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Revolutionary Perception: History and Modernist Form in Ireland and Russia

by

Wendi Ardath Bootes

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor C.D. Blanton, Chair
Professor Harsha Ram
Professor Dora Zhang
Professor Catherine Flynn

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Abstract

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Wendi Ardath Bootes

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor C.D. Blanton, Chair

This dissertation develops an account of formal indirection arising in the context of anti-imperial revolutionary culture at two ends of Europe's geopolitical map—Ireland and Russia. It is guided by an apparent contradiction: while the events broadly understood in Ireland and Russia as revolutionary were widely discussed and written about, they were resistant to narrative description. Though these two roughly contemporaneous moments of imperial contraction and collapse have rarely been considered together, writers of these periods negotiated a remarkably similar set of preoccupations regarding how to best to express the gulf between historical abstractions and lived experience. As they attempt to narrate the disintegration and reorganization of shared categories of nationhood and ethno-national identity, they turn to modes of narrative and rhetorical indirection that foreground the problem of perception. Irish and Russian modernist writers, that is, confront moments in which the categories of nationhood and empire, which had previously done the unreflective work of organizing political and narrative structures, are radically destabilized. In place of standard juridical and political accounts of revolution as intense, sudden, and definite, I emphasize the partial, the ambiguous, and the protracted. As a comparative project, *Revolutionary Perception* attends to the many ways British and Russian imperial crises resisted direct narrativization, and how their complex and uneven historical development shaped the limits of imaginative engagement.

Through focused chapters on James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen, Viktor Shklovsky, and Isaac Babel, I show that prose writers formulated the experience of waning imperial hegemony as a matter of literary form. These authors mobilize techniques—from Shklovsky's sentimental estrangement, to the nominalist problematic of "politics" in Joyce, to Bowen's language of indeterminacy, to Babel's "factographic grotesque"—that encourage a perceptual realignment through their descriptive defiance, foregrounding of absence, and performative self-reflexivity. Across four chapters, *Revolutionary Perception* argues that aesthetic indirection is not only a *response* to these moments, but a *strategy* of describing the feeling of historical rupture: a way of apprehending the experience of an as-yet un-cognized, and yet-to-be-articulated, historical phenomenon. Reading these literary traditions alongside each other illuminates a shared attunement to problems of categorical instability, which emerge out of the dissolution of long-standing imperial frameworks. As such, my project reframes our understanding of comparative imperialisms by offering an aesthetic theorization of the very category of empire as a basis of narrative continuity and referential stability.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ii

Introduction 1

Chapter 1
Of Picaros and Parodies: Viktor Shklovsky's Revolutionary Estrangement 15

Chapter 2
Naming History in the Joycean Bildungsroman 48

Chapter 3
The Grammar of Waning Empire: Elizabeth Bowen's Indirect Coloniality 75

Chapter 4
The Peripheries of War: Isaac Babel's Factographic Grotesque 98

Works Cited 131

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INTRODUCTION

> We strove to grasp the power of our enemies, to reverse their rhetoric, resist their efforts to corrupt us and match their weapons. But when the enemy eventually materialized, it looked too much like ourselves. We had no categories to describe what had occurred, no definitions to capture what we had lost, and what we gained in its place … Before the withering away of the state, the language with which to articulate that aspiration itself withered away … [Socialism] was gone not only as an ideal, not only as a system of rule, but also as a category of thought.
>
> —Lea Ypi, *Free* (2021)

The End of Empire

The story opens in the present day: a moment late in the summer of 2022, when two high-profile deaths, occurring in quick succession, captivated the global news cycle. On August 30, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the former Soviet Union, passed away at 91. Nine days later, on September 8, Elizabeth II, Queen of the United Kingdom, Head of the Commonwealth, and fellow nonagenarian, followed suit. As the deaths of prominent statespeople are wont to do, these remarkably synchronous events prompted retrospective glances at the extensive legacies of each state, occasioning lengthy reflections on the histories of the Soviet Union and the British Empire. In the West, Gorbachev was largely seen as the stalwart reformer who presided over the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the U.S.S.R., shepherding a transition to a market-based economy and the much-touted freedoms of Western democratic states. Domestically, of course, his legacy is far more complicated, clouded with a resurgence of ethnic and sectarian violence, the subsequent return to autocratic rule, an economy ruled by oligarchs, and the rise of Putin's authoritarian regime in the early 2000s. Elizabeth II's death likewise precipitated a flurry of commentary on the monarchy's role as the symbolic head of the British Empire. Her 70-year reign—the longest of any British monarch in history—oversaw the twilight of that empire, characterized by post-war decolonization movements in Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia, the Troubles in Northern Ireland followed by parliamentary devolution (and in Scotland and Wales shortly thereafter), and eventual withdrawal from the European Union. As opposed to the sudden collapse of the U.S.S.R. (and the Russian empire that preceded it), Britain's protracted period of imperial decline extended over a period of decades, only coming to a more definitively symbolic end in 1997, with the transfer of its former colony Hong Kong to China. Yet whether abrupt or prolonged, the deterioration and contraction of these massive states—the dismantling of Soviet republics and satellites, the eventual independence of British colonies and territories—continue to occupy a central place in ongoing cultural and political analyses of twentieth century geopolitics.

The deaths of these two major figures also offered an opportunity to reinvigorate retrospective musings in the public eye: this was a moment of unusually widespread public contemplation regarding the complicated legacies of two of the modern world's largest geopolitical entities. In their later years, Elizabeth II and Gorbachev became relics of erstwhile empires, the former having overseen an explicitly colonialist imperial entity, the latter having administered an ideologically contradictory "anti-imperialist" empire. Their deaths are subsequently freighted with the symbolic weight of state collapse and reorganization, processes marked by fragmentary and often haphazard policy making, resulting in uneven models of independence for former territories. Indeed, the aftermath of decline and collapse is no simple matter. The aftershocks of these endings

reverberate today, with the continued, if sluggish, unraveling of the British union, marked by the ongoing movement for Scottish independence (the last independence referendum in 2014 failed only by a small margin) and continued tension at border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, exacerbated by Britain's 2016 withdrawal from the European Union. On the other side of Europe, the ongoing consequences of Soviet collapse and the Kremlin's longstanding hegemony over its satellite states are still very much live questions, as debates over NATO membership for post-Soviet states continue to roil and unresolved territorial disputes across Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have resulted in numerous "frozen" conflicts. Most vividly, this living history resurfaced with fatal intensity last year with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Yet the invasion was only the latest, most aggressive move in a series of escalating provocations that have contested Ukrainian sovereignty over the last several decades. Occurring only six months prior to the death of Gorbachev, the current Russo-Ukrainian war evidences the protracted and bloody struggles over sovereignty that occur in the long, messy wakes of collapse—not to mention the formidable role played by reactionary nostalgia for the perceived loss of imperial greatness.

These checkered, often violent reckonings with the legacies of post-imperial reconfiguration demonstrate the degree to which matters of national identification are intimately tied up in the contested boundaries of fundamentally abstract and often imprecisely defined concepts: nation, empire, colony, war, revolution. The great irony is that, of course, these are also concepts with critically high stakes and viscerally felt consequences; to say they are conceptually abstract is not to diminish their potency as terms that register material circumstances, often those of life or death. Rather, it is to emphasize the gravity of such abstractions and their definitions as they are lived, experienced, and fought over. The collapse of empire, the framework in which these ideas are embedded, is itself a narrative, an epic tale that has long been told and re-told, given new conceptual shape in each historical rendering. Yet the retrospective narrativizing of such historical processes tends to provide a linear and causally coherent account, imposing language that was not necessarily agreed upon, or even available, at the time—and that continues to drive controversies today. The parameters of the concept of "empire" provide a clear example. A notoriously slippery term, it has been defined and re-defined countless times, with distinctions added and subtracted depending on the political and geographic context: whether terrestrial or maritime, whether possessing extensive economic and political hegemony, whether ruled by an emperor as head of state.[1] Even now, the

[1] Eric Hobsbawm's classic *The Age of Empire, 1875*-1914 (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1987) provides a history of the expansion of nineteenth-century European empires modeled on bourgeois class structures, liberal ideologies, and capitalist economies. For him, this is the era that defines the concept of a modern empire. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's post-Marxist *Empire* moves beyond the historical theorization of empires to posit the endlessly expansive concept of "Empire," which constitutes a "decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule" by the global power of capitalism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001), xii. Responding to this diffuse definition, Alexander Motyl's "Is Everything Empire? Is Empire Everything?" critiques what he sees as the critical deficiencies of this concept, which "effectually explains nothing." *Comparative Politics* 38, no. 2 (2006), 238. In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson, in his essay "Modernism and Imperialism," emphasizes the importance of systematic political and economic coordination for any coherent theory of imperialism (for instance, the capitalist dynamics of nineteenth- and twentieth century imperialism possess an entirely different structural model to the ancient empires warring for territorial conquest). He argues, in other words, for the importance of historical specificity of empire; the term on its own, sans clear economic and political differentiation, risks "dispersing the phenomenon of imperialism throughout human history, wherever bloody conquests are to be found (which is to say: everywhere!)." *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2016), 154. See also Philip Pomper, "The

exact dates of the British empire's existence, and even its territorial holdings, are still a matter of debate, while the question of whether empire is even an applicable, and appropriate, term for the U.S.S.R. remains the subject of continued dispute.[2] But clearly "empire" is not simply an intellectual abstraction, and living through the end of it is not a mere rhetorical matter. This is one of the central tensions at the heart of attempts to articulate and narrativize something like the "end of empire": the clash between its experiential significance and the abstract concepts that, when evacuated of everyday and shared meaning, fall short in their explanatory power. As we see in the wake of Elizabeth II's and Gorbachev's deaths, even an innocuous term like the "end" is not so clearly delimited: when, exactly, *is* the end? The contemporary struggle over the unresolved legacies of British, Russian, and Soviet rule brings renewed attention to the heightened political stakes of description and to the contested nature of labels, which reveal their embedded instability during moments of massive socio-political restructuring.

In the epigraph to this introduction, the political theorist Lea Ypi describes the destabilizing and sudden loss of meaningful, shared language during the collapse of the communist regime in Albania. In her memoir, she writes of how the abrupt rupture leaves language desiccated: "we had no categories to describe what had occurred, no definitions to capture what we had lost, and what we gained in its place." As the state "withers away," the terms that previously gave coherence to everyday life (socialism, proletariat, bourgeoisie) suddenly vanish not only as relevant political concepts, but as entire "categor(ies) of thought."[3] The collapse of state order occasions not only a fundamental shift in ways of living, but in ways of thinking and perceiving. As old narratives and terminology cease to hold meaning, they leave in their place an explanatory and linguistic void. How, then, to describe what is happening? How to relate to such events when facing a paradigm shift that obviates former models of articulation, and fails to replace them with any adequate framework of shared understanding?

This project dwells in the coexistence of contested language and narrative instability alongside the vividly felt texture of historical rupture. In considering the attempted narrativizing of modern imperial collapse, I find it necessary to revisit an earlier history: a pivotal era when the categories that Ypi describes as lost were emerging as a potent, lived force, amidst the loss—and resignification—of earlier categories. In the narrative prose of Russian and Irish revolutionary moments in the early twentieth century, we find other ends and other beginnings, prehistories of these contemporary reckonings. Spinning out of the chaos of the First World War, swept up in the electric atmosphere of socialist and republican fervor, these anti-imperialist movements agitated for

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History and Theory of Empires," *History and Theory* 44, no. 4 (2005) for an extensive overview of the range of scholarship theorizing and defining "empire" since the 1980s.

[2] For instance, historian Dominic Lieven, who has theorized extensively on the imperial politics of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, makes a compelling case for understanding the Soviet Union's expansion and extractive policies in Central Asia as direct outgrowths of the Tsarist empires. See "The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as Imperial Polities," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 4 (1995): 607–36; and *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Valerie Kivelson and Ronald Gregor Suny's *Russia's Empires* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016) likewise employ the concept of empire to analyze the forms of non-democratic governance across the imperial and Soviet periods. In contrast, Tania Raffass aims to complicate the description of the U.S.S.R. as an empire in *The Soviet Union: Federation or Empire?* (London: Routledge, 2012), where she argues for understanding the Soviet Union as a multinational federation on the model of the United States.

[3] Lea Ypi, *Free* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 137.

an end to colonial rule and monarchical autocracy. As writers in each of these locales attempted to grapple with the complex, global historical forces that gave shape to their material situations, their prose reveals the surprising intangibility of some of the most ostensibly vivid and bodily categories of experience: revolution and war. In this project, the explosive atmosphere of revolutionary Russia finds unexpected resonance in the protracted agitations of the Irish revolutionary era, but not for the reasons one might think (for instance, because of their remarkable simultaneity or common anti-imperialist ethos). Rather, as the following chapters will explore, Irish and Russian writers of the late 1910s and 1920s demonstrate discursively resonant responses that illuminate shared preoccupations with the imperceptibility of historical moments of rupture that constitute, in the parlance of innumerable book, article, and film titles, the "end of empire." As I will argue in the following chapters, the textual archive of this study, which comprises novels, short stories, and curiously hybrid genres mixing literary theory with historical memoir, grapples with its historical circumstances primarily as matters of newfound narrative reorganization and linguistic indeterminacy. The novelists, writers, and theorists at the center of this project—Viktor Shklovsky, Isaac Babel, James Joyce, and Elizabeth Bowen—productively test the perceptual conditions of possibility for representation in their narrative compositions. By understanding these works' orientation toward their respective eras in terms of their immanent formal problems, rather than via reference to their subject matter or explicit topicality, this project uncovers shared modes of historical representation that emphasize perception as the primary framework of significance.[4] As this project will demonstrate, formal innovation constitutes the sole recourse in this representational dilemma that pits the sensory immediacy of rupture against the ungraspable historical forces that produce it.

The idea that imperceptible historical phenomena can be registered only in their felt effects is one that, of course, owes its existence to the Marxist tradition of literary scholarship. A few comments will be helpful here in outlining how this project draws on this lineage, while also departing from it. Louis Althusser's well-known term "absent cause," which bears resemblance to what I have been describing as the abstract and ungraspable forces behind imperial collapse, carries this critical weight perhaps most clearly. Althusser's theorization of this idea—derived originally from Baruch Spinoza's divine determinism, whereby God is the immanent cause of all things—depends on the causal relationship between abstract and concrete entities. Individual elements (such as modes of production) are inseparable from the entire structure, determined by their relation to and interaction with the whole; thus no single element can be isolated or reduced to being the essential cause of another, hence the relationship he terms "structural causality." The structural whole is therefore "absent" in its causality, as it is everywhere present, and thus nowhere identifiable. As such, a sense of structure is only perceptible—indeed, it only actually exists—in its effects. One cannot grasp the whole from within. This model is then taken up by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious,* where he famously states that "History is what hurts," a pithy phrase that

[4] My approach here joins a robust scholarly lineage of work that aims to address historical processes (imperialism, internationalism, industrialization, patterns of dislocation, etc.) not as visible or thematic narrative data, but as encrypted formal and/or discursive effects. This includes, but is by no means limited to, Jed Esty's work (including *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004] and *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012]); Aarthi Vadde's *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017); Nathan Hensley's *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016); Anahid Nersessian's *The Calamity Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); and Kevis Goodman's recent *Pathologies of Motion: Historical Thinking in Medicine, Aesthetics, and Poetics* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2023).

points to the painful experiential qualities of historical necessity, even as that "History" remains at the outer "untranscendable" limits of understanding.[5]

Jameson outlines the task of Marxist literary critique quite explicitly in his essay "Cognitive Mapping"; as he states, it aims to make "conceptually available the ultimate realities and experiences … which the reading mind inevitably tends to reify and to read as primary contents in their own right."[6] In so doing, the critic elucidates the realities of "unrepresentable" historical structures—the Althusserian "absent causes"—that can be expressed only via distorted and symbolic means. Such a call, to study the "forms that inscribe a new sense of the absent global colonial system on the very syntax of poetic language itself," has of course proven enormously generative, spurring an entire generation of post-colonial Marxist criticism.[7] This is a scholarly tradition that informs certain aspects of this project, but it is not one of its central theoretical models. Certainly the literary works examined here, which all face the pervasive yet perceptually indeterminate forces constituting the "end of empire," exhibit an apparent reticence to name and define their own sense of historicity, even as they remain centrally preoccupied with the histories that shape and produce them. This is an aporia that bears a familial likeness to "absent causes" in some respects, primarily in that the structural forces of history in both contexts enter into these texts only obliquely, as they are unavailable for direct perception. Indeed, one of Jameson's central arguments about the modern colonial system hinges on the relocation of significant structural segments of the British economy in colonies overseas, a process that occluded the imperial system's structure. Beyond the lived experience of the metropolitan center, the "imperialist structure of colonial appropriation" remains invisible, effectively erasing the colonized other and foreclosing the possibility of mapping the imperialist system.[8] I accept this general paradigm—the impossibility of comprehensive representation of the crumbling imperialist structure—while also acknowledging that the specifics of such a model (overseas colonial expropriation and extraction) are inapplicable in the Irish and Russian cases I examine. More significantly, perhaps, my focus is directed toward the particular means and methods by which the experiences of ungraspable forces and categories find narrative expression. Indeed, even as these crumbling imperial structures are unavailable for full assimilation, they nevertheless serve as the textual center of gravity, acutely felt but partially cognized in the narratives which resolutely circle around the tangible effects of such abstract and invisible structures. The particular revolutionary moments in question are a crucial point of fracture for observing the

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[5] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 100-2. He elaborates: "History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force," 102. This intrinsic means of historical apprehension draws as well on Theodor Adorno's particular understanding of "historical content"; Adorno posits that art formally encodes the historicity and antagonisms that constitute its production. Artworks, as he states, provide an "self-unconscious historiography of their epoch." *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 182-3.

[6] Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: MacMillan Education Ltd, 1987), 350.

[7] Ibid., 349.

[8] Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," 156-157. Jameson's framework is here indebted to Gyorgy Lukács's theorization of modernism as registering a lost social totality, and likewise resonates with Perry Anderson's idea that increased attention to colonial peripheries in modern Britain led to an evacuation of social knowledge of the "core" of England itself. See Anderson, "Components of National Culture," in *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992), 92-104. Jed Esty summarizes these central points lucidly: "the metaphor of lost totality is one of the central deep structures of imperialism and modernism," *A Shrinking Island,* 7.

effects of incomplete assimilation: in the context of the texts examined here, these are transitional occasions of rupture, which offer glimpses into the breakdown of organizing categories. One of my central arguments will posit that previously taken-for-granted concepts—such as nation and empire—produce more potently felt effects in the process of their dismantling. The contingency and collective fabrication of such central socio-political categories of thought surfaces only as they cease to work: to provide shared meaning, and to serve as a common discursive and perceptual framework. To put it differently, collapse makes formerly obscure things noticeable, even if this noticing remains imprecise.

My aim here thus differs from Marxist critique in the tradition of Althusser and Jameson, even as it shares some of their basic premises about the unrepresentability of historical forces that exceed immediate experience. Primarily, I am less concerned with making visible the structural causalities that determine the forms of the texts I examine, and rather with studying the perceptual effects of such structures in the process of their collapse, and the way they distort available language and forms of narrative. I take seriously the claim that such works register their historical conditions in their own right, an attention that directs us to the vital importance of sensory immediacy, even as it points to the contingencies and limitations of empirical perception. The attempt to discern, cognize, and articulate becomes at once a necessity, an epistemological challenge, and an unattainable desire. These conflicting drives produce a particular and shared formal problematic of indeterminacy and peripherality, which results in what I term an aesthetics of indirection. And yet, as my detailed readings of these writers will demonstrate, this aesthetic is not simply a response to or passive encoding of revolutionary histories, but a strategy of describing the experience of historical rupture: one that necessarily constitutes a reorientation away from increasingly incoherent abstractions, and toward the sensuous details of everyday experiences.

Contraction and Collapse

Before we turn to these central problems of perception and form, a brief outline of the revolutionary circumstances in each troubled imperial context will provide useful context for the discussion to follow. In remarkably quick succession, on opposite ends of Europe, the longstanding ferment of late-nineteenth-century progressive agitation—in Ireland, contentious debates over Home Rule and land reform; in Russia, battles for judicial and constitutional reform, leading to the 1905 revolution, or the so-called "dress rehearsal" for 1917—erupted in massive revolt. These are two of the pivotal moments that planted the seeds for the later legacies of British imperial contraction and Soviet collapse with which we opened. Catalyzed by the unpopularity of the First World War (which permanently delayed the implementation of the Third Home Rule Bill), Ireland's Easter Rising of 1916 heralded a newly impassioned revolutionary movement. The surprise attack launched by the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which seized the General Post Office in Dublin, offered an opening salvo to the revolutionary era that would violently contest the legitimacy and existence of the British state over the next several years.[9] Though the armed rebellion was itself a

[9] The exact dates of the revolutionary period remain a source of scholarly discussion, with no unanimous consensus. Some historians date the beginning of this period to the formation of various "volunteer" armies in the north and south in 1912, after Ulster rejected the third Home Rule Bill. For instance, Irish historian R.F. Foster asserts that the separatist struggle begins with the 1916 rising and continues until the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, but that the decade from 1912-22 is nevertheless marked by "extraordinary upheavals … contingent upon a series of social, political, and military crises contained within that decade." *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Press, 1988), 461.

failure, it galvanized popular support (in part due to the draconian response of the British, who swiftly imposed martial law and executed 16 of the leaders) and laid the groundwork for the war of independence three years later, followed by a civil war that ended in 1923.[10] Roughly two thousand kilometers away, less than a year after the Rising, in February of 1917 another armed rebellion toppled the Romanov dynasty and ended the Russian empire, establishing the liberal (bourgeois-democratic, in the parlance of the Russian Social Democrats) Provisional Government.[11] Resulting from long-standing animosity toward the monarchy, nearly a century of escalating conflict among peasants, industrial workers, landowners, and the aristocracy, and precipitated by the military failures of WWI, this first revolution ushered in a period of increasing unrest in the countryside, near-total economic collapse, and impending famine.[12] The Provisional Government proved deeply unpopular, incapable of stable governance, and ultimately short-lived; a second armed insurrection, this time an explicitly socialist revolution helmed by Lenin's Bolshevik party, followed eight months later in October. In short order, the Bolsheviks seized control of major government and communications facilities (culminating in the assault on the Winter Palace), installed a Bolshevik-led Soviet state, and rapidly re-mobilized a demoralized and largely sympathetic army. After a bloody, four-year-long civil war, the victorious Bolsheviks eventually founded the Soviet Union atop the ruins of a destroyed empire in 1922.

