues can be regarded as the 'infant phases' of so-called partial security regimes — regimes between states with their own codes of conduct that only cover

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[42] See e.g. Robert D. Putnam, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two Level Games' *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1988) pp. 427–60.

[43] See Benjamin I. Page, 'The Theory of Political Ambiguity', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Sep. 1976), 742–52.

[44] Larson, ch. 3.

certain issue areas.[45] Though partial security regimes in their mechanism correspond to regular security regimes, state behaviour in issues outside the regime are still subject to the dynamics of anarchy and self-help. The partial nature of cooperation between the two superpowers again invites ambiguity: although issues covered by the regime require cooperation and generate reassurance, issue areas outside the regime are still at the same time subject to conflict and hostilities. This is the reason Booth and Wheeler provide for the failure of *détente* in the late 1970s: because the superpowers did not agree on rules for conducting their policies in the Third World (the Basic Principles Agreements of 1972/3 were too vague), aggressive policies limited to the developing countries such as Afghanistan were still seen as acceptable. However, the mistrust such policies generated eventually set an end to the partial regime that was détente.[46] Thus, cooperation under partial regimes may succumb to interstate conflict outside the targeted issue areas.

4. Conclusion: costly signals vs. rational ambiguity

As demonstrated in the previous section, attempts at cooperation under the security dilemma are subject to certain dynamics that challenge costly signals and invite ambiguous discourse. Though ambiguity seems to be a rational course of action in two-level games (enabling greater leverage on both levels), as well as in partial security regimes (allowing seemingly contradictory actions), it can easily contribute to failed cooperation as we have seen in the case of the Khrushchev-Eisenhower talks. In such cases, inconsistent and ambiguous state rhetoric acts as noise, interfering with costly signals aimed at increasing trust.[47] If a state wants to communicate peaceful intent (e.g. make a conciliatory move) in one area, it should be careful that actions in other areas do not interfere with the costly signal. Mixing types of signals in an uncontrolled manner is confusing and may compel the other side to interpret the signal as nothing more than cheap talk, disguised to be costly.[48]

Though costly signals are a potential means for counteracting the ambiguity of security dilemma scenarios and furthering cooperation, actors inclined to make them can be subject to other dynamics that favour cheap signals, such as signals that are deliberately ambiguous. Paradoxically, rational behaviour in both respects may eventually decrease trust due to the psychological variables at work, as it happened in the discussed historical example. The

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[45] See Joseph Nye, 'Nuclear Learning and U.S.-Soviet Security Regimes', *International Organization*, 41:3 (1987), 371–402.
[46] Booth and Wheeler
[47] Larson, p. 30.
[48] For example, President Kennedy simultaneously called for arms control and initiated a huge arms build-up at the beginning of his presidency.

emphasis on this paradox within this paper is however not a critique of rational choice approaches to the security dilemma but is, rather, intended to draw attention to psychological variables that help us explain the pitfalls and potential failure of costly signalling. These variables need to be incorporated in rational choice analyses in order not only to understand better security dilemma scenarios but also to facilitate effective costly signalling for future decision makers. Though a simple game-theoretical-analysis only requires signals to be measurably costly, in reality, the language of the signal is equally important: how the signals are communicated determines whether they can *at all* be interpreted as costly, thus as capable of building trust. Rational choice as a versatile methodological toolset is capable of incorporating psychological variables in its models in order to increase the analytical value of rationality-based theories of the security dilemma. Following the logic that Jervis puts forth in his book *Perceptions and misperceptions…*, namely a careful attention to variables that modify beliefs and perceptions in conflict situations, a more comprehensible analytical framework can be constructed.

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