This hasty sketch of the notably concurrent timeline of revolutionary events in Ireland and Russia provides a helpful historical outline, but—as does any neat attempt to retrospectively capture cataclysmic events that lack clear beginnings and ends—it also belies the aforementioned ambiguities in terminology and the misleading coherence of narrative structure. Such accounts, necessary as they may be, also impose a false sense of chronological, conceptual, and causal clarity on moments when

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[10] As with the disagreement over precise dates, the applicability of the term "revolution" has likewise been a matter of dispute. A monograph dedicated to this analyzing this period, *The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923*, begins by stating that it has "been impossible so far to find a generally accepted term to describe the period as a whole," viii. Charles Townshend's and Peter Hart's contributions to the study cover this historiography, and each begin by noting the varying ways this period has been characterized by historians: insurrection, republican rebellion, separatist revolt. Townshend notes that, while nearly all major comparative studies of revolution exclude Ireland, "it remains plainly true that the events of the war and post-war period were felt by their proponents … to be a revolution" *The Irish Revolution, 1913-23* ed. by Joost Augusteijn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 1, 8.

[11] The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party was the leading socialist party, formed to unite various Marxist revolutionary factions in the 1890s. In 1903, they split into the Bolshevik ("majority") and Menshevik ("minority") factions, with the former—in fact a minority—led by Vladimir Lenin.

[12] There are, unsurprisingly, radically divergent opinions regarding the causes of the revolutions in the vast historiography on the subject. To be sure, the Russian empire had been in a state of accelerating crisis for many decades. Whether taken to be primarily occasioned by Nicholas II's disastrous incompetence in the war (the interpretive tendency of liberal historiography) or an inevitable development according to the process of historical materialism (the view of Marxist historians), the precipitating factors comprised an undeniable intersection of socio-political underdevelopment, a preindustrial economic system, and a vast chasm between a small elite and a largely rural, peasant population. Such analyses have been influenced by widespread public opinion on the matter, in addition to the difficulty—indeed impossibility—of accessing Soviet archives until quite recently. For a thoughtful account of how both Western-democratic and Soviet ideologies have frustrated a balanced historical accounting, see Moshe Lewin's *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2006), especially his introduction and "Part Three: Russia in Historical Context."

definitions of nationhood and forms of governance possessed no singular legitimacy, and socio-political identities were quick to transform. Indeed, as with the blurry conceptual edges of "empire," the significance of these crucial concepts was being forged, contested, and continually remade during the revolutionary epochs.[13] In responding to the chaotic restructuring of social and political life, and the violent forces that displaced, deformed, and destroyed bodies, prose writers from these two historical junctures turn to the resources of literary form, developing resonant modes of rhetorical and linguistic indirection. These are instances when previously "given" concepts, so banal as to pass formerly unnoticed, become newly troubled, and thus newly available for contemplation. Such is the case with "Ireland" and "Russia," which emerge as loci of awareness and preoccupation in the narratives discussed. The questions that loom throughout the texts examined here—what, exactly, is Russia? what is Ireland?—indicate the extent to which the pivotal organizing category of nation has ceased to operate.

It bears stating explicitly that this project charts a central conceptual problem that emerges across a shared historical era of collapsed imperial hegemony. While some of the texts I examine (notably Viktor Shklovsky's generically hybrid memoir) are clearly "about" the revolution against empire, others are apparently less so, if we take "aboutness" to mean an explicit concern with the details of policies, debates, mobilizations, and central historical characters. The representational content typically signified by plot, subject matter, and character is subordinate here to the aspect of setting, which—building on the above discussion of destabilized national contexts—emerges as a newly pressing narrative problem. Indeed, each of the four narratives examined here challenges the stability of setting as a theoretical object, opening it up for contemplation by demonstrating its temporal and spatial dynamism. Given that one of this project's interventions is to disrupt revolutionary setting as a shared framework by theorizing its fundamental "unsettledness," it is thus unconcerned with offering an historical overview of the various incidents, skirmishes, and political emergencies comprising these histories. Nor does it survey the numerous literary and autobiographical works that concern revolutionary plots or themes in Ireland and Russia. Rather, in accordance with the central theoretical orientation of this project, which probes the forms and effects of empirical limitations and unstable epistemologies, revolution and empire figure here as conceptual problems made available primarily through means of indirect or otherwise marginal engagement.

And so, in place of standard juridical and political accounts of revolution as intense, unexpected, and definite, this project emphasizes the partial, the ambiguous, and the protracted. This is a critical tendency that runs counter to the scholarly landscape on histories of emancipatory struggle and revolution. For instance, Enzo Traverso's recent *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (2021) understands revolution as mass eruption, following an intellectual tradition helmed by Karl Marx

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[13] Given the contemporary events with which we opened, it's worth mentioning the recently revivified, heightened political stakes of employing certain words to label historical events. In the context of the aforementioned Russo-Ukrainian war, in early March 2022, Putin's regime criminalized calling the invasion of Ukraine a "war," mandating the euphemistic "special military operation" (*spetsial'naia voennaia operatsiia*) in its stead—a propagandistic term initially employed during World War II with the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939. I want to make clear that my concerns here are quite distinct from the issue of censorship in contemporary Russia. I am not suggesting that the contestation over what constitutes a "war" is in any way analogous to the denial of war crimes or the criminalization of anti-war protests and independent reporting. The difference between censorship and definitional vagueness is a crucial one; the former relies on an authoritarian imposition of pre-determined, self-interested interpretation and denial, the latter on the discursive, generative questioning of conceptual definitions.

and Walter Benjamin; in these accounts, revolutions are constituted by a violent and sudden sundering of social, political, and economic structures.[14] Without wholeheartedly rejecting this paradigm, I aim to destabilize it by troubling the assumption that such moments are unambiguous and immediate instances of shared experience. Rather, this project demonstrates how forms of revolutionary experience take on curious, heightened qualities of vacuity and uncertainty, which emerge in the narrative responses to these prolonged moments of collapse. By taking such events as extended occasions of structural collapse and rearrangement, I re-orient the critical model of revolutions from punctuated dramas of intentional, collective action to temporally elongated, epistemically uncertain periods that expose perceptual volatility. My aim is thus to estrange—in good Shklovskian fashion—our understanding of the revolutionary moment as a clearly delineated rupture by revealing a tenacious narrative tendency toward ambiguity and absence.

Empirical Phenomena, Imperial Abstraction

To that end, the following chapters linger in the murky language and fraught, episodic narratives of revolutionary collapse, locating in literary form a means of grappling with the problematic of destabilized imperial frameworks that remain incompletely apprehended but acutely felt. One of the vital questions at the heart of this project, regarding the disjuncture between a literary work's historical setting and its ostensible inability to articulate its own sense of historicity, is located within a much longer history of epistemic doubt and inquiry. This troubled notion of setting exposes a foundational epistemological preoccupation regarding the relationship between the immediate details of sensory experience and the abstract ideas that structure the nature of social and political life. Such a dynamic remains fundamentally dependent on the question of how our minds process sensory data: especially, in this case, when the available descriptive categories for such organization remain insufficient. As I will develop across this dissertation, these are problems that—while arising with renewed vigor in the historical moments under consideration here—reinvigorate long-standing inquiries posed by the empiricism of David Hume and John Locke: what is the nature of human understanding, and where do our ideas come from? How do our minds organize the litany of sensory impressions with which our bodies are confronted? And from there, how do we move from knowledge of the sensory particular to knowledge of the abstract? [15] From these central

[14] Admittedly, Benjamin's ideas of revolution are nevertheless idiosyncratic. Revolution appears for him as primarily an experiential category, and while such an approach generally aligns with this project's understanding of revolution, there remains a fundamental distinction: here, the experience of revolution is neither collective nor shared. For a detailed account of Benjamin's approach to the concept of revolution under conditions of bourgeois modernity, see Allison Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin: A Conceptual Analysis* (Routledge, 2019).

[15] The language of empiricism introduces related terminology—such as impression, sensation, and perception—that is not used consistently among its main interlocutors. Locke, for instance, does not systematically distinguish between perception and impression, though perceptions/impressions fall into either sensuous or innate categories. For Hume, "perceptions of the mind" are divided into impressions and ideas, with the former being livelier and more forceful. Here, I will be using sensation to refer to the immediate experiential data received by the senses, and perception to gloss the process of regarding or becoming aware of that data; I thus take perception to be the organization of sensation. I will distinguish the terms further when needed in each chapter. For more on the literary and philosophical history of these terms, see Jesse Matz's *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics,* which includes a genealogical overview that traces how discourses of empiricism and phenomenology have grappled with, conflated, and distinguished the concept of

preoccupations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British empiricism, which foregrounded embodied sense experience as the sole source of knowledge, accounts of aesthetic experience soon developed, owing to the proximity of the "aesthetic" to sensory cognition.[16] This is no place to rehearse the vast literature on the development of aesthetic discourse from the philosophical models of empiricist knowledge in the eighteenth century; rather, it is to emphasize the extent to which the very concept of aesthetics—and especially aesthetics as a mode of knowledge—owes its existence to the guiding principles of eighteenth-century empiricist philosophy. As has been argued by Michael McKeon, the development from the originary term *aisthesis* to "aesthetics" as a recognizable area of study emerged out of the empirical sciences. The very idea of the aesthetic, he posits, was originally "formulated as a subcategory of empirical epistemology."[17]

In tracing modes of aesthetic indirection in narrative and language, this project adopts this particular understanding of the aesthetic as an immanently sensory phenomenon, one that maintains a foundational intimacy with capacities of perception. While the following texts primarily grapple with problems of historical (as opposed to explicitly aesthetic) experience, they all remain centrally attuned to issues—including deficiencies, distortions, and limitations—of perception. A crucial throughline developed across each chapter thus regards how contingencies of perception are embedded in forms of destabilized narrative and the staging of linguistic difficulties. For instance, in the first chapter, Shklovsky's hybrid memoir *A Sentimental Journey* (1923) takes up and transforms the sentimental tradition of self-reflexivity (a mode likewise indebted to eighteenth-century discourses on sensation) to "estrange" the relations of revolutionary experience. This defamiliarized context manifests as a gaping void that encompasses the October revolution and obscures the associative connections between cause and effect. His confrontation with the empirical impossibility of direct "revolutionary" perception becomes a problem, primarily, of language in chapter two, as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) stages the difficulties of grasping non-ostensive objects—those that cannot submit directly to sensation—such as "politics" and "nation," in proto-revolutionary Ireland. Via the developing consciousness of Stephen Dedalus, the novel reveals the crucial difference between propositional and perceptual knowledge for apprehending how proto-revolutionary politics contest the idea of Ireland. Joyce's drama of naming intensifies into total descriptive evasiveness in chapter three, where a lack of shared perception in Bowen's *The Last September* (1929) results in dialogic indeterminacy, rendering the Irish revolutionary setting fundamentally indeterminate. And in the final chapter, Babel's attention to the spatial and perceptual peripheries of post-revolutionary conflict in *Red Cavalry* (1923), which elevates the sensory immediacy of seemingly marginal phenomena, destabilizes the possibility of factual singularity and rejects any holistic paradigm of perceptual organization. Babel's stories bring this situational indeterminacy to an extreme as they ventriloquize an array of discursive idioms and perspectives;

"impression" (and "impressionism") over the past several centuries. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 15-33.

[16] Though Kant's account of aesthetic experience is famously reliant on a fundamental separation of the judgment of beauty from the faculties of sensation: the disinterested nature of judgments of beauty, or taste, relies on their abstraction from sensation. Empiricism, for Kant, cannot account for judgments of taste, seeing as the latter lay claim to a "subjective universality" (whereas sensations are "merely" subjective—with no claim to *a priori* universality—and so they remain the foundation for judgments of the agreeable). *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* ed. and trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge, Cambridge UP), §§1–5.

[17] McKeon, "Mediation as Primal Word: The Arts, the Sciences, and the Origins of the Aesthetic," in *This is Enlightenment,* ed. Clifford Siskin and William Warner (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2010), 385.

similar to Shklovsky, his collection enacts a documentary impulse that simultaneously suggests its own impossibility.

These varied instances of perceptual dissonance foreground the epistemic primacy of sensuous cognition, an emphasis that returns us to the etymological origins of aesthetics: *aisthesis* as it indicates perception from the senses. Aesthetic indirection, in this sense, thus glosses a murky epistemological territory in which perception functions as the privileged manner by which knowledge can be acquired, yet—owing to its inherent deficiencies and propensity to be distorted—it simultaneously offers a problematic, incomplete basis of knowledge. Taken together, this project's archive evidences an essentially empiricist epistemology that—in the manner of Humean skepticism—emphasizes the absence of clear causality and stable, shared conceptual definitions. Yet despite these evident limitations, this project contends that the discursive ambiguities and unstable narrative forms traced here in fact prove uniquely capable of registering the felt effects of historical events unavailable for apprehension in their entirety, and thus inarticulable in clear, unambiguous terms. As they move from sensory voids to descriptive evasiveness to peripheral perspectives, each textual encounter with the effects of revolutionary conflict displays a developing tendency to privilege the sensuous materiality of lived experience. The partiality of perspectives, incomplete and oblique perceptions, and volatile epistemologies traced across this dissertation all evidence the struggle to move from an empirical awareness of particulars to the generation of an organizing concept. As they imbricate such difficulties into their representational idioms, these authors bring the contingency of perception itself into the realm of critique and awareness.

While the aforementioned empirical distortions are, to some extent, inherent to the imperfect faculties of perception and language's infinite capacity for misapprehension, the archive of this project discloses a heightened instability occasioned by revolutionary agitation and imperial disintegration. With the collapse and contraction of empire, a capacious concept that nevertheless forms the basis for existing socio-political frameworks of shared reference, empirical problems surface with renewed vitality. Put differently, empire puts abstractions in place, and so its disintegration then constitutes a loss of coherent taxonomy: the necessary concept is lacking, either because it does not exist, or it has been rendered meaningless. Grappling with such loss, these authors render the historical problematic of waning or lost imperial hegemony at the level of discursive and narrative form, in a representationally oblique idiom of perceptual indirection.

To return to the Marxist-inflected framework addressed earlier, the dynamic between structural opacity and formal representation is one that has long interested Jameson, for whom war in particular "offers a paradigm of the nominalistic dilemma: the abstraction from totality or the here-and-now of sensory immediacy and confusion."[18] Across his analysis of the various narrative typologies concerning war, the tension between immediacy and absence—"the two poles of a dialectic of war"—precipitates the struggle of recognition, thus prescribing the forms of representation even as they remain "incomprehensible in their mutual isolation."[19] If for Jameson, "war is one among such collective realities which exceed representation fully as much as they do conceptualization, and yet which ceaselessly tempts and exasperates narrative ambitions, conventional and experimental alike," I extend and complicate this logic by questioning the stability of the very category under which he organizes such a dilemma.[20] As I have been outlining here, the idea of "war," like revolution, is itself abstract and ill-defined, with unclear definitional boundaries. Akin to the representational dilemma it occasions, war as a concept is subject to the very same contradiction between phenomenal experience and abstraction. The classification of categories of

[18] Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 232.
[19] Ibid., 256.
[20] Ibid., 257.

war narratives therefore ends up revealing, once again, the difficulty of grasping and accurately identifying the whole ensemble of economic, political, and social structures from within. That is, war's recognizability as a phenomenon—within and without narrative—depends not only on a shared set of "sense-data," but a commensurate interpretive framing. As such, the "struggle of recognition" that emerges throughout this project's narrative archive results not just in difficulties of representation, but in an inability to name the very circumstances that elicit such difficulties.

One of the central factors leading to this problem lies in the sudden incapacity to organize the data received from the senses, which rebuff order and systematization. The aesthetics of indirection that I trace here perpetually negotiate this fundamental tension, dramatizing the capacity to perceive, while at the same time exposing the very limits and distortions of perception. This formal dynamism determines the structure of this project, as it moves between the two geographic contexts of Ireland and Russia in tracing the discursive effects of disruptions in categories of imperial and revolutionary (un)belonging, political identity, and state restructuring. It is my hope that these geographic fluctuations more vividly foreground the development of narrative forms as techniques of perceptual organization. To that end, the following readings analyze forms ranging from micro-level concerns of language—euphemism, vagueness, and problems of naming—to macro-level structural issues—generic experimentation, emplotment, discontinuity, and perspective. In the Irish context, the indeterminacy of setting in the wake of British imperial contraction emerges in the novels of Joyce and Bowen as a set of problems rooted in language: issues primarily of labeling, naming, and definitional insecurity. In the aftermath of the more decisive and violent Russian revolutions, the empiricist problematic traced across this dissertation—that of moving from sensuous, material details to abstract categories—is worked out in Shklovsky and Babel through the breakdown of narrative form.

Chapter One, "Of Picaros and Parodies: Shklovsky's Revolutionary Estrangement," opens with Shklovsky's early formalism, excavating the empiricist epistemology that underwrites his theory of *ostranenie,* or defamiliarization. Shklovsky's theoretical essays, I show, provide the key to understanding the perceptual potential behind his experimental prose—namely his generically unruly memoir *Sentimental'noe Puteshestvie* (*A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917-1922*)—which figures the October revolution as an absence. As his language casts the revolutions as imperceptible, his narrative reveals its own impossibility: narrative coherence is a fiction buttressed by custom and habit. The problem of revolution thus becomes one of form, as "revolution" is the loss of associations that arise out of custom and habit.

Chapter Two, "Naming History in the Joycean Bildungsroman," turns to James Joyce, who takes Shklovsky's empirical problem of perceiving political transformation and torques it into an issue of language. Here, I argue that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* figures the struggle to grasp the "politics" fueling revolutionary sentiment in fin-de-siècle Ireland as, first and foremost, a drama of naming. By reviving the scholastic problem of nominalism in the figure of Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's novel reframes *Bildung* as a contested process of labeling, one that points to the untenability of putting stable names on emerging formations. Within this framing, I read Stephen's act of revolt at the novel's end as an attempted aesthetic solution to the perceived insufficiency of descriptive categories.

This problem of naming is recast as an impossibility in the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen, for whom the historical conditions of the Irish revolutionary period outstrip the capacities of direct perception. Chapter Three, "The Grammar of Waning Empire: Bowen's Indirect Coloniality," focuses on Bowen's indeterminate use of language in *The Last September*. As I trace the connection between referential instability and imperial collapse, I argue that the felt experiences of the rapidly shifting historical situation must be understood through the novel's linguistic indirection. By tracking the development of what I call enabling generalizations, I claim that the novel's dialogic

language exposes the unstable nature of colonial identification, while simultaneously offering a means of grappling with that very instability.

Revolutionary Perception concludes by returning to the Russian revolutionary context with Isaac Babel's *Konarmiia* (*Red Cavalry*), a cycle of post-revolutionary vignettes from the Polish-Soviet war. If for Shklovsky the central question remains how to grasp an empirically imperceptible phenomenon, for his contemporary Isaac Babel, this issue becomes a matter primarily of perspective—specifically, of the distorted and partial perspectives from the margins of war. Chapter Four, "The Peripheries of War: Babel's Factographic Grotesque," opens by locating Babel's work within the culture of early Soviet documentary practices. I then demonstrate how his propensity for distortion leverages the literary tradition of the grotesque to dismantle the factual assumptions of documentation. Babel's provocative technique, which I label the "factographic grotesque," recalibrates inaccuracies as reflections of immediate perceptions, revealing a crucial distinction between "fact" and "truth" in the context of revolutionary experience.

One of this project's central wagers is that the abstractions of lived experience that elude direct engagement or apprehension can be made newly available by literary form, as a technology that organizes perception. In my emphasis on form, it might strike the reader as strange that I have avoided specifying or classifying the generic categories of each of these texts. The conventions of genre may offer helpful frameworks for particular kinds of comparative analysis, but I do not find them particularly relevant for parsing how these various narratives innovate models for understanding the formal distortions of oblique historical perception. On the contrary, the presuppositions provided by genre remain insufficient here, largely inapplicable to analyzing the dynamics of empiricist negotiation with invisible historical forces. To be sure, each of these authors transforms and stretches their respective genres (or approximate generic models) in some way, and to varying extents: Bowen with the historical novel that cannot name its history; Joyce with the *Bildungsroman* that traces an ambivalent arc of historical and psychological development; Shklovsky with the auto-theoretical memoir that intentionally defies systematic classification; Babel with the pseudo-fictional, pseudo-factual short story that appropriately troubles the very category of fiction. While each of these central texts takes the form of narrative prose, and thus invites the potential appellation of novel—and all of these texts have, with varying degrees of success and in various critical contexts, been labeled a novel—the notorious capaciousness of that category summons a lingering uncertainty regarding what, exactly, the novel is.[21] While the categorical instability of the novel may resonate in some central ways with the epistemic concerns of this project, such as the difficulties of labeling and classifying, it also presumes a set of unifying conventions that are inadequate (and unnecessary) to explaining the discursive and narrative idioms developed here. And so, rather than tether the forms of aesthetic indirection traced in this project to a particular genre like the novel, I prefer to let them defy specific categorization, so as to emphasize the extent to which these representational techniques transcend genre.

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[21] While it is clear that Bowen's and Joyce's texts fit into the novelistic category more comfortably, Shklovsky's and Babel's works lend themselves far less easily to such classification. Yet the case for reading Shklovsky's strange memoir as a novel was made by his contemporaries, including Boris Eikhenbaum, who hailed it as a new form of experimental novel. Likewise, several scholars, Jan van der Eng and Edyta Bojanowska among them, have made the case for reading Babel's collection of stories as a coherent cycle, treating it as a novel "insofar as the need for a holistic approach is concerned," in Bojanowska's words. "E Pluribus Unum: *Red Cavalry* as Story Cycle," *Russian Review* 59 (2000), 386. See also Jan van der Eng, "*Red Cavalry*: A Novel of Stories," *Russian Literature* 33 (1993): 249-64.

In the absence of clear and shared categories, what, then, is organizing experience? This project argues that the indirections of literary form become the organizing key that puts impressions into some kind of place. They offer, that is, a crucial technology of perceptual mediation, one that paradoxically reveals the very limitations of our perceptive capacities. As the dissolution of imperial order precipitates a crisis of representation, the literary forms of Irish and Russian revolutionary prose return us to a foundational empirical problem: mediating between sensation and abstraction. They serve as both a response to the felt incoherence of experience in the wake of structural collapse, and a strategy for grasping the relationship between the palpable effects and intangible processes of historical rupture. In doing so, they reveal the very category of empire to be the basis of narrative continuity and referential stability. Its loss, then, necessitates producing a new means of perceptual organization.

CHAPTER ONE

Of Picaros and Parodies: Viktor Shklovsky's Revolutionary Estrangement

Я не видал Октября, я не видал взрыва, если был взрыв.
Я попал прямо в дыру.

I hadn't seen the October revolution; I hadn't seen the explosion, if there was an explosion.
I fell right into the hole.
—Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey,* 1923

I. The Absence of Revolution

We open with a striking discrepancy: the vivid, palpable event of the Bolshevik coup in St. Petersburg in October 1917 on the one hand, and its apparent absence—its perceptual and descriptive resistance—on the other.[1] Such is the sentiment behind Viktor Shklovsky's bold proclamation likening the Bolshevik revolution to a hole (*dyra*); even more provocative is his statement that he never actually *saw* the October coup, an assertion that might seem strange considering that the text in which he declares it, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917-1922 (Sentimental'noe Puteschestvie: Vospominaniia 1917-1922),* ostensibly narrates his experiences during the Russian revolutionary period. To be sure, Shklovsky was the rare literary intellectual who was persistently embedded in the military activities of the era's ongoing conflict: he chose to participate willingly in the First World War, as well as in the conspiratorial activities that arose in the immediate aftermath of the October revolution. A member of the Socialist Revolutionaries, the largest leftist party existing in Russia until 1918 (when it was banned by the Bolsheviks), Shklovsky's oppositional politics were central to his activities during the early months and years of the civil war that spiraled out of the October revolution. And in fact, *A Sentimental Journey* is the first of several books penned by Shklovsky during the 1920s that seek to calibrate his evolving relationship to literary form, the narratability of history, and the political exigencies of the post-revolutionary era.

If the possibility of historical narration provides a continual preoccupation for the itinerant writer, it is the purported absence of the Bolshevik coup—the event that precipitates the civil war whose violence resounds throughout the memoir—that crystallizes the tensions in his orientation to narrating history. Indeed, the revolution creates a gaping hole at the center of the text, through which Shklovsky imaginatively plummets. He falls, that is, "right into the hole" upon his return to Petersburg in early 1918 in the wake of the Bolshevik "explosion" (*vzryv*).[2] While Russia and its empire deteriorate around him, Shklovsky bears disoriented yet dutiful witness to the ravages of extended war and privation. Yet even as he chronicles the realia of accelerated collapse, including unheated apartments, crumbling infrastructure, and the torched remains of villages, his focus

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[1] Russia operated according to the Julian calendar until early 1918, when the Bolsheviks implemented the Gregorian system operative in Western Europe. As the Julian calendar remained 13 days behind the Gregorian, the Bolshevik revolution of late October (per the "old style") in fact occurred in early November (per the "new style").

[2] Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917-1922*, trans. Richard Sheldon (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 134. *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018), 134.

vacillates between material minutiae and mystifyingly abstract pronouncements about the nature and forces of history. For instance, the leitmotif of a falling stone (*padaiushchii kamen'),* which alludes to a passage from Baruch Spinoza meant to demonstrate the illusion of free will, appears throughout the memoir. The falling stone, for Shklovsky, ostensibly serves as an illustration of the contingencies that complicate free and voluntary individual action: "The forces moving me were external to me. The forces moving others were external to them. I am only a falling stone."[3] A falling stone's path is inevitable, determined by the forces of gravitational physics, divorced from the realm of human agency. And so, this metaphor seems to say, the revolutionary actors of this moment are objects, not subjects, of historical change. Even as a falling stone (one falling, moreover, into the hole blown open by the explosive energy of the October Revolution), Shklovsky figures himself as an object that retains a critical ability to narrate its own path.

This leads us to a peculiar situation. On the one hand, Shklovsky offers himself up as a chronicler of the historical moment, capturing the revolutionary zeitgeist in a fragmentary manner, seemingly appropriate to the surrounding turmoil. As an historical narrator, his ability to record is premised upon, most basically, his powers of observation: the empirical data (sights, sounds, smells, feels) which allow for a description of surroundings and events. On the other hand, he casts himself as a beleaguered pawn caught in the maneuverings of shifting sovereignties, shuttling between military posts under three separate regimes in roughly five years: from the tsarist Russian Army to the Provisional Government to the Bolshevik Red Army. His position is ever unstable, and his constant movement between Petersburg and Ukraine, Galicia and the Caucasus renders him liable to miss key moments. In fact, he quite often finds himself at the figurative and literal margins of the crumbling Russian empire, deployed to various fronts, convalescing from illness and injury in remote infirmaries, or running from the Bolsheviks (in one instance literally hiding in a haystack outside Saratov). These journeys result in prolonged absences from the capital, in which a majority of the consequential political decisions—and both revolutions—take place; as such, he is quite simply unable to observe some of the events as they unfold. In lieu of his own observations, he must rely on secondhand reports and hearsay to fill in the details of what transpires. These limitations undermine the figure of the author as agile observer dutifully chronicling their exploits, a persona upon which the long tradition of sentimental travelogues is premised. Shklovsky, however, is unabashed in relinquishing his experiential authority, declaring about the October Revolution that "all this happened without me and I'm writing about it from other people's words."[4]

Such empirical gaps mirror the more subtle erosion of narrative coherence and stability apparent in the memoir, achieved through purposive fragmentation and cognitive failings. If he is not literally absent from the scene, he is occasionally figuratively so. The picaro mixes up dates, forgets to describe things, and incorporates irrelevant details that even he admits do not quite belong, demanding of the reader, "so what! I should carry all this in my soul?"[5] And notably, he continues to describe the revolutions and civil war in terms of emptiness: "It was a civil war and two voids were attacking each other./There were no Red and White Armies. /That's no joke. I saw the

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[3] Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 133. «Причины, двигавшие мною, были вне меня. Причины, двигавшие другими, были вне их. Я—только падающий камень.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 133.
[4] Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 135. «Все это было без меня, и я пишу об этом с чужих слов.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 135.
[5] Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 160. «А мне какое дело. Я-то должен носить это все в душе?» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 158.

war."[6] If Shklovsky—as literary theorist and provocateur—initially seems an unlikely narrator of the revolutions and wars, his cryptic asides are even more perplexing. Indeed, even as Shklovsky declares that he "saw" the war, the thing he perceives is defined by its absence: that is, how could one even "see" two voids? For that matter, how does one fall into a hole of revolution? What perspective is a "falling stone" capable of imparting with regard to the turmoil of external forces? And if we take Shklovsky at his word (never a straightforward task), how do we reconcile his announcement that he does not actually *witness* the main event with his several-hundred-page "revolutionary" memoir?

In fact, once we read more Shklovsky, it becomes apparent that these are actually the wrong questions to be asking. His theoretical work invites us to take a step back to consider the more primary issues of perception and cognition, upon which our knowledge of such events is necessarily based. How, that is, can one perceive revolution? Is it possible to observe an historical abstraction? To bear witness to something like a revolution presupposes that such events may submit to perception—an assumption that remains, for Shklovsky, unconvincing. And so the issue is less that he "missed" the October Revolution, but that the October Revolution is not, strictly speaking, available to observe anyway. This is where the problem of form enters. For Shklovsky, the primary imperceptibility of the revolution does not mean that it lies entirely beyond cognition, but that it must be conceived of outside the conventions of descriptive prose inherited from nineteenth-century Russian realism. The historical moment of rupture, of which this memoir serves as a document, cannot be described using the tools of novelistic world-making by which settings, characters, and actions are organized and interpreted in a coherent manner, a mode of representation that offers ostensibly visible causal relations in the service of an explanatory framework. In fact, it is precisely this issue of causality that that the revolutionary set of circumstances reveals to be a central problem.

How, then, to approach the possibility of representing this moment of collapse? For Shklovsky, the narration of revolution requires a literary form that brings the problems of perception and knowledge to bear upon the experience of historical crisis. Rather than attempting to faithfully integrate his surroundings through detailed description, Shklovsky takes a page out of the books of earlier literary prose, choosing forms ostensibly more suited, in his mind, to the narration of historical rupture. Such narrative forms must be adequate to grapple with the problems of relationality and causation, which remain, in their perceptive recalcitrance, at the root of historical experience. It is only certain literary forms, as we will see, that Shklovsky considers capable of bridging the cognitive gap, and of filling in where perception leaves off.

At first blush, Shklovsky's formal interlocutors hail from unexpected traditions developed centuries prior: picaresque and sentimental prose, which emerge out of sixteenth-century Spanish writing and eighteenth-century British and German letters respectively. In addition to Miguel de Cervantes, he was particularly enamored of Laurence Sterne, whom he claimed to have "rehabilitated" in Russia—and after whose novel *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) Shklovsky's own memoir is named. With this in mind, we might then ask what such genres or modes might offer to a Russian revolutionary in the early decades of the twentieth century. Why choose the episodic, irreverent picaresque as a form? How does the roguish levity of the picaresque and the sentimental speak to the systemic violence, institutional collapse, and widespread immiseration of revolutionary Russia? And for that matter, why narrate revolution through the

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[6] Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 187. «В гражданской войне наступают друг на друга две пустоты. Нет белых и красных армий. Это—не шутка. Я видал войну.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 182.

figure of Sterne, someone who seems to have ostensibly nothing to do with revolution, war, or imperial collapse more broadly?

To answer these questions, we first must turn to Shklovsky's theoretical essays, in which he lays the epistemological foundations necessary to consider how art—first and foremost literature, Shklovsky's privileged artistic medium—operates. In his best-known essay, "Art as Device" (*Iskusstvo kak priem*, 1917), he explores the question of how objects are presented to our minds, proposing something like an empiricist epistemology of pure perception. Poetry and prose are the site of attention here, singled out as possessing unique epistemological value. This follows an intellectual tradition in Russia that reaches back to nineteenth-century linguist and philosopher Alexander Potebnya, with whom Shklovsky opens this early essay. "Like prose, poetry is, first and foremost, a mode of thinking and knowing [*sposob myshleniya i poznaniya*]," Potebnya provocatively claims.[7] Shklovsky takes seriously this possibility that literature offers a way of knowing: in effect, the device essay poses the question of just how we come to know the things we claim to. This question, in various iterations, resurfaces in his later essays collected in the volume *Theory of Prose* (*O Teorii Prozy,* 1925), which take up more legibly formalist issues of structure and plot construction. These essays consider how the forms of the novel—its "devices" (*priemy)* and conceits—mediate our understanding of its content. Narration, as opposed to "poetic" language more broadly, here becomes the mode of knowing under investigation. The irreverent prose of Laurence Sterne is, he declares, the form best suited to the restoration of active perception, and thus most capable of facilitating our access to knowledge. Implicated in such perceptive restoration is a heightened awareness of form itself, an attunement with which the parodic orientation of the Sternean sentimental is occupied.

In what follows, I first consider Shklovsky's device essay in order to establish the empiricist epistemology at the core of his formal analyses, an orientation that foregrounds sensory modes of perception (sight being the most privileged). This essay, in essence, elaborates on one of the problems that becomes central to *A Sentimental Journey*: what it might mean to perceive an historical event like revolution, and how such an abstraction might be subsequently represented through language. As I argue, it is through his essays on form, including "The Novel as Parody: Sterne's Tristram Shandy" (*Parodiinyi roman: Tristram Shendi Sterna*), that a solution is proffered via literary structure, one that hinges on the potential of parody. Tracing Shklovsky's epistemological concerns alongside his formalist analyses allows us to return to his memoir, in order to take seriously his seemingly plotless (we might say, in Shklovskian parlance, *syuzhet*-less) and loosely organized set of revolutionary reflections. The thread that runs through his work to denaturalize objects and institutions constitutes a push from a secondary order of functions—the set of associations and assumptions entailed in "recognition"—back to the primary moment of cognition. A heightened attunement to the interaction between primary cognition and secondary convention is achieved through the doubled dynamic of parody, which demands self-reflexive awareness. We thus are made cognizant of form *qua* form in a process that necessarily entails the perception of relations, those both autonomous (textual) and heteronomous (extratextual). As form is rendered strange through our very awareness of it, the causal relations implicitly assumed to undergird the world disintegrate. To perceive relations is, for Shklovsky, in fact to confront their *artifice*. In the final sections of this chapter, I turn to the syntactic and structural strangeness of the revolutionary memoir. My reading of *A Sentimental Journey* demonstrates the perceptually estranging capacity of Shklovsky's prose, one that allows us to see the absence of that which we assumed to exist.

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[7] Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose,* trans. Benjamin Sher (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 1. «Поэзия, как и проза, есть прежде всего и главным образом … известный способ мышления и познания.» *Sobranie sochinenii* vol I, 250.

Feeling Objects

In 1916, amidst the turmoil of the First World War, stationed in the barracks of the Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) garrison, Shklovsky penned what would become his most famous essay on the nature and purpose of art.[8] "Art as Device" (published the subsequent year) offers an expanded reformulation of a prior paper, "Resurrection of the Word" (*Voskreshenie slova*, 1914), delivered as a lecture in late 1913 at an avant-garde café and cabaret known as the Stray Dog. In the intervening years, Shklovsky cultivated a pattern of extreme polarities, whereby his urban intellectual life was punctuated with often far-flung stints of manual and military labor. Within a span of months, he founded the Formalist alliance known as *Opoyaz* (*Obshchestvo Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Yazyka*, or the Society for the Study of Poetic Language) and enlisted in the army as an armored car mechanic and instructor at the outset of the war. The ensuing dynamic, vacillating between military campaigns on the Eastern Front and enlivened literary debates with the Futurists and Formalists back in Petrograd, was to provide a surprisingly fruitful foundation for Shklovsky's work on the craft of prose. As he repaired cars and trained drivers in the last days before the February Revolution of 1917, he meditated on mechanics of a different sort—that of "literary" or "poetic" language, whose distinction from "everyday" language is one of the founding premises of Russian formalism.[9] Perhaps fitting for someone scavenging makeshift vehicle parts out of the rubble of the city, his focus in "Art as Device" is notably material, concerned with objects and our relationship to them. Devices, techniques, tools, apparatuses—the very language of his essay, filled with words of craftmanship and purpose, emphasizes the *work* behind both art and the modes of perception it invites. Yet even as Shklovsky is laboring over the mechanics of armored cars, he remains overwhelmingly skeptical of mechanization as an experiential process. Customs and habits function, per his estimation, to render the world effectively invisible; faced with daily repetitive movements and familiar sights and sounds, we cease to actually perceive the materiality of the surrounding world. Indeed, it is objects—especially banal and domestic ones—that first fall victim to the deprivation of sensation. And it is such objects, in all their banality and domesticity, that Shklovsky seeks to revive from the perils of habitual, unnoticed functioning, a seemingly inevitable aspect of existence characterized by Shklovsky as "automatization" (*avtomatizatsiya*).

In fact, it all starts with a troublesome sofa. Consider one of the most frequently cited passages from this essay, which appears after he quotes an entry in Tolstoy's diary, wherein a contemplative Tolstoy ruminates on whether or not he actually dusted his sofa, and concludes that if he cannot remember, it as good as didn't happen. This non-remembrance is a problem because, as

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[8] Though the name of the city was changed from St. Petersburg to Petrograd by official degree of Tsar Nicholas II at the onset of WWI in August 1914, many residents and writers continued to refer to it as Petersburg during the war. Throughout Shklovsky's writings during this period, he most frequently uses Petersburg (or its informal diminutive, Peter), only rarely using the "correct" name of Petrograd.

[9] "Literariness" (*literaturnost'*) is a self-described preoccupation for the Formalists, even if the various practitioners of Formalist criticism defined it in sometimes quite divergent ways. Roman Jakobson, for instance, the head of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, approached "literariness" primarily through linguistics and poetry, an emphasis with which Shklovsky took issue, charging that it unduly privileged linguistics at the expense of literary autonomy. As Scott Bartling notes, Shklovsky once wryly commented that Jakobson's ilk were turning literature into a "subfield of linguistics." "Beyond Language: Viktor Shklovsky, Estrangement, and the Search for Meaning in Art" (Ph.D. Diss, Stanford University, 2015), 19.

Tolstoy extrapolates, it actually implicates a much broader issue with our psyche. If we are liable to forget whether or not we cleaned a piece of furniture, we are apparently susceptible to forgetting nearly anything at all. The unconsciousness with which we can carry out tasks as menial as sofa-dusting is an unsettling indication of our tendency to elide the experiential texture of being. Put simply, for Tolstoy, forgetfulness amounts to non-existence. Here Shklovsky intervenes, declaring:

> And so, held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.
>
> If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it's as if this life had never been.
>
> And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "enstranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious."[10]

The catalog of fading things offered by Shklovsky provides a telling suggestion that automatization threatens more than merely domestic objects. In proceeding decisively from "clothes and furniture" to "wives and fear of war," his list gains in affective potency as the stakes likewise increase, suggesting that our very conditions of intimacy and emotion are jeopardized. Tolstoy's possibly dusty sofa is, in fact, only a seemingly innocuous harbinger of a more ominous problem: what Shklovsky reveals here is no less than a crisis of perception, one that risks denuding our sensibilities regarding something as large and potentially abstract as war. Of course, in 1916 Petrograd, war was not an especially intangible concept, and so Shklovsky's suggestion that it remains in danger of passing into the level of unconsciousness is particularly provocative. Yet while the potential loss of something so consequential as "fear of war" seems resolutely immaterial (even if the consequences are quite tangible: loss of a fear of war, it seems, would incline one to be *more* useful to the machinery of combat), the power he invests in art is decisively of a material kind. If automatization, that is, threatens feelings, art restores not affects but sensations—a different kind of feeling, that of objects and the material qualities of experience, including our own embodiment (in the Russian, *vernut' oshchushchenie zhizni,* to return the sensation of life). Habitude numbs our psyche, and art hands us a newly stonified stone.

The means by which art can enact such revivification is through a device Shklovsky famously labels *ostranenie,* variously translated as "defamiliarization," "estrangement," "making strange," and—in Benjamin Sher's awkward but perhaps more faithful rendering—"enstrangement."[11] The word itself is a neologism, riffing off of the Russian word *otstranit'* (to remove or push aside); thus, it

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[10] Shklovsky, "Art as Device," 5-6. «Так пропадает, в ничто вменяясь, жизнь. Автоматизация съедает вещи, платье, мебель, жену и страх войны. «Если целая сложная жизнь многих проходит бессознательно, то эта жизнь как бы не была». И вот для того, чтобы вернуть ощущение жизни, почувствовать вещи, для того, чтобы делать камень каменным, существует то, что называется искусством. Целью искусства является дать ощущение вещи, как видение, а не как узнавание; приемом искусства является прием «остранения» вещей и прием затруднённой формы, увеличивающий трудность и долготу восприятия». *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol. I, 256.

[11] Throughout this chapter, when not simply using *ostranenie* (which for non-Russian and Russian readers alike resists easy assimilation, a dual benefit), I prefer to use estrangement, as it connotes the distancing effect that I see as central.

performs what it describes, causing the reader's eye to stumble over an unrecognized formulation that itself becomes imbued with strangeness. Aptly, then, the word is "removed" from convention and placed within a new linguistic context (outside the familiarity of the Russian lexicon), eliciting a particular form of attention. Indeed, the attention *ostranenie* commands, both as a novel coinage and as a process of artistic defamiliarization, is very much to the point. As Shklovsky outlines in this early essay, renewed attentiveness to the aesthetic object is required in order to fully apprehend it—not merely to recognize it (*uznavat'*), an act that he critiques as a result of automatization.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this distinction between apprehension and recognition, pivotal as these concepts are throughout the essay.[12] For Shklovsky, to apprehend suggests something like a moment of intuition or impression: a first seeing, as it were. Primacy is key to this means of mentally laying hold of something; it is crucial that the thing in question is pared down to its empirical fundamentals, stripped of any potential secondary associations. This is an act of mind that hews closely to empiricist philosophy, to what John Locke and David Hume were concerned with centuries earlier in their inquiries into human understanding. Locke's monumental *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), which inaugurated the age of British empiricism, radically challenged the rationalist orthodoxy of innate ideas. In seeking to establish how we come to have "ideas" (a capacious concept for Locke, referring to anything we can think about), his project limits the source of human knowledge almost exclusively to that which is experienced and observed. Hume's contributions decades later built upon Locke's empiricist foundations, extending them not only to the grounds of ethical principles, but pushing them to more skeptical ends. His *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) addresses the origin of ideas, which he posits arise from impressions, the stronger of the two "perceptions of the mind." The crucial epistemological distinction for Hume is that between two kinds of propositions: "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact." The former concerns intuitive reasoning and is primarily confined to mathematical operations. The latter is far more significant; propositions concerning "matters of fact" are discoverable only through empirical observation, and it is upon these kinds of mental activities that the problems of causality are brought to bear. This domain of belief (for "matters of fact" are grasped through belief, not reason) offers a means of understanding the strange causality at work in Shklovsky's memoir, and so we will return to Humean skepticism in the second half of this chapter.

For now, suffice it to note that the cornerstone of British empiricism, by which immediate objects of perception constitute the basis of our knowledge, likewise becomes the foundation of Shklovsky's inquiry into the potential of art.[13] And it is to this primacy of impression that Shklovsky most wants to return. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, recognition (*uznavanie)* is the lesser of the two functions, as it necessarily casts backwards to something seen already—a kind of "second seeing" that displaces one's initial apprehension. Recognition is the imaginatively impoverished but ubiquitous phenomenon against which *ostranenie* is working, and it remains tellingly opposed to "seeing." As such, we might think of recognition in stronger terms, as an occasion of non-seeing, or perhaps *un*-seeing, considering that this secondary form of sight is a diminution of the first. At the root of the empiricist psychology underwriting Shklovsky's formalist aesthetics lies an insistence on

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[12] There is no single word used by Shklovsky that corresponds to what I am calling "apprehension." The closest would be *videnie*, or "seeing," or *sozdanie osobovo vospriiatie*, literally "the creation of a special perception," but he primarily describes the desired phenomenon in negative terms—*against* recognition.

[13] In addition to British empiricism, numerous other related and/or parallel intellectual traditions embrace concepts that clearly precede Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, including German and British romanticism. See the Appendix in Bartling, "Beyond Language" for a brief but comprehensive "prehistory" of estrangement, 267 ff.

the radically unqualified power of the object: the "idea" in empiricist parlance reduced to its essential sensory data, unburdened by the adjectives and qualifiers that come with habitude and familiarity. In the examples he provides, of holding a pen and speaking a foreign language, he notes the drastic difference that separates the first and ten-thousandth times one engages in these activities. Repetition, in deadening the senses, mortifies experience—and if experience is the means by which we know things, the result is very dire indeed. What becomes of knowledge if our very means of acquisition is jeopardized?

This is where art intervenes. Art's intervention, however, is not simply a matter of demanding our studied attention to the idea in question: the act of "reduction" to a primary impression is a necessarily complex operation. To return to my earlier emphasis on the importance of work—the vocabulary of mechanics and devices being perhaps the first indication of such focus—Shklovsky insists that the encounter with an object facilitated by art is characterized by effort. Labor is thus an integral aspect of a text's literariness; the effort required by *ostranenie* is not a means to an end, but rather part of the very point. Apprehension, in the grip of this methodology, is marked by a lack of ease: after all, the device of art increases the difficulty and length of perception (*uvelichivaiushchii trudnost' i dolgotu vospriiatiia*). And while Shklovsky notoriously declares that the "estranged" object itself does not matter (*sdelannoe v iskusstve ne vazhno*), a point that is somewhat unduly emphasized in some accounts of Russian formalism, objects are undeniably at the heart of formalism's formative paradigm—indeed, they are the regulating end of the entire operation.[14] The reanimation occasioned by estrangement restores an object's specific *objectness*, and for Shklovsky this entails our primary sensations of the material thing, an explicitly somatic experience that harkens back to the etymological root of aesthetics, which derives from the Greek *aisthesis,* meaning sense perception. Far from being the depersonalized, aloof, and anti-sentimental methodology of structuralist polemics, then, Shklovskian formalism is a deeply embodied account of the literary text, at the heart of which are people and their sensory relationships to the world around them. It is, in this sense, a phenomenological formalism, less in the manner of the early twentieth-century philosophical movement, and more resonant with an earlier Kantian description of empiricism: an abiding concern with phenomena (objects of consciousness, or what appears to us) and the manner of their immediate presentation to our senses. As such, Shklovsky's endeavor is one that identifies a kind of aesthetic numbness—anaesthetics, literally—as the main psychological problem warranting correction.[15]

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[14] This understanding of the movement as a coldly positivistic phenomenon was initially propagated by Lev Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution (Literatura i revoliutsiia,* 1923)*,* where he laments that Shklovsky, as the head of the Formalist school, is concerned with objectivity above all else, erroneously seeking precise criteria for classification. Nearly 90 years later, the 2012 *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* introduces Russian formalism as "steering away from aesthetics, sociology, psychology, and history" and further states that it is "as technical, precise, meticulous, and cold as positivism itself." This account, as many elsewhere, relies on false binaries between form and content, language and materialism—oppositions that blunt the complex dynamics actually suggested in Shklovsky's early essays. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Kavanaugh, et al., 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1239-40.

[15] My reading joins a vein of scholarship that emphasizes the sensory and embodied underpinnings of Shklovsky's formalist work, including Scott Bartling's "Beyond Language: Viktor Shklovsky, Estrangement, and the Search for Meaning in Art" (Stanford University diss, 2015); Anastasia Eccles's "Formalism and Sentimentalism: Viktor Shklovsky and Laurence Sterne," *New*

From Objects to Relations

Nevertheless, the notion of restoring sensation, or "feeling objects" through a mode of laborious perception, is admittedly a rather abstract notion, even as it strives for tangibility. To ground the discussion in more concrete terms, let us turn to some of Shklovsky's own examples regarding the particular ways that estrangement works in the device essay. His first examples are taken from Tolstoy, whom he regards as master of the technique. Tolstoy's primary methods of enacting estrangement rely most fundamentally on perspectival shifts: either by describing something "as if it were perceived for the first time" or by refusing to call something by its commonly understood name.[16] His short story "Kholstomer," told from the point of view of the eponymous horse, provides a vivid instance of the kinds of insights that perspectival alteration might afford. The titular horse's ignorance of the human concept of private property invites us to reflect on the artifice behind claims of ownership: "They [humans] have made a compact among themselves that only one person shall say "my" to any one thing. And, in accordance with the rules of this game, he who could say "my" about the greatest number of things would be considered to be the happiest of men."[17] Here, a verbal claim—the use of a possessive pronoun—is the sole indicator of proprietorship, suggesting that mere assertion is the basis of ownership, a move that subsequently trivializes the idea of property as a childlike compulsion for acquisition. Further, to characterize property as a verbal game rather than an assumed aspect of social and legal organization is to denaturalize it as a phenomenon, which is precisely the conceit of the story. But something more essential happens in the course of this analysis, which re-situates the terrain of discussion. Shklovsky's reading of Tolstoy relies upon an implicitly staged object-relations shift: from the clothing and stones with which he opens the essay, we move to a set of *relations* concerning such objects. Property is a concept premised upon relationality between humans and objects and, as such, is not perceptible in itself, in the way that owned things (or humans) are sensorily available. The brilliance of "Kholstomer," for Shklovsky, is to make these implicit relations, obscured by their custom and ubiquity, available for apprehension.

What is estranged here is then not the stone itself, but our relationship to it. Tolstoy's broader point, which Shklovsky picks up as a central problem driving *ostranenie*, is that we have naturalized the artificial and, what is possibly worse, occluded the very act of doing so. What we would see as "property" the horse sees as "things" or objects in their own right—clothing, houses, land, other horses, etc.—unfettered by the relational category of possessions. Indeed, this is a category rendered inoperable within the story, precisely because it does not exist for the horse (or for that matter, anyone unfamiliar with the relation of property). The very absence of the category in the story reveals that it is neither immanent nor inevitable. And so, though we might initially think that the *ostranenie* Shklovsky identifies in the story is that of the horse, it is in fact our own.

Literary History 47 (2016): 525-45; and Benjamin Robinson's *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). Robinson goes a step further and centers the feeling body at the very heart of Shklovsky's and Bertolt Brecht's formalisms, reading them as "repersonalizing somatic formalists," xii.

[16] Shklovsky, "Art as Device," 6. «…описывает [вещь] как в первый раз виденную …» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol. I, 257.

[17] Shklovsky, "Art as Device," 7. «Про одну и ту же вещь они условливаются, чтобы только один говорил—*мое.* И тот, кто про наибольшее число вещей по этой условленной между ними игре говорит *мое,* тот считается у них счастливейшим.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol. I, 258.

Kholstomer's viewpoint allows *us* to see the Lockean "idea" before the category that we later impose upon it, a perspective afforded by the unique capacity of the text to frame the strangeness of the relation; after all, in a text, there is no real ontological difference between an object and a relation. Tolstoy's defamiliarization makes visible categories of relationality—like property—that are pervasive but often imperceptible *as* categories. As such, they become historical, rather than atemporal and inevitable. Crucially, this means that they also become changeable.

Shklovsky's subsequent examples shift away from insights afforded by nonhuman perception, but they continue to privilege the estrangement of relations, leveraging distanced observation in order to reveal the pretenses behind social conventions. The most famous example, from *War and Peace* (*Voina i mir,* 1869), depicts an operatic performance as a fragmented assortment of props, costumes, people, and music. Seen through the eyes of the young and amorously spurned Natasha Rostova, the whole affair is reduced to its constituent parts—relations, in other words, are broken back down into objects—thus foreclosing the immersive totality that it provides the other spectators. For Natasha, the spectacle never coheres into a full experience, instead remaining at the level of discrete actions and objects: floorboards, painted canvases, white and blue dresses, singing, body parts. These theatrical components remain extraordinary in their individuality because they fail to connect, and thus impede the production of a narrative or a sense of causal continuity. The absence of subordinating clauses in Tolstoy's text—or any embedding syntactic structures that might provide relationality—allows the semantic object to work freely, availing itself to perception without the usual intermediation. This, Shklovsky asserts, is the Tolstoyan "way of seeing things out of context," a descriptive mode that suffuses most of his work.[18] We will return to this idea in the latter half of this chapter, as Shklovsky takes up and transforms the Tolstoyan method of extra-contextual representation in his memoir.

Presumably (we must infer as Shklovsky declines to elaborate), context lends information relating to the semantic object or idea: it proffers perspective, a broader structure of meaning within which to interpret a phenomenon. Yet by inflecting the phenomenon with background data, context forestalls the immediacy of encounter. Rather than apprehending the idea "as it is," we grasp an entire network of connections and associations surrounding it. Again, Hume offers a framework for understanding how such associations are formed. He notes that all ideas are organized within the mind with a necessary degree of "method and regularity," in accordance with three regulatory "principles of connexion": resemblance, contiguity (in time or place) and cause and effect.[19] Hume's associationist theory privileges these principles as foundational to all causal inferences and moral judgments. But within the Shklovskian epistemology of pure perception, these principles are secondary, and regulate our understanding by subsuming the "idea" within a pattern of contextual information established through prior experience and habit. So we might observe singing on a stage and label it "opera" without actually seeing the rich nuances of performance in all their strangeness, as Natasha does. This is not to say that context can never be useful or illuminating—Shklovsky never reaches quite this level of polemic—but rather that it tends to preemptively impose interpretive frameworks, increasing the likelihood that we are thrown into the realm of recognition instead of apprehension. To restore unmediated primacy to our encounter with the idea, then, Tolstoy's strategy of *ostranenie* depends on a critical dissociation of Humean principles: of categories, as above with property, or of context, as here with opera.

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[18] Ibid., 9, translation modified. «способ видеть вещи выведенными из их контекста.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol. I, 262.

[19] Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals,* ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), §III, 23-4.

What should be clear by now is that Shklovskian estrangement, in all the varied and eclectic manifestations he provides, is positioned against recognition. And yet the underlying epistemology at work is premised not just upon empiricist encounter, but upon *re*-encounter. Shklovsky's aim is to return us to our first moment of "contact" with an object of perception or thought, a move that presumes a primacy of apprehension that is, of necessity, both lost and restorable. In the process of this restoration of primacy we come to understand our prior knowledge as false or incomplete: the categories we would ostensibly use to define the phenomena presented are in fact inoperable—property, opera, Orthodox ritual (in a later example). And crucially, here it is *relations* that are rendered strange. Shklovsky underscores that the power of *ostranenie* does not lie in generating ultimate resolution—he does not provide us with new, "proper" categories, for instance—but in this unique mode of unexpected, delayed perception, characterized as a newly developed mental "vision": "The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a "vision" of this object rather than mere 'recognition'."[20] Rather than a specific technique, *ostranenie* appears here as an approach achieved by a variety of rhetorical methods: metaphor, perspectival shifts, euphemism, etc. Perhaps most surprisingly, given the Russian formalists' reputation for disengagement from the social, Shklovsky invokes a broader purchase via this perceptual paradigm. His examples suggest that to experience estrangement is to undergo an ethical reorientation, however small or seemingly inconsequential. And so, despite Shklovsky's initial emphasis on the material world of objects that we risk losing to habitude—sofas, stones, and the like—the estranging literary moments that he actually describes in this essay move beyond objects to implicate conventions and institutions, and to the relations underpinning them. In the examples above, the stakes are clearly raised; when we are impelled to apprehend something in a "special way" (*osoboe vospriiatie,* literally "special perception"), we unearth our implicitly held assumptions regarding how objects and people relate to each other in the process.[21]

Method and Anti-method

Within the device essay, however, we are still left with the problem of how exactly this "special perception" is provoked. What is more, a seemingly paradoxical undercurrent runs through Shklovsky's early definition. Formulaic, mechanized modes of perception "eat away" at our embodied experience of the world, but it is certain formal devices—that is, formulas—that are capable of restoring true perception to our everyday existence by a particularly effortful process of intensified attention. Evidenced by the vacillation between the *method* of estrangement and the *methodization* of routine, there remains a strange ambivalence about the nature of mechanization throughout this essay. (This is one of the numerous tensions that exist within the theory of *ostranenie* as a whole, at least in its early iterations.[22]) Initially, method is a subject of critique, and one of the

[20] Ibid., 10. «Целью образа является не приближение значения его к нашему пониманию, а создание особого восприятия предмета, *создание «виденья» его, а не «узнаванья.» Sobranie sochinenii,* vol. I, 262.

[21] This ethical valence is perhaps the closest Shklovsky comes to Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, though Brecht's alienation is far more ideologically implicated and action oriented: it relies upon the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism and remains explicitly aimed at galvanizing a social response. Shklovsky's theory is more concerned with a fundamental sensory reorientation and revivification to no clearly stated political end (despite citing Tolstoy's critique of private property).

[22] Shklovsky continued to refine his theory—both explicitly and obliquely—in much of his subsequent work, including his later essays in the 1925 volume *Theory of Prose,* in which "Art as

culprits behind our unconscious thinking; Shklovsky identifies the "algebraic method of thinking" (*algebraicheskii metod myshleniia*), by which ideas are replaced by symbols, as a process of economization that encourages facile recognition. The idea of such a method is fundamentally reliant on routine: a standardized, replicable, repetitive process of thinking that allows us to economize on time and effort by not fully grasping every idea in its unwieldy particularity. But of course, *ostranenie* is itself a method of sorts, in addition to a psychological phenomenon, and further one that can be leveraged to methodological ends. So this is clearly not to say that all methods are implicated in automatization. Estrangement, by interrupting the system of economy that apparently motivates habitual perception, is in fact a paradoxically *anti*-methodical method, a set of techniques (*priemy)* that aims to disrupt and contort.

The slipperiness regarding method-as-stultifying and method-as-estranging is especially notable when considering Shklovsky's overt focus on the precise techniques of prose in his other essays, including "The Relationship between Devices of Plot Construction and General Devices of Style" ("*Sviaz priemov siuzhetoslozheniia s obshchimi priemami stilia*") and "The Novel as Parody: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*" ("*Parodiinyi roman: Tristram Shendi Sterna*"). In these essays, as well as throughout much of the collection *Theory of Prose*, two main points emerge. First, writers—from anonymous composers of folk epics (*byliny*) to Miguel de Cervantes and Charles Dickens—rely on an array of techniques to structure their narratives. In the "Plot Construction" essay, he singles out interactions of tautology, parallelism, repetition, retardation (*zamedleniie*, also translated as "deceleration"), and peripeteia as aspects of plot composition that are shared by a broad range of different narrative genres. The coincidence of such plot devices across cultures and historical periods is, to Shklovsky's mind, a result of the existence of "special laws of plot formation" that are immanent to fictional texts.[23] The internal nature of poetic laws governing "literary" texts (here taken to connote narrative) results in the shared "schemata" (*skhemy)* of plot, which is how we arrive at similar formal phenomena in such diverse texts as Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) and early Slavic folklore. As such, the laws governing plot construction and narrative operate transhistorically, and regardless of nation or genre. This framework is resonant with the broader formalist interest in parsing literariness (*literaturnost'*), which remains a central preoccupation for *Opoyaz,* the group whose titular interest is in "poetic language." Shklovsky's aim throughout much of the collection *Theory of Prose* is to investigate these foundations by shifting the focus more specifically to narrative theory, a move which requires close analytical attention to plot structures and their modes of functioning.

But a second—and for my purposes more salient—point emerges in these essays. It relates to the way in which narrative structures might occasion estrangement, even as they rely on rhythmic forms of repetition, which might otherwise seem to be complicit in modes of automatization. The vital distinction hinges on whether or not the method is diegetic. The transhistorical legibility of plot devices requires that they rely on a set of iterable structural paradigms, necessitating systematic organization. Shklovsky in fact goes to great lengths to highlight the rhythmical repetition that plot

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Device" is included. Though he was forced to officially renounce Formalism as a methodology under Stalin (his 1930 recantation, "A Monument to a Scholarly Mistake" ["*Pamyatnik nauchnoi oshibke"*] effectively ended Formalism in the Soviet Union), he returned to the idea in the 60s and 70s. One of his last works, *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar (Tetiva: O neskhodstve skhodnovo,* 1970) revisits and redefines *ostranenie*, highlighting that its meaning is contingent on a conception of "the world" (*mir*). He also admits to previous inconsistencies and purportedly misplaced emphases in his earlier work on the subject.

[23] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose,* 17. «Совпадения объясняются только существованием особых законов сюжетосложения.» *O Teorii Prozy,* 27.

schemata share, a statement that appears to evoke the automatization he so derides in "Art as Device." Yet these textual methods in fact *resist* automatization by playing a critical role in disrupting perceptual habitude. So it is specifically diegetic methods that are capable of interrupting non-diegetic ones; the formal relationships organizing texts may be methodical, but they engender a dynamism that challenges the automatization of everyday life. Inner forms, put simply, challenge outer ones. After making form difficult—a laborious process through which the reader must struggle—narrative ultimately returns us to life and lived experience, reoriented and revivified. This is the critical point of distinction to make with regard to formalism's infamous dismissal of historical materiality. The rejection of externality lies specifically with causation, in a refutation of historical and sociological explanations of expressive structures. But this is not to say that the boundaries of the text are entirely autonomous or divorced from a relationship with the outside world *tout court*. In Ilya Kalinin's words, Shklovskian formalism deals "with a manifestation of the autonomy of the artistic text from the automatized grammar of everyday language."[24] While Kalinin's account emphasizes the embodied kinetic logic behind structures of narrative plasticity, his broader point, including a refutation of the oft-assumed connection between formalism and aesthetic escapism, resonates with my account of narrative estrangement: "Narrative difficulty was to produce the dialectical effect of emancipation from the limitations of the physical, psychological, and logical determinism of everyday life."[25]

As Shklovsky outlines, such emancipation is achieved by a violation of norms (specifically the norms of practical or "prosaic" language, which literary or "poetic" language works to disrupt). In fact, by his understanding, all plots of necessity involve a violation, as they distort the logic of a story. This idea is premised upon the difference between *fabula* and *syuzhet,* the former being the events comprising a story and the latter being the way the story is actually told—the raw material versus its emplotment, so to speak. As a result of the laws structuring plot formation, *syuzhet* and *fabula* are decidedly not the same: some level of deformation occurs by virtue of "emplotting" raw material. These violations might entail interruption, or the introduction of some new material that is not integral to the action, or they might involve framing, or repetition that frustrates advancement. But this is not to say that all narratives are equally estranging, and it is specifically forms that draw attention to themselves *as* forms that Shklovsky hails as superior, presumably because they self-consciously compel the awareness of form that estrangement invites in the reader. Shklovsky calls this technique of deliberate transparency "laying bare the device" (*obnazhenie priema*), a label that again foregrounds the importance of making visible. This is where Laurence Sterne enters as a presiding figure in Shklovskian formalism, his prose being exemplary in its commitment to "laying bare" its own structure and composition.

Sentimental Estrangement

Sterne, the giant of late-eighteenth century sentimentalism, is an ideal model for thinking through the tension between idiosyncrasy and systematicity that underlies Shklovsky's early work on literary form. On the one hand, Sterne's novels appeal to popular sentimental conventions based most clearly upon exaggerated displays of feeling and heightened attunement to moral obligation (an emphasis that perhaps seems to fit oddly with Shklovsky's theoretical aim, at least initially). Yet on the other hand, Sterne is resolutely eccentric, committed to narrative experimentation and the defiance of generic norms, even while such norms—notably those of the novel—remain new and

[24] Kalinin, "The Body of Plot: Viktor Shklovsky's Theory of Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory,* ed. Matthew Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), 50.
[25] Ibid., 57.

unsettled in this period. He began publishing at a time when the discourse of sentiment in British letters was already seeing robust debate, alongside attendant anxieties about its capacity to engender both virtue and corruption.[26] Conversations about how to understand the role of feeling in moral deliberation and action culminated in Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), two landmark accounts that situate sentiment, understood to result from the workings of "sympathy," at the heart of moral philosophy. While discussions of sentiment played out across a variety of contexts—psychological, scientific, philosophical—the literary sphere was a central arena for exploring the connections between emotional responsiveness, critical judgment, and moral reflection. The novel, as the major new cultural form developing in tandem with these discourses, became the site on which these debates were articulated.[27] The discourse of the sentimental thus evolved alongside that of the burgeoning novel, constituting an age of experimentation and innovation in which still-molten forms were being cast.

As a case in point for this simultaneity, the first volume of *Tristram Shandy* appeared the same year as Smith's tome on moral sentiment. But Sterne's towering stature as an influential figure within the tangled historical narratives of novelistic and sentimental discourses is not without its complications: even as conventions were still malleable in the mid-eighteenth century, Sterne's interventions were unique in their extremities. He was a "problematic standard-bearer for Sensibility" for contemporary critics, as John Mullan attests, combining pathos and comedy, laughter and tears.[28] Moments of earnest "fellow feeling" are punctuated with less noble passions of desire and lust, while scenes of tender melancholy are disrupted with bathos, as in the infamous scene in Chapter IX where Tristram inquires of the beautiful and dejected Maria what resemblance she sees between himself and her goat. He is a pioneer and a parodist of sentimentalism, playing with and developing the mode's tendencies while overtly lampooning them. Yet even as Sterne played the role of a sentimental provocateur, his work quickly changed the literary landscape. As James Chandler notes, his later *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) "effectively created a new subgenre in fiction," one largely refashioned from the genre of the picaresque.[29] The dynamism between the parodic and earnest leveraging of sentiment is a crucial technique of readerly engagement for Sterne and later practitioners of literary sentimentalism who followed in his wake. Shklovsky's own preoccupation with Sterne and his brand of novelistic innovation is premised in large part on this approach to humorous sentimental fiction, whose foundation rests on a deep sense of ambivalence. Even as Shklovsky eschews sentiment as suspect in terms of *content* ("Sentimentality cannot constitute the content of art," he polemicizes), he is reliant on the *structure* underpinning sentimental

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[26] For a brief historical gloss on the paradoxes of sentiment as a moral and aesthetic category—a faculty praised and pathologized, understood as a universal quality and a sign of distinction—see John Brewer's "Sentiment and Sensibility" in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25-29.

[27] Ian Watt's classic account locates Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) at the beginning of this history; see *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). See also Michael McKeon's *Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) for a robust Marxian history of the material and cultural conditions—manifest in epistemological and social crises—leading up to the modern novel.

[28] John Mullan, "Sensibility and Literary Criticism," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. H. Nisbet and C. Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 423.

[29] James Chandler, "The Novelty of Laurence Sterne," in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, vol II: English and British Fiction 1750-1820,* ed. Peter Garside and Karen O'Brien (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 111.

practice.[30] The mechanics of the kind of sentimental fiction pioneered by Sterne depend on an attunement to modes of affective ambivalence, an orientation that foregrounds self-conscious awareness of the text as a vehicle of influence. To understand Sterne's status in the formalist canon, it is necessary then to consider the particular formal innovations of the sentimental mode, rather than solely its thematics.

Already in the 1750s, several years prior to the first installments of *Tristram Shandy,* the word "sentimental" had acquired associations with a new kind of formal organization; as Chandler attests, it became understood as "a new way of producing narrative."[31] "Sentiment," according to Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary, is defined as "thought; notion; opinion." However, it also came to be understood as something that results from experience, and as a description of something felt (its etymological origins are derived from the Latin *sentire*, meaning sensed) rather than just a thought, connoting a deeper affective resonance.[32] One of the central preoccupations of the sentimental mode remains the varied intersections between knowledge and feeling—sentimental fiction, from its earliest iterations, takes seriously the epistemic potential of emotions or sensations. The ability of "sentiment" and the sentimental mode to activate a reader's cognitive energies animates the development of such narratives. Indeed, the term "Sensible" itself came to connote a reader's own sensitivity to a text: in contemporaneous discussions of sentimental fiction, "sensibility" was used less to describe the content of the novels themselves, and more to point to their effects upon readers.[33] Samuel Richardson's preface to the first edition of *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) describes the aim of his novel as moral edification of the "sensible reader," someone alert and attentive to the complexities of a text, both moral and aesthetic. As a term pointing to the cognitive effects of the sentimental, "sensibility" was seen as a discriminating capacity governing critical judgment.[34]

Sterne's interventions amplified the latent tensions between disparate registers of feeling, and between a reader's absorption in a text and their awareness of it as a constructed narrative. By the latter decades of the eighteenth century, sentimentalism was being theorized in terms of its invitation to self-conscious reflection. The "sensible reader" was not only attuned to the feelings being described in a given text, but to the ways that the text itself was composed, and to the complexities of sympathetic identification with fictional characters. Friedrich Schiller's engagement offers a more robust account of sentimental ambivalence, one that substantiates Sternean self-reflexivity as integral to the very paradigm of sentimentalism itself. Schiller's treatise *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795) reads the sentimental as a complex structure distinguished from straightforward expressions of sincerity or sympathy.[35] Notably, Schiller's sentimental poet is marked by deep ambivalence and instability. As opposed to the naïve poet to whom singular aesthetic impression—and thus direct representation—is available, the sentimental poet grapples with "mixed feeling" (*gemischte Gefühl*):

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[30] *Theory of Prose,* 159. «Сентиментальность не может быть содержанием искусства», *O Teorii Prozy,* 192.

[31] Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013), 152.

[32] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: W. Strahan, 1755).

[33] Mullan, "Sensibility and Literary Criticism," 423.

[34] Ibid., 426.

[35] In making the connection between Sternean form and Schillerian sentiment, it is worth noting that Schiller was acquainted with Sterne's work, and indeed deeply engaged with British literary and philosophical thought more generally. See Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy,* 11, 152-4.

> This sort of poet *reflects* on the impression the objects make upon him and only on the basis of that reflection is the emotion founded, into which he is transported and into which he transports us. The object here is related to an idea, and his poetic power rests solely upon this relation. The sentimental poet thus always has to deal with two conflicting images and feelings…[36]

The sentimental, as outlined here, is a distinctively self-conscious relation, one generated by reflection on the actual mental process of apprehension. The poet, to be properly sentimental, must be aware of the relation that obtains between the primary *object* of perception and the secondary *association* arising out of the impression. The consciousness of this duality produces a doubled image, which results in affective ambivalence: "the mixed feeling aroused by him will always testify to this two-fold source."[37] In this way, the dual nature of the mixed feeling reflects the doubling of the mode of perception (first the impression, then the association). The critical move of Schillerian sentiment that speaks to Sterne's method, and thus to Shklovsky's formalism, is its fundamental reflexivity. The structure elaborated here—dependent on heightened sensitivity to the sensory process, receptivity to the arousal of ambivalence, and equivocation regarding poetic resolution—is recognizably one that adheres in Sterne. If conscious attunement is at the crux of Schiller's sentimental poetry, what shifts in Sterne is the attunement to the process of mediation itself. Sterne's narrative commitment rests on a consciousness of form *qua* form, a forced confrontation with literary convention through its subversion.

The dynamic between imitation and parody, contingent on reflexive self-awareness, in fact lies at the core of the sentimental movement in Russia. Here sentimental topoi often emerged contemporaneously with their own (frequently humorous) imitations.[38] This very dissonance between "serious-lachrymose" sentimentalism and sentimental humor in Russian letters is a site of scholarly attention, and has invited considerations of the surprising affinities between sentimentalism and formalism.[39] Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, which participates in the popular genre of the

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[36] Friedrich Schiller, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," in *Essays*, trans. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 2005), 204. "Dieser reflektiert über den Eindruck, den die Gegenstände auf ihn machen, und nur auf jene Reflexion ist die Rührung gegründet, in die er selbst versetzt wird und uns versetzt. Der Gegenstand wird hier auf eine Idee bezogen, und nur auf dieser Beziehung beruht seine dichterische Kraft. Der sentimentalische Dichter hat es daher immer mit zwei streitenden Vorstellungen und Empfindungen, mit der Wirklichkeit als Grenze und mit seiner Idee als dem Unendlichen zu thun, und das gemischte Gefühl, das er erregt, wird immer von dieser doppelten Quelle zeugen." *Schillers Werke, Philosophische Schriften*, ed. Benno von Wiese, vol. 20, pt. 1 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1962–1963), 441.

[37] Schiller, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," 204.

[38] Alessandra Tosi outlines this history as it unfolds in early nineteenth-century Russia, demonstrating the wide variety of innovative and humorous approaches to sentimentalism that emerged in Russian literary prose. The catalyzing force was Sterne himself, enormously popular in Russia at the time, along with Nikolai Karamzin (dubbed the "Russian Sterne"), a preeminent figure who ushered in the fad for sentimental novels and travelogues. See "Sentimental Irony in Early Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature: The Case of Nikolai Brusilov's *Bednyi Leandr,*" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 44, no. 2 (2000). See also Gitta Hammarberg's *From the Idyll to the Novel: Karamzin's Sentimentalist Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) for an account of sentimentalism that prioritizes the emotional engagement of readers, particularly through humor and irony.

[39] Anastasia Eccles's article "Formalism and Sentimentalism: Viktor Shklovsky and Laurence Sterne" does precisely this, arguing that Shklovsky's development of formalism is deeply indebted to

sentimental travelogue and follows a more linear plot structure than *Tristram Shandy*, is often hailed as the impetus behind the Russian cult of sentimentality during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. But it is the earlier novel to which Shklovsky is drawn in his literary essays, and it is not hard to see why: *Tristram Shandy* is a formalist's playground, full of self-reflexive asides, extravagant digressions, and bawdy humor.[40] Shklovsky's fascination with the novel is primarily centered on the digressive plot structure, which transforms from apparently random disarray to reveal a methodical design when more closely scrutinized: "upon first picking up Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* we are overwhelmed by a sense of chaos … but when you examine the structure of the book more closely, you perceive first of all that this disorder is intentional … everything in the novel has been displaced and rearranged."[41] The oscillation between displacement and rearrangement is precisely where the artistry is found—in the Russian, he writes that Sterne's "poetics" lie within the narrative's intentional disorder (*zdes' est' svoja poetika*).

What is most crucial for Shklovsky in "The Novel as Parody" is Sterne's exemplary ability to "lay bare the device" in his plot organization, a move that draws attention to the artifice of the text and the deliberate constructed-ness of its temporal dislocations. In many ways, it is the very fact of enhanced visibility that is most important for Shklovsky, the revelation of scaffolding underneath the narrative surface. The precise contours of the material organized by the framework are less important—this is of course a formalist trope that has developed into somewhat of a truism, though it is not to say that content is by any means irrelevant, necessary as it is. Rather, what Shklovsky highlights is the drama of unveiling at the heart of the novel as a genre, a move that he does not explicitly describe as estranging, but that essentially performs its function: wrenching us out of passive contemplation by inviting heightened attention to form. In other words, we become aware that there *is* a form, as opposed to narration that presents itself as something natural. In a metaphor appropriate to Shklovsky's days as a mechanic, Sterne lifts the hood on the novel and shows us exactly how things work.

As is evident from the title of Shklovsky's essay, a particular kind of self-ironizing parodic spirit lies at the root of the work that Sterne is doing. And while, as I noted earlier, self-reflexive awareness is a central characteristic of a certain strain of sentimental fiction more broadly, Sterne's own brand of sentimentalism is notable in the degree to which it assimilates parodic self-making into its very structure. His aesthetics rely on extremities of form (such as blank pages, "extraneous" matter, and line drawings of plot progression) that warp the sentimental mode from within, even as his aesthetics inaugurate the cult of sentiment that resonates widely throughout Russia. As Shklovsky details in "The Novel as Parody," Sterne's own work is heavily reliant on distorted imitations of certain novelistic tropes, such as the "found manuscript" and the fantasy of "conventional" literary

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sentimental aesthetics. Eccles asserts that Shklovsky conflates sentiment and form in his reading of Sterne, and in fact claims that *ostranenie* itself is a device of sensibility. *New Literary History* 47 (2016): 525-45.

[40] Eccles provides a condensed summary of Shklovsky's longstanding engagement with Sterne, which evolved over the course of multiple articles and essays. The essay I consider here from *Theory of Prose*, "The Novel as Parody," is in fact a reprinting of an earlier 1921 essay, which is itself a reworking of a 1919 essay entitled "Plot Shift" ("*Syuzhetnyi sdvig*"). See Eccles, "Formalism and Sentimentalism," 531.

[41] Shklovsky, "The Novel as Parody," 147-8. «Если взять «Тристрама Шенди» Стерна и начать читать его, то первое впечатление будет хаос … Но когда начинаешь всматриваться в строение книги, то видишь, прежде всего, что этот беспорядок—намеренный, здесь есть своя поэтика.» *O Teorii Prozy,* 177-8.

time.[42] Further, the existence of a wide range of derivative fiction inspired by Sterne, including a litany of sentimental travelogues, constitute another turn of the parodic dynamic; the imitative fictions that emerged in his wake (parodies of a parody) result in a multi-layered structure of duplication.[43] This corpus of texts illuminates, in Eccles's words, the "porous borders" between imitation and parody, and between two poles of narrative orientation—self-conscious irony and affective, earnest excess—that arguably constitute the sentimental mode itself.[44]

Shklovsky's essay thus emphasizes a particular aspect of the sentimental dynamic, drawing out the parodic tendency within the Sternean corpus and surfacing it as a privileged aspect of sentimental form. To be sure, the regime of sentimentality that Sterne forges and Shklovsky explores is almost obsessively invested in both convention and disruption.[45] Shklovsky's intervention is to understand the sentimental as a fundamentally parodic form, a move that makes sense when we consider that parody itself relies on a doubled structure, necessitating the existence of a prior text or cultural form upon which to draw. Its mode of operation is imitation with variance, a dynamic in which an inherent tension between sameness and difference is embedded: after all, a deft negotiation of (dis)similarity is necessary for parody to be legible as such. But the distinctive quality separating parody from, say, mimicry, is the abiding sense of ironic inversion, contingent on a sense of self-awareness. The author of parody, that is, remains necessarily aware not only of the conventions upon which they draw, but of their own intentional act of creative distortion (an awareness that must extend to the reader in order for the parody to be successful). Sterne's noted contribution is to continually make visible the relation between the conventional form and the parodic one, leveraging the divergence between the two to comedic effect. This is the rationale behind Shklovsky's assertion that the very content of *Tristram Shandy* is constituted by "consciousness of form through its violation" (*osoznanie formy putem narusheniia ee).*[46] To view Sterne's "laying bare" of these maneuvers as the energizing force behind the novel is to place self-consciousness at the heart of his sentimental endeavor.

Going through Schiller's definition helps us see that Sterne's structure of sentimentalism is exemplary, in multiple senses of the word. *Tristram Shandy* stands as the novel *par excellence* for Shklovsky—he famously remarked that "*Tristram Shandy* is the most typical novel in world literature"—but it also accords with a regime of sentiment that foregrounds the reflexive dynamism

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[42] Shklovsky's example of the latter is drawn from chapter 5 of Vol V of *Tristram Shandy,* when Tristram "leaves" his mother crouched in a hallway eavesdropping, only to forget about her. He remembers her briefly in chapter 11, but she does not actually move again until chapter 13.

[43] This is true not only in Russia, but throughout much of Europe: shortly after Sterne's death, a proliferation of "sentimental journeys"—including sequels, pastiches, and outright imitations—emerged in Britain, France, and Germany. See James Chandler's *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013), 151-2, and Tosi's "Sentimental Irony," 267.

[44] Eccles, "Sentimentalism and Formalism," 530.

[45] In understanding sentimentalism as a form with an ironic dual structure, I am drawing on Eccles, Adela Pinch, and James Chandler, who all highlight sentimentalism's reflexive confrontation with the conventional. See Eccles, "Formalism and Sentimentalism"; Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996); and Chandler, "The Novelty of Laurence Sterne" in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Vol 2: English and British Fiction 1750-1820,* ed. Peter Garside and Karen O'Brien (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015).

[46] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 149; *O Teorii Prozy*, 180.

of encounter.[47] While the earliest manifestations of the sentimental (notable in someone like Richardson) were not necessarily self-conscious—sentiment was often felt as a force of compulsion, over which one had no control—over the course of its development, catalyzed by Sterne's provocations, affective self-awareness emerges as a privileged piece of the narrative mode. Even while sentiment may be compelled on the one hand, it also comes to play a pivotal role in textual mediation on the other. Crucially, it is parody that illuminates these forces of compulsion and mediation, and the distancing effect consequently produced. Ultimately, this self-consciousness constitutes the grounds of narrative difficulty that, to return to Shklovsky's concern with perception, precipitates estrangement. As such, though he derides sentimentalism's affectively charged content, he privileges its form as the mode that best speaks to the unique capacity of the novel to estrange. His theory of the novel as parody is more precisely a theory of the *sentimental* novel as parody: Sterne's sentimentalism achieves the estranged perception that forestalls recognition as it renews attention to the content within.

This, then, is the logic behind the title of Shklovsky's own "sentimental journey," a phrase that gestures to Sterne's specific text as it also evokes the long lineage of "journeys" in its wake (the lack of definite and indefinite articles in Russian contributes to this ambiguity: though the title is typically translated *A Sentimental Journey,* it could technically just as well be *The Sentimental Journey*).[48] As I noted at the outset of this chapter, Shklovsky was invested not only in the theorization of estrangement, but in its actual performance: he is known for quipping that he was both a fish and an ichthyologist.[49] His memoir's fragmentary exploration of the daily minutiae of life amidst catastrophic conditions provides an opportunity to consider how his theory of estranged form is turned on the experience of history. To return to the questions animating the opening of this chapter, the choice of Sterne as a formal interlocutor allows Shklovsky to tap into the relational reflexivity subtending the discourse of sentimentalism, an orientation that is inherently estranging: to be made aware of one's own perception is, after all, much the goal of *ostranenie*.

In what follows, I take *A Sentimental Journey* as a case study for exploring how revolutionary crisis is illuminated—that is, made available to perception—through the parodic form of the sentimental. If estrangement offers a renewed vision of an ossified object or idea, one which has ceased to elicit our emotional or perceptual responses, then the memoir asks what it might mean to see, not merely to "recognize," the collapse of the imperial regime and the formation of a newly codified socio-political order. For Shklovsky, the experience of revolution cannot submit to direct description: this is the sense behind the proclamation that he fell into the hole blown open by the October revolution, and thus missed the main event. Rather, it is the dissociative logic of his narration that makes available the event that cannot otherwise be perceived, as it makes visible the absence of causal relations. In the course of moving from the initial theory of *ostranenie* to its praxis, then, we shift from feeling objects to perceiving revolution.

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[47] *Theory of Prose,* 170. «Тристрам Шевди» самый типичный роман всемирной литературы.» *O Teorii Prozy,* 204.

[48] Svetlana Boym in fact refers to Shklovsky's memoir as *The Sentimental Journey,* even as she uses the standard Sheldon translation that employs the indefinite article. "Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky." *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (1996): 511-530.

[49] Cited in Alexandra Berlina, "Translator's Introduction," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 42.

II. "Novel" Perception in *A Sentimental Journey*

Detail and Digression

A Sentimental Journey comprises Shklovsky's account of the last years of World War I, the 1917 revolutions, and the ensuing civil war; the first half, entitled "Revolution and the Front" ("*Revoliutsiia i Front*") was composed in Petrograd during the summer of 1919. The second, "Writing Desk" ("*Pis'mennyi stol*"), was penned over several weeks in May 1922, while he was living in exile in Berlin to escape from Bolshevik persecution, as members of the Socialist Revolutionaries were being rounded up and arrested. The memoir is an astonishingly mobile one, tracing not only his movement to and from broader geographical and metropolitan regions—Persia, Galicia, Ukraine, Moscow, Petrograd—but in and out of apartments, houses, military camps, and train stations in those territories. His peripatetic tendencies are matched by the frenetic flow of the narration, which reshuffles events achronologically and bears the overwhelming impression of a vast and arbitrary natural disaster spiraling out of control. As he circulates throughout the lands of the collapsing empire, his aesthetic impulse to narrate collides with the exigencies of revolution: lack of paper, food, heat, and shelter. "The fabric of the country had deteriorated," he declares as he wearily debates with the members of the War Ministry regarding Bolshevik resistance late in 1917.[50] The memoir's striking formal qualities, including flagrant digressions and repeated lacunae, reveal a deep ambivalence about the position of the writing, revolutionary subject: one who can neither fully locate his position in the shifting landscape of political fervor, nor fully divest himself of its violent consequences. The dissonance between his desire to record and his aversion to explanatory mechanisms results in a tersely dispassionate style that privileges disjointed anecdotes at the expense of cohesion. Ostensibly abandoning the titular claim's affective orientation, Shklovsky eschews ruminative reflections, and attempts instead to provide a matter-of-fact catalog of details.

Indeed, the reader would be forgiven if, upon first picking up the memoir, they were "overwhelmed by a sense of chaos" in the manner Shklovsky describes first experiencing Sterne. The level and volume of detail is striking: the first half in particular is devoted to the February Revolution and Russia's contentious withdrawal from the First World War, and Shklovsky's focus privileges the continuous movements of troops to and from the capital, the re-shuffling of military regiments, and the campaign in northern Iran.[51] What is striking about this chronology is its simultaneous attention to detailed descriptions of actions alongside a notable lack of any expository apparatus—in fact, it would not be much of a stretch to say that a majority of part one is *only* detail. Numerous pages are devoted to describing the journey of Shklovsky's armored car regiment to reach the offensive lines in Ukraine, while a generous portion of the section entitled "Persia" comprises just the arduous journey itself to join the Russian troops. These apparent excursuses include a

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[50] Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 73. «Ткани страны переродились.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 80. The verb «переродиться» is more literally translated "to be reborn," while «ткань» also means tissue. The phrase then connotes something more ambiguous—and dynamic—than pure deterioration, evoking the regeneration of a living organism's tissue.

[51] Following the February Revolution and the installment of the provisional government, Russia's continued participation in the war became a matter of exigent concern, with the Bolsheviks demanding immediate end, the Constitutional Democrats favoring continuation, and the Socialist Revolutionaries (Shklovsky's own party) split between those favoring peace "without annexations and reparations" and those preferring strategic continuation. After months of negotiations, the Bolsheviks finally withdrew Soviet Russia from the war in March 1918 with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

dizzying array of place names and regimental titles, descriptions of small Iranian towns, and terse accounts of the complex conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, such as the Kurds, Aissors, Persians, and Armenians. His sojourn in Persia, a chaotic quagmire marked by ancient enmities, reprisals, and collapsed diplomacy, proves short-lived: the Russian troops withdraw at the end of 1917, and it is to this outward journey that the rest of the section is dedicated. The result is a chronicle of perpetual movement, one preoccupied with the ever-shifting spatial coordinates of people, whether military regiments or civilian populations. This instability makes apparent the lack of central narrative core or linear axis around which organized movement happens: here, movement is arbitrary, difficult, and circuitous.

Certainly the textual emphasis on travel, which privileges attention to the particularities of conveyance alongside accounts of landscapes and villages, accords with the tradition of the travelogue more generally, and the sentimental travelogue and picaresque in particular. In the case of the latter, there were ample Russian precursors from the late eighteenth century that followed in the footsteps of Sterne's sentimental journey, and Shklovsky's text joins this long line of peripatetic works. Prototypes like Alexander Radishchev's *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (*Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu*, 1790) and Nikolai Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveller* (*Pis'ma russkogo puteshestvennika*, 1791–92) established a Russian model of sentimental, novelistic experimentation that follows the exploits of a perceptive gentleman protagonist observing social and political ills (in the case of Radishchev) or liaising with artists and intellectuals across Europe (in the case of Karamzin). Both travelogues, in line with Sterne's exemplar, comprise a meandering trip unfolding through a digressive structure. Radischev's novel, like *A Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy*, integrates interpolated narratives and found manuscripts, while Karamzin reimagines Sternean exploits across Western European cities from the perspective of an aristocratic Russian man of letters (occasionally even retracing the steps of Yorick's pilgrimages).[52] Notably, these texts maintain an organizing configuration legible as a purposeful journey from one destination to the next, motivated by a clear impetus, whether for political enlightenment or intellectual enrichment. This method of emplotment was convenient, allowing for a justifiable episodic configuration that obviated the need for complicated narratives at a time when the popularity of the novel form was growing. Even if relatively digressive, the travelogue nevertheless offered an opportunity to record exigent social conditions and participate in a developing cultural form. As Neil Stewart attests in his discussion of the relative popularity of *A Sentimental Journey* over *Tristram Shandy* in late-eighteenth century Russia, the travelogue "suited the literary need of the day: it supplied writers with a ready-made solution to the problem of plotting."[53]

Yet though Shklovsky adopts the label of the "sentimental journey," his memoir in fact bears closer formal resemblance to *Tristram Shandy* in many regards, including the extremity of its digressive plotting, interruptions, and temporal displacements. While the travelogue provides a general thematic model upon which to draw—one suited to the forced mobility of wartime and revolution—Shklovsky's version lacks the organizing schema of an intentional journey. His orientation is one of bewilderment as he is shuffled from one locale to the next: the detailed cataloguing of his excursuses and reflections themselves comprise the entirety of the text. Much in the way that Tristram famously struggles to "begin from the beginning" (his birth does not come until Volume IV), leading him down a path of detailed asides and tangential discussions, Shklovsky's journey refuses to follow a coherent linear plot. His narration is not so much *violated* by interruptions

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[52] Neil Stewart, "From Imperial Court to Peasant's Cot: Sterne in Russia," in *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe,* ed. Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 130-1.

[53] Stewart, "Sterne in Russia," 136.

and digressions as *constituted* by them. A digression necessitates a central narrative of some kind: it must, after all, deviate from something. This condition is visually evident in Tristram's oft-cited drawings of his own narration, in which he traces out five squiggly lines to demonstrate his progression through the plot thus far (see fig. 1). While the sketches may be curvilinear, they still proceed along a discernible if circuitous path as Tristram attempts to relate the "history of himself." Such is not the case for Shklovsky's memoir, which does not pretend to offer a plot from which to deviate. In its lack of central narrative momentum, the revolutionary journey takes the Sternean digressive schema to its extreme.

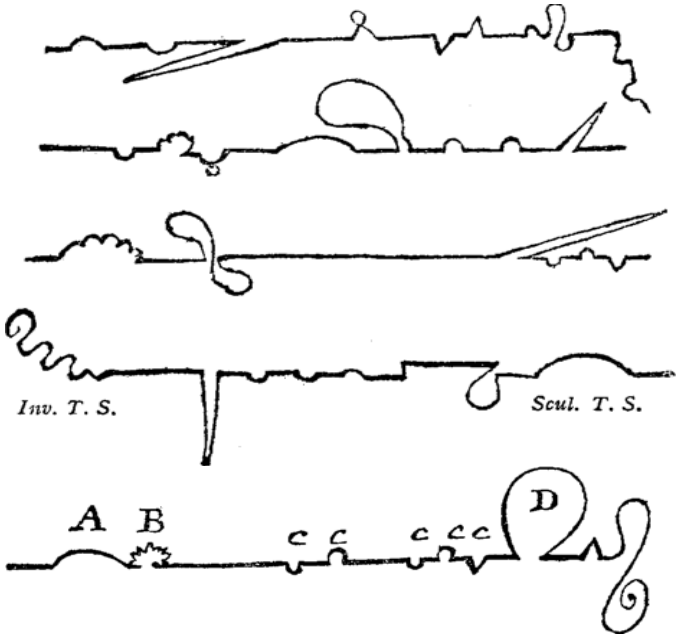


Figure 1. Tristram's lines of narrative from Vol VI of *Tristram Shandy* (from the Project Gutenberg digitized first edition, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39270/39270-h/39270-h.htm, 347.)

Shklovsky thus takes the conceit of the sentimental travelogue, catalyzed by Sterne and subsequently incorporated into the Russian literary tradition, and combines it with the characteristic interruptions of *Tristram Shandy* with which he remains intensely preoccupied in *Theory of Prose*. The result is less a singular journey characterized by a coherent motive, and more aptly a set of reflections joined loosely together under the rubric of revolutionary documentation. In effect, the structure offers an accretion of numerous encounters without a framing narrative or interpretive coherence. The resulting format follows what, in essence, is a pattern of "thing after thing": one thing happens, then another, then another, in stark paratactical style. At a superficial level, this is the basic model of a documentarian impulse, providing a record of events without a network of associations through which to understand them. Details are privileged over broader narrative schemes, psychological analyses, or developmental trajectories.

By relying on this form, Shklovsky is in fact an early participant in what was to become a popular mode of writing in Soviet avant-garde circles of the later 1920s. Amidst the documentary tendencies that proliferated after the Bolshevik revolution, the so-called "factography" movement (*literatura fakta)* emerged amongst the artists and writers of the journal *Novyi LEF*, a rise often considered to be a response to material, ideological, and aesthetic concerns in the post-Civil War period (this is a movement to which we will return in greater detail in chapter four, via Isaac Babel's distorted version that I term the "factographic grotesque"). Victor Erlich, for instance, attributes the notable influx of interest in documentarian concerns to the material privations of the time: the

scarcity of resources (acute paper shortages plagued the Soviet Union until the 30s) and general ongoing tumult of events was not conducive to the writing of longer narrative fiction, instead encouraging "straight reporting."[54] The general expansion of the Soviet press in the 20s and 30s, which resulted in a widening of circulation networks despite cyclical shortages, also contributed to the cultural and political importance of newspapers.[55] For a variety of tangible historical reasons then, this period saw burgeoning curiosity in news reporting and journals, notably on behalf of leftist intellectuals and artists. Alongside the increasing popularity of the newspaper as means of communication and propaganda, adjacent forms of prose also flourished, including "semi-journalistic genres, such as reportage and the feuilleton or feuilleton-like short story."[56] Indeed, the overwhelming interest in chronicling reality amongst a wide array of cultural producers leads Elizabeth Papazian to diagnose a pervasive "documentary impulse" in early Soviet culture.[57]

These methods were also, however, responding to exigent aesthetic questions regarding the role of language in the artistic construction of a new era. The figures associated with the Left Front of Arts (*Levyi Front Iskusstv,* or *LEF*) and later *Novyi LEF,* an eclectic association of ultrarevolutionary and avant-garde writers, critics, photographers, and designers, hailed the form of the newspaper as the future of artistic production.[58] Led by Vladimir Mayakovsky, the group embraced "factography" as a means of "integrating literature with life," privileging the "fact" as the primary unit of literary composition.[59] The assumption, made to varying degrees by *LEF* and *Novyi LEF* members, is that a stripped-down cataloging of elemental factual material, sans commentary and descriptive flourish, is the most appropriate means of aesthetically relating to the modernizing and rapidly industrializing world of the early Soviet Union. Yet rather than passive reflection, the factographic method was envisioned as an explicitly *creative* endeavor, one that participated in the production of the Soviet state through establishing "facts" and thus re-envisioning the future of aesthetics. By abandoning realist literary conventions—including ideas of literary subjectivity—seen to be outmoded and bourgeois, the proponents of such techniques saw themselves as redefining representational systems commensurate with the task of socialist production.[60]

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[54] Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism*: *History—Doctrine* (London: Mouton, 1965), 120.

[55] For a thorough account of Soviet press distribution, including cycles of inflated circulation and shortages, see Matthew Lenoe's "NEP Newspapers and the Origins of Soviet Information Rationing," *The Russian Review* 62, no. 4 (2003).

[56] Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, 120.

[57] Papazian traces the development of documentary approaches in the years 1921-1934, which she understands to be crucial to the adoption and evolution of Socialist Realism. *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).

[58] Shklovsky, along with several other Formalists, contributed a handful of essays to the collective's journal, also called *LEF,* which ran from 1923 to 1925 (later becoming *Novyi LEF* from 1927 to 1928, which Mayakovsky cheekily proclaimed was to the "left of *LEF*").

[59] Erlich, *Russian Formalism,* 121. Nikolai Chuzhak, one of *LEF*'s chief proponents of "factography," collected a series of such "factographic" works in a volume entitled *Literature of Fact (Literatura Fakta),* published in 1929. Richard Sherwood, "Translation from *Lef* with an Introduction," *Screen* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1971), 32. Ben Brewster's accompanying introduction to the essays from *Novyi LEF* notes, albeit in passing, that Shklovsky's memoir was upheld as a formative example of such "literature of fact." Brewster, "*Novyi Lef* with an Introduction," *Screen* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1971), 60.

[60] Devin Fore understands the *LEF*'s preoccupation with facts as part of a broader desire to transform literature into a "concrete force of production" in accordance with Marx. Emphasizing the "interventionist" aims of factography, he asserts that contrary to merely "fetishizing facts" (as opponents claimed), it constituted an active attempt to establish new linguistic parameters

At work here—both in factography as well as in the broader documentarian approach—is an underlying empiricist epistemology, resonant with Shklovsky's earlier theoretical ruminations. Recall that "Art as Device" privileges the immediacy and directness of primary impressions, even if textually mediated, outside of any associative context. This is the empiricist ideal upon which estrangement is premised; one of its stated aims is to restore the radically unqualified power of an object by removing it from the sphere of automatization. At a fundamental level then, both the documentary and estranging impulses derive their force from observations, and both sustain an attention to basic units of detail comprising sensory data (a "fact" or an "idea"). Of course, the two methods differ radically in their intentions: the documentary purportedly aims for objectivity, a chronicle of the state of things independent of belief or perspectival bias. Estrangement harbors no such orientation to ostensible truth or objectivity, and in fact perspective is precisely its preoccupation, insofar as it can be modified. But these differences occlude a critical similarity arising from their shared empirical sensibility. In their elevation of empirical data, both documentation and *ostranenie* eschew any attempt to integrate impressions or observations within a clear connecting framework. They avoid coherent and sustained exposition, which would impose an interpretive context, and thus undermine a factual account (the concern of the documentary or factographic text) while also inviting habitual and automatic patterns of thinking (the bane of Shklovskian formalism). And so while their aims and assumptions diverge, these two tendencies prioritize the presentation of discrete, often disjointed details. Seen in this light, the documentary inclination is ideally suited as a medium for engaging estranged perception. Shklovsky's striking paratactical style is thus legible within the contemporaneous regime of reportage, even as it remains ambivalent about any attempt to capture an impartial view of history. Instead, his form foregrounds the primacy of apprehension without the associationism of interpretation. In the "thing after thing" paradigm of the travelogue and factographic montage, singular "things"—events, incidents, encounters, or experiences—do not possess a clear dependency on each other; they are sequential but not necessarily connected. What these bits of data lack, in short, is relationality, and it is to this crucial omission that we now turn.

Estranged Relations; or, Breaking the Humean Habit

To be clear, Shklovsky was neither an explicit proponent of the factographic method, nor an unequivocal enthusiast of a documentarian approach, though he was a contributor to *LEF* and closely associated with several of its members. True to his reputation as an eclectic and often inconsistent thinker resistant to explicit theorization, his incorporation of reportage is partial and fraught. *A Sentimental Journey* displays a lingering tension between the desire for a kind of accuracy—at least in the relating of his own experiences—and the understanding that empirical accounting typically strives for a kind of verifiable truth, a concept rendered largely inoperable within the memoir (as we will see in chapter four, this very distinction between "fact" and "truth" assumes crucial importance in the hands of Babel). Knowledge may be dependent on sensory experience in the empiricist paradigm, but synthesizing isolated sense impressions into coherently associated ideas is a separate matter, and one of central importance to the memoir and its estranging potential. At the crux of the issue lies the problem of relationality (or associationism), a consideration of which necessitates a return to the Humean model of empiricism at work in Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* essays.

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appropriate to the experience of socialism and advanced industrialism. "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography," *October* 118 (2006), 100-3.

Recall that for Hume, impressions are fundamentally atomic: they stand independent of each other, with no immanent or logical connections amongst them. This results in the theory of mind by which humans are "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."[61] Yet though we may all constitute monadic, impressionistic bundles of sensations, we are obviously able to organize our thoughts in a coherent manner, enabling us to make inferences about temporality and causality and so to function in our environments. This is because the mind naturally becomes accustomed to associating certain impressions based on resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect, with the latter processes playing by far the most significant role. Because the operations of cause and effect are based on our observations of the external world—they are, empirically speaking, wholly experientially derived—the result is that reason has no place in telling us what will result from a particular occurrence. Experience thus provides us with what Hume calls custom or habit, the connecting fabric between cause and effect, or between one action or "operation" and the next. So the idea that the sun will continue to rise, one of Hume's famous examples, is wholly a matter of supposition based on past experience. The same is true of, say, the belief that a particular consequence (like famine, resource scarcity, or ethnic violence) will arise from "operations" like withdrawing from occupied Persia, reaching an armistice with the Central Powers, or instituting nationalist policies, to take several more evidently apposite examples. In essence, we assume that the future will resemble the past because our minds are simply accustomed to believing in the presence of causal reasoning. But—and this is a crucial point—none of this is to say that habit is merely illusory or spurious: just because habit is fabricated does not mean it is not a potent force in the functioning of the mind and the organization of lived experience. To the contrary, Hume declares that custom is the "great guide of human life."[62] It is what provides us with knowledge sufficient to enable our participation in the world, as without it we would be trapped in our impressionistic interiority, "entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to the memory and senses."[63] Custom, or habit, allows us to make meaningful, productive decisions based on our observations; it is ultimately what "renders our experience useful to us."[64]

Here is where things begin to break down for Shklovsky. While his memoir retains an interest in impressions, Humean habit has been disrupted, and the associative component of empiricist understanding is largely absent. The customary propensity of cause and effect ceases to provide a compelling blueprint: there is simply no guarantee that the future will resemble the past. Without robust associative structures, which offer a sense of the whys and hows of occurrences, as well as the relationships between perceptions, we are left with a chaotic, loose, and unconnected assemblage of impressions. Within such a paradigm, Shklovsky evinces a resolute skepticism about the very possibility of knowledge, reiterating a general sense of bewilderment: "And as for me, I can't make any sense out of all the strange things I've seen in Russia" he notes in the midst of questioning the purpose of his narrative enterprise.[65] Several pages later he repeats simply, "I didn't

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[61] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* Book I, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), IV, §VI, 252.

[62] Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, §V, I, 44.

[63] Ibid., 45.

[64] Ibid., 44. Hume appears to use both "custom" and "habit" virtually interchangeably, though habit tends to connote what an individual has derived from their personal experience, while custom might also include that which one has derived from experience more generally (such as the historical past, the experience of other people, etc.).

[65] *A Sentimental Journey,* 184. «И вот я не умею ни слить, ни связать все то странное, что я видел в России.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 179.

understand Russia."[66] The words he uses in the Russian notably foreground an inability to connect: he cannot "merge (*slit'*) or tie together (*sviazat'*)" the strange things he has witnessed, a failure that throws him definitively into the realm of dissociation. If external impressions fail to connect in any meaningful way, then for matters of truth we are reduced to operations of thought with no experiential necessity. Such is the *a priori* reasoning which empiricists like Hume relegate to a more modest area of inquiry—namely, the field of mathematics.[67] And it is precisely this category to which Shklovsky turns for the assurance of certainty:

> During the evenings, I taught the soldiers fractions.
> All over Russia, fronts were being opened. The Poles were advancing and my heart ached as it aches now.
> And in the midst of all this misery, which I didn't understand, in the midst of the shells falling from the sky, as they fell one day along the Dnieper into a crowd of swimmers, it's very reassuring to say calmly:
> "The larger the numerator, the larger the fraction, because that means there are more parts. The larger the denominator, the smaller the fraction, because that means it's more finely sliced."
> That's a sure thing.
> It's the only sure thing I know.[68]

In this piecemeal narration of his time in the Red Army fighting the White Guard in Ukraine, the misery and chaos of experience comprise the site of doubt, while the only secure source of knowledge is arithmetic.[69] This is not to say that external perceptions are any less potent in their ability to impart the felt details of experience, but rather that they simply cannot provide the basis of certain knowledge. The idea of "truth" remains entirely divorced from the realm of experience and worldly relations.

Shklovsky, in short, harbors a skepticism about the epistemic potential of impressions, at least in instances during which custom and habit have been suspended. As he relates the things he

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[66] *A Sentimental Journey*, 207. «Не понимал России.» *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol II, 201.

[67] While Hume's concern lies overwhelmingly with "matters of fact," or propositions discovered by empirical observation, recall the other category of reasoning that he terms "relations of ideas." The latter propositions are grasped solely through intuition, known in philosophical terms as analytic *a priori* statements. "Relations of ideas … are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain." Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* §IV, I, 25.

[68] *A Sentimental Journey,* 211. «По вечерам занимался с солдатами дробями./По России шли фронты, и наступали поляки, и сердце мое ныло, как ноет сейчас./ И среди всей этой не понятой мною тоски, среди снарядов, которые падают с неба, как упали они однажды в Днепр в толпу купающихся, очень хорошо спокойно сказать:/ «Чем больше числитель, тем величина дроби больше, потому что, значит, больше частей; чем больше знаменатель, тем величина дроби меньше, потому что, значит, нарезано мельче.»/ Вот это бесспорно./ А больше я ничего бесспорного не знаю.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 204.

[69] This moment anticipates a later scene from the second volume of Ford Madox Ford's war tetralogy, *Parade's End* (1924-28), in which the protagonist Christopher Tietjens stages a sonnet contest with a fellow officer in the trenches of the Western front. Both instances imagine the reconfiguration of war into an orderly rhythm, foregrounding the palliative power of quantitative activity.

sees, he continually interrupts himself with interjections reminding us of the isolated and subjective nature of sensory data. These asides prevent immersion in a flow of narrative in two ways: first, they foreground the self-reflexive act of recollection by insisting that the text is a constructed object. In one instance, after impassively noting his brother's execution, he ends by declaring "May 20, 1922. / I continue writing."[70] There are many such moments throughout the memoir in which Shklovsky marks the process of composition, effectively inserting the writing subject into the unfolding text-being-written: "I'm writing on July 22, 1919"; "And now it's July 30, 1919, and I'm writing while on guard with a rifle between my legs."[71] These gestures evoke the self-conscious production visible in the Sternean regime of sentimentality, by which both the author's and the reader's relationship to the text is foregrounded. They are also, notably, *drained* of sentiment in terms of its emotional force, in line with Shklovsky's avowed preoccupation with the mechanics of the sentimental over its thematics.

Second, by calling attention to the event of writing, his interruptions also generate friction between the act of observing and the act of recording. Shklovsky is ever careful to not smooth over the uneven terrain of his thoughts, nor to provide the kind of expository connective tissue—the cause and effect—that might ease the passage from one "thing" to the next. In fact, a roughly textured jumble of perceptions is precisely what Hume surmises would happen if a "fully developed" person was to somehow experience the world for the first time. In such a case, the absence of prior experience strips away one's capacity to grasp how things operate:

> Suppose a person, though endowed with the strongest faculties of reason and reflection, to be brought on a sudden into this world; he would, indeed, immediately observe a continual succession of objects, and one event following another; but he would not be able to discover anything farther. He would not, at first, by any reasoning, be able to reach the idea of cause and effect.[72]

This description is strikingly resonant with Shklovsky's telling of revolution, which obstructs the "habit" that makes cause and effect legible, and so results in a succession of discrete impressions. But of course, Shklovsky *insists* on imparting details and digressive anecdotes, inviting us to consider exactly what their presence effects in the memoir. If impressions themselves cannot provide knowledge *per se*, what then do they offer?

The lingering presence of this question is one of the central differences between Shklovsky's "journey" and the travelogues and documentary literature that came before and after (beyond, of course, the evident changes in landscape and circumstance). It is precisely his attitude of ambivalence, self-reflexivity, and epistemic doubt that moves the memoir beyond the documentarian to the sentimental, combining both modes into a peripatetic mélange of narrative play. He is careful to remain self-conscious and deliberate in his chronicling, often making a performance of eschewing commentary as he describes his own methods. In the language of Hume, Shklovsky is essentially forced to experience the world for the first time: everything to which he has been "accustomed" has disintegrated. While the dissociative tendency becomes more exaggerated as the memoir proceeds, his position is evident from the outset. Early in the first section "Revolution and the Front," he states "I don't want to be a critic of events: I only want to leave material for the critics. I'm telling

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[70] *A Sentimental Journey,* 148. «20 мая 1922 года. / Продолжаю писать.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 146.

[71] *A Sentimental Journey,* 74, 80. «Пишу 22 июля 1919 года … А сейчас пишу это 30 июля 1919 года, на карауле, с винтовкой, поставленной между ног.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 81, 85.

[72] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §V, I, 42.

about events and making of myself a case study for posterity."[73] This statement is one of many similar asides throughout the memoir, which demonstrate the continual negotiation between his conflicting commitments as participant and observer: he is both telling and being told, writing and being written (in the Russian, literally "making himself ready," *prigotovliaiu iz sebia,* for posterity). The spectatorial orientation of such a statement echoes his proclamation noted at the chapter's outset about being a falling stone (*padaiushchii kamen'*), which he figures as a purely observational position.[74] In ostensibly shunning exposition—refusing to be, that is, a "critic" of events—he affirms his commitment to the situational details by attempting to grasp these phenomena in the necessary absence of a critical framework that explains, judges, or connects. What is most "revolutionary" about these revolutionary details is precisely the fact that they are encountered as scattered impressions lacking proper association.

In practice, however, the line between explanation and "straight reporting" is not always so clearly drawn. Even as he endeavors to minimize contextual clarification, he occasionally attempts to offer some broader perspective on the unfolding of events—in effect, to create associations. After a piecemeal account of the catastrophic campaign on Russia's southwestern front—waged under the interim rule of the Provisional Government in the months before the Bolshevik revolution—he professes a desire to convey an ostensibly more coherent account of the happenings on the front. Noting that "writing about war is very difficult" and that most previous attempts have fallen short of plausibility, he appears to commence a new approach: "So I will speak. I will try to relate how I understand everything that happened."[75] The seemingly explicit proclamation promises to shift to a more unified and less granular perspective ("I'll stop talking about myself for a while and tell about the whole front," he notes in a preceding paragraph).[76] Further, his proposed undertaking implicitly suggests that the foregoing material does not, in fact, constitute "everything that happened" (*vse chto proizoshlo*), though the question of how one might *actually* relate the things that happened remains undetermined. What follows is a series of cryptic statements that shift the focus from the painfully slow evacuation of the Ukrainian front to allusive descriptions of Russia, the Bolsheviks, and revolution. It is the Allies, he glibly declares, who "blew up Russia," and it is Russia itself that "invented the Bolsheviks as a motivation for desertion and plunder."[77] One of his concluding metaphors turns upon the idea that "world revolution" (*vsemirnaia revoliutsiia*) is a doorbell that awakens a sleeping man reluctant to get out of bed. This material—the apparent result of his

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[73] *A Sentimental Journey,* 24. «Я не хочу быть критиком событий, я хочу дать только немного материала для критика. Я рассказываю о событиях и приготовляю из себя для потомства препарат.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 35.

[74] Shklovsky at one point augments this metaphor by adding that he is a stone that "falls and can, at the same time, light a lantern to observe its own course," a description that exalts the power of observation even in the absence of agential will. *A Sentimental Journey,* 133. «Камень, который падает и может в то же время зажечь фонарь, чтобы наблюдать свой путь.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 133.

[75] *A Sentimental Journey,* 59. «Про войну написать очень трудно … Но буду говорить. Попробую рассказать, как я понял все, что произошло.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 68.

[76] *A Sentimental Journey,* 59. «Теперь я бросаю на время говорить про себя и скажу о всем фронте.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 67.

[77] *A Sentimental Journey,* 60. «Союзники … взорвали Россию.»; «Россия придумала большевиков как сон, как мотивировку бегства и расхищения.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 68. It is worth noting that, in line with his propensity for contradiction, the idea that the Bolsheviks were invented is directly refuted by a statement in the latter half of the memoir, where he states that they "weren't invented—they were discovered." 165.

attempt to communicate the war in broader, more global terms—quickly runs its course and abruptly ends the section after a few paragraphs. While Shklovsky's penchant for irreverent quips might initially suggest the shift to be a short-lived whim, his oft-repeated commitment to narrating the wars and revolutions nevertheless encourages us to take seriously his promise to convey "everything that happened." Doing so reveals that the movement from specificity to generality—and from concretion to abstraction—is a crucial index of the memoir's grasp on relationality.

Materiality and Abstraction

There is, in fact, a progressively extreme tendency toward more general pronouncements over the course of the memoir's two halves; what appears as a latent phenomenon emerges in full abstract force in the second half. In part one, alongside the details on committees, offensives, and regimental positionings, runs a series of dissonant interjections about history and experience. Take one instance from the section on Persia, in which an abrupt shift in discursive register intrudes amidst an otherwise steady stream of descriptive prose. Shklovsky has just spent several pages detailing the violent clashes between ethnic groups in Russian-occupied northern Iran, enumerating the nature of religious, linguistic, and territorial conflicts amongst at least a half-dozen different ethnic factions. Suddenly he declares: "In the geographical entity known as Russia live all kinds of people."[78] His assertion is striking not for its actual propositional content (which is unquestionably if banally true), but rather for the level at which it operates. The statement swiftly enacts a categorical shift from the hyper-specific to the hyper-general, from the contextually rich details of cultural groups originating in Turkey and Persia to the broadest appellation possible, "people" (*liudi).* Likewise, Russia itself features not as a nation, state, or erstwhile empire, but as a similarly sweeping category, a "geographical entity" (*geograficheskoe edinstvo)* apprehended only through custom: the qualifier "known as" (*nazyvaemaia*) reveals the habituated aspect behind the name itself. After this singular interjection, the prose then returns to its former detailed register devoted to cataloging tribal conflict. It is a movement from the micro to the macro and back again, and one that will become a habitual dynamic, whose frequency and extremity builds progressively over the course of the text. In its jarring leap from focused detail—nominal and numerical specificity, including the names, places, and numbers of national groups, military leaders, and committees—to broad abstractions, the fluctuation demonstrates the strangeness of relationality in the memoir, by which dissociation becomes the operative dynamic.

This relationality is marked most significantly by a lack of associative reasoning, as the mediating framework connecting discrete and conceptually disparate phenomena ceases to reliably function. This is an absence that works on two levels: the first, and most obvious, is found in the paratactical structure that rebuffs the subordinating structure of causality. It is the standard Shklovskian one-sentence paragraph—visible on virtually every page—that is most arresting when it laconically turns to atrocity. Here is the telling of his brother's death at the hands of the Bolsheviks:

> And you and I are people. So I'm writing what kind of people we were.
> They killed my brother after the killing of Uritsky.
> They shot him on the firing range at Okhta.
> The soldiers of his own regiment shot him. The officer who killed him told me… My brother was outwardly calm. He died valiantly.
> His name was Nikolai. He was twenty-seven years old.

[78] *A Sentimental Journey,* 88. «В географическом единстве, называемом Россией, живут разные люди.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 93.

> The worst thing about being shot is that they take off the dead man's boots and jacket—that is, they make him take them off before he's killed.[79]

His short, declarative sentences possess minimal descriptive flourish, a terseness that reflects Nikolai's ostensible calm, which itself accords with Shklovsky's own composure in the face of astonishing cruelty. Without causal conjunctions, the ligaments of hypotactical constructions, we move from one thought to the next with a staccato rapidity. Crucially, there is no hierarchical organization: all details are afforded equal importance in such paratactical arrangements. So the elements of Nikolai's death (the time and location, his name and age, the executors and means of execution) are presented side-by-side, their particular order of no critical importance to the telling itself. The heavy use of passive voice in Russian (somewhat elided in the English translation), deemphasizes the actor(s) responsible for the event, while the pacing and flow frustrate a coherent picture of the overall situation beyond the most cursory facts—neglecting, for instance, to even gesture at the complex, haphazard network of ideological reasons for Nikolai's execution. Such explanatory material would, of course, constitute the kind of exposition that Shklovsky assiduously avoids in favor of singular units of detail. In flattening the basic "facts" of the matter into paratactical units, cause and effect are nowhere to be found.

In addition to the syntactic repudiation of causality, categorical dissonance makes visible the dissociation at work in the memoir. It is this second plane of associative absence—that aforementioned disconnection between details and generalities—where the lack of causal structure is most profoundly felt. On the one hand, Shklovsky is preoccupied with the mundane and technical aspects of both military and domestic life; he chronicles occupations, withdrawals, and the ephemera of quotidian existence, or "how we lived" (*kak my zhili).*[80] Yet on the other hand, he remains curiously reliant on sweeping rhetorical gestures that run counter to statements dependent on empirical observations. Such are the cryptic asides mentioned at the outset of this chapter, in which he likens himself to a falling stone, and the Red and White armies to voids. Contrary to strictly sensory perceptions, this discursive register operates at a higher level of abstraction or metaphorical resonance, untethered to perceptual specificity. "Russia" itself becomes a name that defies detailed description, while "revolution" is either a vacuous hole (a void) or an embodied one (a gunshot wound): "If you don't believe that there was a revolution, go and put your hand in the wound. It's wide. The pole was pierced by a three-inch shell."[81] Here is a curious metaphorization of the empiricist epistemology by which sensory data provides the basis of knowledge: one finds evidence of the revolution not in its tangible effects, but rather in the figurative gash left in its wake. If the mark of revolution is an imagined bodily injury—specifically, a cavity characterized by spatial absence—the territory in which it takes place is even less of a presence. Immediately before this proclamation, Shklovsky baldly asserts that "Russia" itself is nonexistent: the Bolsheviks, he gripes, overestimate the strength of nationalism, thinking that "the men loved 'Mother Russia.' But she

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[79] *A Sentimental Journey,* 147-8. «И мы, и вы—люди. Вот я пишу, какие мы были люди./ Брата убили после убийства Урицкого./Его расстреляли на полигоне у Охты./ Расстреливали его солдаты его же полка. Мне рассказал это офицер, который его убивал… Брат был внешне спокоен. Умер он храбро./ Имя его Николай, было ему 27 лет./В расстреле самое страшное, что с убитого снимают сапоги и куртку. То есть заставляют снять, до смерти.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 146.

[80] *A Sentimental Journey*, 164; Sobranie sochinenii, vol II, 161.

[81] *A Sentimental Journey,* 142. «Если вы не верите, что революция была, то пойдите и вложите руку в рану. Она широка, столб пробит трехдюймовым снарядом.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 141.

didn't exist."[82] This is a provocative statement, made more challenging by the categorical ambiguity with which it operates. That is, what exactly is meant by "Russia" if its existence can be questioned? How do we get from the phenomena of military and domestic *byt* (a notoriously difficult-to-translate word, meaning something akin to the customs and habits of everyday life) to the categorical intangibility of a nation? The skepticism with which Shklovsky confronts the abstracted idea of "Russia" in fact constitutes a subtle turn from an empiricist to a nominalist epistemology, which understands universal concepts and abstract objects (such as nations) to be merely labels, solidified through conventions of naming. Here, then, is a movement back from a radical empiricism, sustained by custom or habit, to its implicit understructure, which lies in a version of nominalism skeptical of the ontological status of anything but physical particulars. The tenacious impulse to question the signifying power of names is one that will be explored in further depth in the next chapter, where we see James Joyce work through the nominalist problematic as it adheres in the Irish context. Joyce, that is, confronts a strikingly similar problem, defined by the difficulties in moving from an empirical awareness of particulars to the generation of an organizing concept.

For Shklovsky, the idea of "Russia" is a perennially troublesome concept, one that crops up repeatedly as a thing that is ungraspable, in the process of disintegration, or altogether nonexistent.[83] Its organizing power as a label becomes apparent only as it ceases to function: Shklovsky is thrown into a vivid awareness of "Russia" precisely because, as an idea, it has become uncertain. Directly after the moment above in which he likens the revolution to a gunshot wound, he ponders the state's complete eradication save its political (and frequently shifting) boundaries: "All the same, if nothing's left of Russia but its borders, if it exists only as a spatial concept, if it's totally leveled, I know one thing—there is no guilt and there are no guilty."[84] While his orientation here is one of possibility rather than certainty—*if (esli)* Russia is only a spatial concept—several sentences later he is definitive in the conviction that the material foundations of the country have dissolved. Things cannot return to their former places, he writes, because "the 'places' no longer existed."[85] His statements here foreground the ephemerality of national and political designations, but they also—rather paradoxically, given Shklovsky's repeated avowals that dividing lines are arbitrary—point to the lasting power of such labels. In perhaps the most striking illustration of withdrawal from taking sides, he claims that he cannot remember which faction executed his (other) brother, Evgenii: "Either the Whites or the Reds killed him./ I don't remember which—I really don't remember. But his death was unjust."[86] In their uncertainty and shifting referential content, names such as "Russia" fail to provide useful and definite meaning. In so doing, they mark the absence of a previous conceptual clarity: only through their notable failure to signify coherent entities is it evident that they did, at one point, do so. As Shklovsky signals the loss of what meaning "Mother Russia" (*matushka Rodina,* literally "mother homeland") once offered, he relies on a level of metaphorical abstraction

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[82] *A Sentimental Journey,* 142. «Большевики … думали, что люди любят «матушку Родину.» А ее не было.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 141.

[83] The instability of nationhood as an abstract concept looms over this entire project, and it is an issue to which we will return in subsequent chapters: so Isaac Babel likewise grapples with the idea of "ineffable Russia," while James Joyce and Elizabeth Bowen each linger on the dissolution of shared understanding as the idea of "Ireland" becomes an explicit problem.

[84] *A Sentimental Journey,* 142. "И все же, если от всей России останутся одни рубежи, если станет она понятием только пространственным, если от России не останется ничего, все же я знаю—нет вины, нет виновных.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 141.

[85] *A Sentimental Journey,* 142. «А «местов»-то и не оказалось!» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 142.

[86] *A Sentimental Journey,* 156. «Убили его белые или красные. Не помню, действительно—не помню. Убит был он несправедливо.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 154.

that contrasts with the tangible details of privation otherwise provided. "Russia" thus becomes a generality at categorical odds with the particulars of lived experience occurring in its (erstwhile and variable) territories: such is the latent nominalist suspicion haunting these pronouncements, which emphasize the merely conventional, linguistic basis of an abstraction, while privileging the physical particulars from which we derive such labels.

This is not to say that shifting political borders and territorial designations do not have direct, material consequences, but rather that the idea of "Russia" provides a newly abstract signifying power at a far remove from revolutionary *byt*. Its abstraction is evident in part through the metaphorical turns of phrase upon which Shklovsky relies. The association above, of revolution with a gunshot wound, is but one of several vivid instances in which Russia is likened to an embodied subject. Earlier he wryly notes that "Russia's bones were crooked," a metaphor that imagines dysfunction—imperial, revolutionary, or otherwise, the lack of precision is much to the point—as congenital deformity. He continues by implicating "Russia's habits, her train of thought" in this disfigurement.[87] Multiple levels of abstraction are at work in such a figuration, which posits not only an (literally) ossified national structure, but a national character possessed of both physical and intellectual capacities at once: it is not just Russia, but her very *thoughts* that are afflicted with crooked bones. If this constitutes a rather messy metaphor, it nonetheless provides a dissociation from the surrounding literal violence; these statements come amidst a brief excursus on corporal punishment, leaping from the shooting and flogging of military penalties to the figurative injury of national constitution.

In this jump from the literal to the figurative, an embedded dynamic that occurs again and again to jarring effect, we can see the memoir's dissociative logic at work. Yet even when Shklovsky does not mobilize metaphorical abstractions, the ongoing background hum of historical events offers a similarly hard-to-grasp network of abstractions. What relation do haphazard national policies, massive population displacements, and repeated governmental coups ("All told, I think the Ukraine saw as many as twenty governments," he states while recounting one of his many trips) bear to the details of revolutionary *byt*: starvation, jaundice, hypothermia, etc.?[88] In Humean empiricist terms, how might we determine the causes and effects? Our standard inclination, per Hume, would be to understand one thing (such as famine) as resulting from another (economic disturbances, railway disruptions), even if it is logically unsponsored. This would be an inference arising from what past experience tells us about how such things are typically associated. But Shklovsky rebuffs this kind of causal thinking: syntactically and conceptually, one "thing" is never connected to the next (this is, after all, ultimately Hume's point). Indeed, what is consistently apparent in these examples is an evacuation of a mediating level of detail. We are left with fine-grained details regarding armored cars, the movement of troops, the makeshift heating of frigid apartments, and constant lack of food, contrasted with the broadly abstract pronouncements that defy integration within the rest of the narrative. There is simply no middle discursive register with which to connect the abstract with the material, nor is there a clear sense of causal, chronological movement. If we take Shklovsky's empiricist framework seriously, then we must recognize the dissolution into scattered particulars for what it is: a sign that we are missing the forces of habit and custom that allow things to make sense. While this loss recapitulates the logic of *ostranenie* on the one hand, it also, in this case, shows us something else, perhaps more important. As a simple empirical matter, the force of habit has been

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[87] *A Sentimental Journey,* 66. «У России скривлены кости … Навыки России, походка ее мыслей были им понятны.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 74.

[88] *A Sentimental Journey,* 223. «Всего видала Украина, правительств, я думаю, до 20-ти.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 214.

withdrawn. *This* is what ultimately constitutes revolution, as old notional objects, including the very idea of "Russia," collapse into meaningless names.

The simple answer to my earlier question—regarding how we get from something like the minutiae of revolutionary life to the abstractions of national character—is that, in this instance, we cannot. In the absence of habit, there is no path of reconciliation between these disparate categorical registers, no clear means of connecting the immiseration described with the provocations about literary form and history. This continual associative refusal leaves us with the bewildered, digressive array of chaotic and singular impressions. These impressions cannot offer epistemic certainty, but they do provide the grounds of dynamic interaction that allows us to see not relations themselves, but their contingency and artifice. Relationality is neither necessary nor immanent; it is, in true empirical fashion, merely something in which our minds are accustomed to believing. If *ostranenie,* in the hands of Tolstoy, provides a way of seeing things "out of context," then the memoir's dissociative relationality demonstrates that revolution, and its attendant causal strangeness, possesses no context at all.

Shklovsky's leveraging of the sentimental mode—his marking of textual production, his recapitulation of the "sentimental journey," his chronological displacements, his "resurrection" (*voskresenie)* of Sterne—enacts a heightened attunement to the potential of form to render relations strange.[89] What these strange relations ultimately demonstrate is the essentially narrative character of any version of coherence we may perceive. The atomized impressions constituting the memoir illuminate the power of custom and habit, precisely because custom and habit cease to function here—their absence discloses the organizing power they once held. Revolutionary experience, the memoir indicates, enacts the Humean thought experiment about experiencing the world afresh, without the associative sinews of prior experience. These dissociative conditions return us to the opening question animating this chapter's inquiry, which asks how one can grasp a revolution, a phenomenon figured by Shklovsky as a void. As his language casts the revolutions as imperceptible, the narrative reveals its own impossibility *as* narrative: narrative coherence is a fiction buttressed by custom and habit. The problem of revolution then becomes a problem of form; "revolution" is the loss of associations that arise out of custom and habit. Such loss conversely reveals the basis of empire to be narrative in character: the collapse of the Russian empire occasions the dissolution of custom and habit, absences that are revealed with striking force in Shklovsky's non-narrative account of revolutionary history.

[89] "I resurrected Laurence Sterne in Russia by knowing how to read him" is his bold proclamation, one that positions him as a heroic reader uniquely capable of understanding Sterne's difficult prose. *A Sentimental Journey,* 232; «Я воскресил в России Стерна, сумев его прочитать.» *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol II, 222.

CHAPTER TWO

Naming History in the Joycean Bildungsroman

> I know histhry isn't thrue, Hinnissy, because it ain't like what I see ivry day in Halsted Sthreet … Historyans is like doctors. They are always lookin' f'r symptoms. Those iv them that writes about their own times examines th' tongue an' feels th' pulse an' makes a wrong dygnosis. Th' other kind iv histhry is a post-mortem examination. It tells ye what a counthry died iv. But I'd like to know what it lived iv.
>
> —Finley Peter Dunne, *Observations of Mr. Dooley* (1902)[1]

Such are the sage words of Irish immigrant bartender-philosopher Martin Dooley, a widely popular character of journalist Finley Peter Dunne who appeared in hundreds of newspaper columns from the 1890s to the early 1900s. Dooley's incisive observations on nationalist politics, rendered in an approximation of Irish American dialect, offered entertainment and social commentary for a broad, international audience. One member of this readership, James Joyce, integrated the character into his own lectures and writings as a lively and comedic illustration of Irish cultural politics.[2] Joyce's invocations of Dooley's humorous, largely pacifist critiques illustrate the novelist's attunement to circulating forms of cultural criticism, with his proverbial finger on the pulse of contemporaneous political sentiment. Dooley's pithy appraisals of nationalist aggression, alongside his vividly detailed evocations of a fin-de-siècle Irish community, provide trenchant observations of the clash between everyday public narratives and the inflated rhetoric of imperialist ideology, all smuggled in via a working-class brogue. And, as this chapter will explore, it is Dooley's emphasis on the "lived" experience of historical phenomena, as opposed to a "post-mortem" perspective, with which Joyce's own Bildungsroman remains preoccupied. Begun around 1903 (in the form of the later-abandoned *Stephen Hero*) and penned in various stages over the course of a decade, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) consciously dwells in the tension emerging out of the disparity between the political imaginary—which provides an available but deficient vocabulary for articulating historical narratives—and the sensuous details of experience itself. The novel, to borrow the words of Mr. Dooley, "examines th' tongue an' feels th' pulse" of the times, while the inflated narratives of "histhry" lapse into hollow abstractions.

Building on the issues raised in the previous chapter regarding the dissociated relationality of revolution, this chapter moves from Shklovsky's narrative estrangement to consider a set of linguistic concerns around the shifting nature of British imperial rule in fin-de-siècle Ireland. Here, the empirical conundrum of the first chapter—how to grasp a major historical moment of rupture, or the "void" of revolution—emerges as a problem of language. As we travel from the difficulties of perception in revolutionary Russia to those of proto-revolutionary Ireland, we turn to the descriptive inadequacies of an earlier moment of imperial contraction on the opposite end of Europe. Joyce narrates the empiricist problematic established in chapter one, concerning how to move from

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[1] Cited in Charles Fanning, *Finley Peter Dunne and Mr. Dooley: The Chicago Years* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1978), 37.

[2] For a brief gloss on Joyce's incorporation of the Dooley character in his own writing, see Brian Caraher's "Irish and European Politics: Nationalism, Socialism, Empire" in *James Joyce in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 285-7.

tangible particulars to abstract categories, as an epistemic drama centered around the problem of naming. My inquiries here proceed from a series of interrelated questions clustered around the overlap between national-historical and narrative forms of becoming in Joyce's *Portrait*: a text that takes us from the terrain of decisive revolution(s) to that of an anticipatory set of proto-revolutionary (and less definitively successful) events. Why cast the shifting political terrain of the years characterized by debates over the future of Ireland's national status—including struggles over Home Rule and devolutionary governance, inflected with the rhetoric of republicanism, nationalism, and anti-colonialism—in the language of a developing individual consciousness? What does Joyce's peculiar novelistic idiom, invested as it is in the insufficiencies of descriptive categories, tell us about the ways in which such historical developments come to be apprehended, and subsequently understood?

Joyce's particular version of the Bildungsroman—which famously offers a progressively developmental idiolect in correspondence with Stephen Dedalus's growth—dramatizes the struggle to grasp a pivotal historical moment in the trajectory of national emergence. By dwelling on the flickering doubts of Stephen's consciousness, this chapter excavates a central and overlooked conflict at the heart of what Robert Spoo terms the protagonist's "historiographic ambivalence": a tension between the crude, sensual realities of experience, and the abstract labels that ostensibly describe them.[3] Emerging from this disconnection is the essential problem of naming, initially evidenced by the young Stephen's ostensible naiveté. His confusion unfolds over the course of his early childhood and adolescence, revealing what is, I argue, a conflict over the ontological status of abstractions and universals, a fundamental tension that determines his orientation to the world. This longstanding philosophical agon pits a belief in the reality of abstract and universal objects (a form of realism) against a rejection of their existence (a nominalist paradigm). While we see the operation of nominalist tendencies most clearly in the early chapters, through Stephen's bewildered childlike perspective, his preoccupation with the nature of universals and abstractions—and the contingent processes by which we choose to label them—continues throughout the novel, transcending their initial association with the supposedly developing cognition of childhood and adolescence.

In what follows, I first explore the nominalist impulses operative throughout the first two chapters of *Portrait,* establishing the terms by which we must understand Stephen's struggle to grasp the situation in which he finds himself. Stephen's difficulty in identifying non-concrete concepts (as opposed to immediately available sensory particulars) illuminates the dissonance between these two types of entities, generating a dynamic that, as we will see, remains stubbornly at the heart of his *Bildung* throughout the novel. His childhood curiosity regarding how exactly words signify opens up onto a problematic regarding how to discern the associative links between abstract ideas and their labels, a problem rooted in the traditions of nominalism. After moving through a brief history of nominalist-realist scholastic debate and its afterlives in modernist thought, we turn to Stephen's fraught negotiations over the nature of "politics." Politics, and in particular the figure of Charles Stewart Parnell, become key terms that anchor Stephen's ruminations over his historical circumstances, even as he is dogged by an overwhelming sense of the ambiguous significations that surround such labels. His adolescent response to the felt sense of historical vagueness is a return to his childhood preoccupation: a recourse to naming, now understood as providing access to a kind of

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[3] Spoo, *James Joyce and the Language of History: Dedalus's Nightmare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 62. While my argument aligns with Spoo's statement that the novel avoids direct confrontation with history in its portrayal of a sensitive, psychologically nuanced consciousness, I attribute this obliquity to a vexed relationship between empirical reality and the language used to describe it, while Spoo is concerned with Stephen's relationship to texts as an evidentiary record of completed actions.

meaning, even if yet to be assimilated. Revealed over the course of these moments in Stephen's perceptual development is the integral nature of names, which hinge on the essential ontological and epistemic questions—do concepts exist? and if they do, how can we know them?—that are re-arranged and re-encountered by Stephen throughout the novel. Even as we arrive at Stephen's aesthetic mutiny at the novel's end, the terms of his rejection are themselves informed by the dynamics of such nominalist-realist conflict. The drama of naming with which Stephen grapples, I suggest, ultimately hinges upon the categorically different ways of knowing that emerge through the process of distinguishing concrete, demonstrable objects from abstract or universal objects (which lack such spatio-temporal specificity). This distinction in turn bears upon how we relate to, and articulate, historical developments that seem too vast, too vague, or too abstract to fully grasp. Crucially, it is via this negotiation over the status and reality of names that the nature and weight of Irish fin-de-siècle nationalist politics comes to be realized in the novel.

What's in a Name?

We begin at the outset of the novel, in the idiolect of a young child, as Stephen confronts the seemingly arbitrary nature of names as a difficulty of memory. Staring at his geography textbook, gazing at a map of North America, the variety of place names overwhelms his faculties and memorization eludes him. The text presents this problem as a failure of ability, as he "*could not* learn the names of places in America" (emphasis mine).[4] Yet the unspecified places are nevertheless individuated, and their non-equivalence clearly flagged: "still they were all different places that had those different names."[5] There seems to be, to the bewildered Stephen, a reason each locale possesses a particular label, which differentiates it from its cartographic neighbors. However, this reason remains opaque, engendering the speculative possibility that the labels *themselves* generate the reality of place, rather than the other way around. The questions looming over the passage concern causal necessity: how exactly does naming function? Do these places have different names *because* they are different, or does their difference merely arise from their names? This problem, figured as a juvenile struggle with memorizing a geography lesson, in fact betokens what will become a central issue for Stephen's epistemological framework: how to discern the connection between labels and their referents, particularly when such referents are not immediately apprehensible. His train of thought proceeds to organize the places in question by ascending order of scale, establishing their relative position to larger spatial categories: "they were all in different countries and the countries were in continents and the continents were in the world and the world was in the universe."[6] Though specific names elude him, the categorical relations between types of places—countries are (typically) located within continents, which are contained within worlds, which lie within universes—provide a rudimentary means of understanding the spatial classifications that ostensibly configure the world around him. These relations frame two related but distinct forms of organization: first, the geographic question of scale (countries fit within continents), and second, the issue of logical taxonomy (a country differs from a city as genus does a species, for instance). These two classificatory systems illuminate the two halves—the quantitative and the qualitative—of the naming problem that Stephen confronts.

At first, the young child struggles less with the categories themselves, and rather with the proper nouns designating specific categorical instantiations (such as, for instance, Mexico City or Boston). His inability to assimilate the particular place names subtly works against the very logic of

[4] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 12.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

naming that accompanies the cartographic enterprise. If the act of drawing a map requires one to distinguish places, both topographical and political, physical and abstract, then names are a necessary means of imposing such distinctions. Yet the endeavor to classify and label becomes an issue as Stephen, in his seeming naïveté, quietly searches for the justification behind the map's logic: the reason why a particular region is differentiated from another, and why a particular name is attached to it. His impulse to affirm that "still they were all different places that had those different names" calls attention to this elusive rationale. Indeed, why would one need to assert such a basic fact—that different places have different names—unless it was in some way doubted? Without an evident reason for the existence of an abundance of names, they appear to him as a confused jumble, ascribed to arbitrarily separate areas without visible explanation or relation. His failure to memorize such names, and his struggle to reassure himself that there *is* a rationale behind them, indicates the tenuous connection between a name and its designation. Such is the pain of rote learning: the lack of inherent associative relation between label and referent is what necessitates memorization in the first place. The very need to memorize an array of names, that is, points to the contingent nature of their signifying power: the various states or cities of North America with which he is grappling do not, after all, *intrinsically* boast such names. The places in question are, rather, distinguished, classified, and given names via a process whose internal reasoning remains opaque to Stephen.

As it happens, Stephen is here confronting two larger issues: the first is a nominalist concern with the existence of the distinctions being made, both quantitative and qualitative. The second is an empiricist problem, which derives from Stephen's lack of any perception of the things named. To put it differently, the clash that emerges in this first chapter is one between material and symbolic geography, or the physical, empirically available space itself and the abstract set of meanings imposed upon it via its toponym. The act of naming, in such instances, is a kind of creation, bringing a place into conceptual existence by delimiting its boundaries from the surrounding space. In carving out and labeling a specific terrain as distinct, the cartographer makes that very terrain visible as a phenomenon, in turn opening it up to contemplation and interpretation: the conceptual edges with which something comes to be labelled determines what can be thought, and subsequently said, about that particular thing. Yet Stephen runs against the limits of this naming practice when, in a well-known moment of self-assertion, he attempts to write a list locating himself in relation to progressively larger geographic entities:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe[7]

His arrival at "the Universe" marks the endpoint of this sequence, as he cannot conceive of anything larger under which it might be subsumed: "What was after the universe? Nothing. But was there anything round the universe to show where it stopped before the nothing place began?"[8] His inability to imagine an entity beyond the universe reinforces the idea, emerging over the course of

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid, 13.

this passage, that places come to be understood largely by virtue of their names, which operate primarily by delineating difference. So nothing exists "beyond" the universe because there is no name with which to designate that which is *not* the universe: "the Universe," here operating as a proper noun, is a totalizing entity, possessed of a singularity implied by its Latin root, "unus." Further, Stephen's notion of a "nothing place" that comes after the universe is an attempt to impose nominal significance on this unwieldy concept—a way to think the unthinkable precisely by giving it a name.[9]

While critical attention has focused on how the first chapter stages the process of language acquisition—and its varied implications for psychological and/or political development—my interest lies more specifically in the exploration of naming as a fraught enterprise.[10] This early passage in fact offers a preliminary model for understanding the particular import of naming for Stephen's burgeoning consciousness, a problematic that comes to inform the dynamics of historical perception throughout the novel, and subsequent contemporaneous political debate. The fundamental significance of this endeavor is in fact signaled almost immediately, within the first few pages, in a moment that is easy to miss for its banality. In an exchange taken out of a familiar playground script, Nasty Roche demands of the young Stephen, "What is your name?" and to Stephen's reply he retorts "What kind of a name is that?"[11] Stephen has no reply to this question, because no satisfactory answer yet exists for him; to know the "kind" of name one possesses would be to attach some form of meaning to it. Of course, names are rarely chosen by their owners, typically being determined by a hereditary lineage over which the individual has no control—or, in the case of "Nasty" Roche, likely bestowed by aggrieved classmates. Stephen's muteness gestures to his sudden confrontation with the felt incongruity of a name's contingency alongside its perceived status as a repository of meaning (a perception evidenced, in this case, by Nasty Roche's very question). Even if the decidedly un-Irish surname Dedalus comes freighted with the historic weight of Greek myth, it is for Stephen here merely a given label. While in later years he toys with identifying himself as the "fabulous artificer," this imaginative occurrence is figured as an adolescent attempt at self-styled artistic heroism, motivated by his professed desire to escape the strictures of nation and religion—or perhaps even a longing to rationalize the ridiculous by giving it a conceptual

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[9] Marjorie Howes cites this passage as illustrative of the novel's preoccupation with conflicting geographic scales, and their influence on the construction of national identity. Her reading joins a long tradition of criticism that understands Joyce's approach to geography as a problem of "defining or narrating the nation." Howes reads Stephen's list as an "alternative geography" that links individual and national scales—notably, his list does not include the United Kingdom, bypassing the empire by placing Ireland directly within Europe. "'Goodbye Ireland I'm going to Gort': Geography, Scale, and Narrating the Nation," in *James Joyce's* "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man": *A Casebook*, ed. Mark A. Wollaeger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 320.

[10] Megan Quigley, for instance, asserts that Stephen's development follows the Wittgensteinian model from *Philosophical Investigations,* which understands language as a social practice, acquired by grasping the *use* of language, rather than its logical functioning (contra Augustine's model of ostensive learning). *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 120. And Hugh Kenner's formative reading famously proposes that "every theme in the entire life-work of James Joyce is stated on the first two pages of the *Portrait,*" the crux being Stephen's developing "attitude to language." "The *Portrait* in Perspective," in *James Joyce's* "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man": *A Casebook*, 365.

[11] Joyce, *Portrait,* 5.

basis, and thus a more coherent sense.[12] His hesitation as to the prophetic nature of his name ("his strange name seemed to him a prophecy") casts the association as a matter of perceptual doubt, one possible "device" alongside the numerous other forms of myth-making encountered in the course of his development. Coupled with his lingering hesitation at his ensuing vision ("what did it mean?"), the uncertainty articulated in this passage points to the tentative nature of this eventual symbolic association.[13] The name Stephen Dedalus, that is, may come to signify some mythic purpose in the mind of Stephen himself, but this is neither inevitable nor fixed in the logic of the novel; Stephen's sense of nominal significance morphs with the fluctuations of his various attempts at self-definition. This is not to say that his name *lacks* significance, but rather that the significance it holds is explicitly fabricated for Stephen—indeed, this is the process of meaning-making that the novel performs as it traces the course of Stephen's development.

Naming, as introduced in these early pages, is the premise upon which things come to be identified and known, but it offers a problematic basis of identification and knowledge, in fact revealing them to be two quite different things. What is initially figured as a problem with proper nouns—the difficulty of memorizing place names in America—transforms, in short order, into a struggle with abstract categories. The clash between proper noun and abstraction surfaces clearly in Stephen's struggle with the idea of God: "But though there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world … still God remained always the same God and God's real name was God."[14] Stephen treats God as an untranslatable proper noun (akin to a name like Stephen Dedalus, which remains the same regardless of language), but also realizes that, as an object of worship, god possesses different cultural and national significations, and is referred to by varying designations depending on the language. Such perceived incongruity culminates in Stephen's assertion that there are "different names" but also a single "real" name for God. The discrepancy hinges on the difference between the *concept* of god as an object of faith—whether a singular being or multiple deities—and the particular triadic God of Catholic doctrine which serves as his main point of reference. The apparently paradoxical nature of Stephen's statement is logically resolved when considering the implicit categorical distinction being made: between abstract concept and particular instantiation, both grasped by Stephen under the label "God."

In presenting the simple fact of what to call something as a problem—one that bears upon the different means by which we can know abstractions and particulars—the opening section of *Portrait* offers two related conclusions. First, as we see with Stephen's memorization difficulties and confrontation with Nasty Roche, names are fundamentally contingent. And so a given name is neither intrinsic nor logically necessary to the referent being named. Yet as becomes evident with Stephen's attempt to ponder (and crucially, to label) what lies beyond the universe, names are also vital, playing a formative role in making places, people, and concepts available for thought. These two premises give rise to a central problematic: something cannot be negotiated—that is, disputed,

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[12] "Now, as never before, his strange name seemed to him a prophecy … Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean?" Ibid, 183.

[13] This mythic resonance is one that continues to plague Stephen beyond his childhood and adolescence; after all, it is the strangeness of Stephen's surname that launches the first chapter of *Ulysses*. The first conversation we hear between Stephen and his roommate Malachi "Buck" Mulligan begins as Buck reflects on the pair's "absurd" names: "The mockery of it … your absurd name, an ancient Greek." *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 3. By this point, however, Stephen seems to have dispensed with any illusions as to the mythic significance of his name, and he wearily brushes off Buck's jest.

[14] Ibid, 13.

argued, or interpreted—before it is named, but the process of naming in fact determines the very grounds of negotiation. This tension in fact turns on a philosophical tradition probing the associative link between universals (later abstractions) and their labels, revealing a nominalist suspicion at the heart of the young Stephen's understanding of language. It is to this history that we now turn.

Nominalist Impulses, Realist Convictions

What Stephen's roving mind is contemplating in this first chapter bears upon an enduring metaphysical debate regarding the relationship between language and concepts, one that saw renewed interest in the fin-de-siècle era of Stephen's youth. The issue of how a word signifies with regard to non-concrete ideas lies at the center of what is known as the nominalist-realist dispute in medieval philosophy, initially centered on the status of universals. The tensile nature of nominalism, however, confounds a clear and singular conceptual sharpness: taken up over centuries to different ends and with varying metaphysical assumptions, it has continued to morph from its (theo)logical origins. As such, a brief accounting will be helpful here in establishing the developing commitments of the nominalist tradition, especially with respect to the version that Joyce inherited in the early twentieth century. The first generations of nominalist thinkers, including the twelfth-century French philosopher Peter Abelard and the fourteenth-century English William of Ockham—the latter of whom is often considered the "founder" of scholastic nominalism—offered accounts of universals as names (*nomina*), existing in our minds rather than as realities in the world. In doing so, they rejected the existential status of universal essences—qualities and properties that can be instantiated by particular things, such as tallness, sharpness, or personhood. This contrasts with the realist ontological commitment that holds common natures to exist as real things (*res*) in the world. So while a realist would, for instance, believe that "universal" qualities such as color exist separately from the things in which they are instantiated (i.e. the quality of "greenness" actually exists as a single property that is present in each green object), a nominalist would maintain that universal qualities are merely names (i.e. "greenness" is an idea in our minds—and a label—that we apply to each green object). As such, the nominalist rejection of universals posits the existence only of physical particulars, from which we derive our ideas and labels of universal qualities *post facto*. So we come to an idea of what "greenness" is only through the application of that label to blades of grass, leaves, or anything that shares a similar-enough hue.

This is not to say, of course, that medieval scholastics were the first to parse the grounds of existence of universal concepts; the so-called "problem of universals" was after all a major metaphysical dispute in ancient philosophy. Aristotle's theory of universals, which holds that universals exist only as instantiations in particulars (rather than, contra Platonic realism, as objective forms that stand apart), could be seen as a proto-nominalist stance. In fact, this is precisely how Theodor Adorno reads Aristotle—as "containing the seeds of what is called nominalism"—though he is careful to state that Aristotle was by no means a nominalist himself.[15] While these distinctions may initially strike the contemporary ear as trivial, they produce far-reaching consequences for how we understand the reality of universal essences. For a nominalist like Ockham, our ideas of universals are ultimately derived from particular instances that are similar enough to fit under a common category: in Ockham's language, the universal is "predicable of many" and thus constitutes

[15] Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2002), 26. For a conceptual history of the role of nominalism in Adorno's historiography of modernist aesthetics, see C.D. Blanton's "Medieval Currencies: Nominalism and Art," in *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory,* ed. Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010).

a universal only by virtue of its "signifying many things."[16] A universal concept, rather than referring to a substance in the world, present in the things to which it refers, instead flags similarities among common things. This, then, is how Ockham comes to claim that universals are an entirely cognitive edifice, "an intention of the mind which, on the most probable account, is identical with the act of understanding."[17] Emerging out of Ockham's so-called ontological parsimony—his reduction of substantive existence to particulars—is the evocative power of the mind, which brings universal concepts into being through the use of universal terms. In essence, the spoken or written language through which we signal commonality (i.e., the conferral of a universal label) constitutes the existence of the universal itself. Ockham's nominalist ontology thus implicitly bestows a generative power upon the use of terms themselves: if the very act of calling certain things by the same name effectively brings the category into being, then universal concepts are essentially tethered to language.

As might be expected, the ontological disagreements about the nature of universals take on a variety of inflections over the course of medieval to contemporary philosophy, and historiographic accounts of nominalism account for a multiplicity of nominalist strains branching out from the scholastic period. W.J. Courteney's historiography, for instance, seeks to explain the divisions between realist and nominalist approaches to ontology that still bear upon disciplinary divisions in philosophy today. His account emphasizes the progression from the nineteenth-century inheritance of nominalism as opposing the existence of universals to early-twentieth-century revivalist understandings that broaden the purview of nominalist thought.[18] And while some critical accounts insist on adhering to the original medieval understanding of nominalism in its narrowest sense, the terrain of the debate nonetheless expands in the hands of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century thinkers to encompass questions beyond the classic problem of universals.[19] Notably, more modern senses of nominalism shift from a rejection of universals to a rejection of abstractions.[20] In this latter version, abstract objects—positioned against concrete ones—become the site of skepticism. Yet

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[16] William of Ockham, *Ockham's Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 78.

[17] Ibid., 81.

[18] See "In Search of Nominalism: Two Centuries of Historical Debate" in *Ockham and Ockhamism: Studies in the Dissemination and Impact of His Thought,* ed. William J. Courtenay (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

[19] For an admittedly narrower account of nominalist thought, adhering to medieval historical records from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, see Fabienne Michelet and Martin Pickavé's chapter "Philosophy, Logic, and Nominalism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020). The authors criticize the tendency—attributed largely to literary scholarship—to associate forms of linguistic skepticism with nominalist philosophies, and maintain that nominalism in no way suggests arbitrary or unstable signification, 413.

[20] As with so many other philosophical terms, there is no standard, singular definition of "universals" and "abstract objects," and their meaning can shift depending on who is employing them. However, most agree that a "universal" indicates a quality or property that can be instantiated in a specific entity (hence the frequent distinction between universals and particulars). Abstract objects likewise famously lack a clear, positive definition: most often they are contrasted with concrete objects to indicate what they are *not*. Broadly speaking, they are understood to be causally inert and non-spatiotemporal. That is, they cannot be involved in cause-and-effect relationships with other objects in the world, nor do they exist in space and time. The distinction between universal/particular and abstract/concrete is, moreover, not exhaustive—so not everything can necessarily be classified under one of these categories. Nonetheless, I will be drawing on these general definitions in this chapter.

despite this later distinction, both senses of nominalist thought share several key tenets: they each hold that everything that exists must be a physical entity, either particular or concrete; that non-physical things, either universals or abstractions, are solely a product of the mind; and that these non-physical things must then be discursive, as they are only apprehensible by virtue of their label.

By the early twentieth century, Anglo-American modernist philosophers were revisiting the medieval scholastics' preoccupation with how exactly language signifies non-concrete ideas. The nominalist metaphysical viewpoint that universals are "intentions of the mind" indicated solely by language resonates with the widespread modernist interest in investigating language as a non-transparent, and indeed often resistant, medium. C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards's formative *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (1923), which sought to provide a solid foundation for the new "science" of symbolism by parsing the "instrumental" or referential uses of language, remains one of the most influential of such endeavors within the Anglophone tradition (and one that builds on the analytic work done by Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege on the one hand, and disciplines like anthropology on the other—Bronisław Malinowski contributed a supplementary essay to the volume). Ogden and Richard's endeavor to construct a comprehensive theory of signs clarifying "the influence of language upon thought" relies upon classifying different language functions, thus attempting to systematize the various possible connections between words and ideas. In the nominalism of Ockham, they locate the origins of a symbolic approach to sign interpretation: Ockham's contention that "universals are … ways of thinking or cognitive acts" indicates that "they are merely general ideas, natural signs for a number of things," resulting in a definite, if rather simplistic, early account of a "verbal sign-situation."[21]

Beyond such efforts aiming to dissect the symbolic operations of language, a strain of modernist thought invested in reforming language by reducing it to its material signification (represented most prominently by figures such as Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme, and Bertrand Russell) also found critical purchase in nominalism's rejection of the existence of non-particulars. Indeed, the recognizably (if stereotypically) modernist distrust in transcendent, universal truths finds a long-standing precedent in nominalism's ontological withdrawal of universal and abstract concepts, which posits their existence only as linguistic phenomena. As Andrew Thacker notes, discussing the obsession with clarity evidenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus,* "there is a kind of extreme nominalism that haunts one form of modernism, where language is treated as a set of discrete entities or atoms, to be pinned onto objects in the world."[22] The reification of language is one strategy in response to the reduction of universals and abstractions to discourse, following to an extreme the nominalist ontology that accepts only particulars and concrete objects: hence the "concrete" approach of Imagism and the Cambridge philosophy of early Wittgenstein, Russell, Ogden, etc. The other, oppositional strategy is seen in a preoccupation with parsing how ambiguity operates, evidenced in the pragmatism of C.S. Peirce and William James, the blurred conceptual edges of the later Wittgenstein's "language games," and William Empson's work on ambiguous poetic devices in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930)—all of which display a nominalist concern with how general terms are capable of referring to the material world.[23] While scholastic nominalists did not understand language to be arbitrary—or even necessarily unstable—their privileging of particularity

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[21] Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1925), 102-3.
[22] Thacker, "A Language of Concrete Things: Hulme, Imagism, and Modernist Theories of Language," in *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 47.
[23] Within the German-speaking context, a related phenomenon of linguistic skepticism is known as the *Sprachkrise* (or *Sprachskepsis*), referring to a fin-de-siècle intellectual trend originating in Austria, and often understood to be inaugurated by Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" of 1902.

over universality and concretion over abstraction nevertheless provides an enduring currency for modernist writers of the period.[24]

Tracing the modernist inheritance of a nominalist orientation to language illustrates the extent to which these debates loomed large in Joyce's own intellectual milieu. More importantly, this genealogy indicates that Stephen's problem in moving from particular instance to general concept can be clearly traced back to one of the central questions with which nominalism grapples: how does abstract language signify? Joyce's sensitivity to the formation and application of names in the first chapter demonstrates how general terms—such as those tied to the notion of place—might conflict with the lived experience of place as a material phenomenon. The problem, essentially, lies in the movement from the empirical awareness of particulars to the assembly of an organizing concept. How does Stephen's crude awareness of names (of people, places, and things) develop into an understanding of the concept(s) under which such names are subsumed? *Portrait* stages this problematic in a version of nominalist discourse yoked to the developmental process of knowledge acquisition. Stephen's desire for a logic underpinning the names of places evinces a conviction that names should indicate particular entities—recall his supposition that each "different place" on the map must possess a "different name." Further, his preoccupation with spatial organization through the ordering of names presumes that knowing the name of a place, and locating it in relation to others, is an essential component of knowing the place itself. But even while Stephen's assumptions about the specificity of names hinges on a version of nominalist philosophy, his convictions remain fundamentally realist: so he believes that there *ought* to be organizing concepts behind the provision of names. Yet, as we will see, his discoveries in fact indicate otherwise, placing him in the thick of a realist-nominalist conflict over the ontological status of concepts and the labels by which they are known. Stephen's *Bildung,* then, lies in an ongoing process of negotiation regarding the contested reality of names, moving from his childhood uncertainties regarding labels to his adolescent theorization of aesthetics, which—as I will address in the final section of this chapter—provides a realism grounded in the ontology of Thomas Aquinas. The developmental arc traces not only a movement from ontological doubt to a kind of certainty, but performs its various stages through experimental testing: the drama of the novel is found in the way Stephen works through the ontological status—the (un)reality—of universal and abstract ideas, and in the progressive complications he encounters.

Consider the following passages, which build on the naming problems that complicate the move from empirical particularity to conceptual abstraction. Initially, as we have seen, Stephen quite explicitly figures knowledge as the provision of names. His reflection on the pious governess Dante's instruction (again, a lesson on geography) plainly demonstrates the connection: "Dante knew a lot of things. She had taught him where the Mozambique Channel was and what was the longest river in America and what was the name of the highest mountain in the moon."[25] Here is a

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[24] One such figure is Fritz Mauthner, the Austro-Hungarian writer whose three-volume *Beitrage zu Einer Kritik der Sprache* (*Contributions Toward a Critique of Language*, 1901-3) tenaciously argues for the inseparability of thought and speech, concluding that whatever cannot be said cannot be known. Mauthner's interest in the limits of language—and his attempt at linguistic revitalization via the *Critique*—was to prove influential for Joyce's composition of *Finnegans Wake*: apparently Joyce instructed Samuel Beckett to skim through Mauthner's tomes as a "notesnatching operation" to collect useful "fodder" for Joyce's last novel. See Linda Ben-Zvi, "Mauthner's *Critique of Language*: A Forgotten Book at the Wake," *Comparative Literature Studies* 19, no. 2 (1982). Notably Ben-Zvi, in addition to Jean-Michel Rabaté, refers to Mauthner's approach as "nominalist," an indication of the distortion of the term beyond describing a theory of the ontological status of universals.

[25] Joyce, *Portrait,* 7.

more direct articulation of the first chapter's tacit logic, by which to know something is to point it out on a map and name it. Yet Stephen extends this rationale beyond his geography lessons: so his response when Dante makes "that noise after dinner" and raises her hand to her mouth is to matter-of-factly conclude "that was heartburn."[26] The confusion is telling. From the indirect knowledge of geographic locales of which Stephen has no actual experience (and in fact, never will), we move to a phenomenon that he directly perceives. His impulse to name remains the same, however, which leads to his misperception: the child, seeing only the visible (or audible) symptoms of Dante's affliction, understands the physical signs to themselves be the cause. Heartburn, of course, is etiologically invisible, and in the absence of any clear causality, Stephen resorts to naming the epiphenomenon as the phenomenon itself. These examples illuminate a crucial distinction, one that clarifies the novel's version of the problem of universals and abstractions: that between direct and indirect experience (or in Bertrand Russell's terms, acquaintance and description, an epistemology to which we will briefly return in the penultimate section of this chapter). So in the first instance, of the Mozambique Channel and the moon, we have names without an experience; while in the second, we witness an experience without a name.

What these passages reveal, ultimately, is the importance of ostension for Stephen's early attempt to wield names. The world is effectively distinguished for the child between the demonstrative and the non-demonstrative, or things to which he can directly point, and things to which he cannot. He soon comes to understand the shortcomings of this tendency as he moves to contemplate more abstract and ill-defined concepts. Such an approach fails to provide a clear blueprint of the conceptual edges in question. Consider the moment immediately following Stephen's rumination on the different names for God:

> He turned over the flyleaf and looked wearily at the green round earth in the middle of the maroon clouds. He wondered which was right, to be for the green or for the maroon, because Dante had ripped the green velvet back off the brush that was for Parnell one day with her scissors and had told him that Parnell was a bad man. He wondered if they were arguing at home about that. That was called politics … It pained him that he did not know well what politics meant and that he did not know where the universe ended. He felt small and weak.[27]

From the physical gestures of Dante's heartburn, we move to the physical gestures of political disagreement, where visible symptoms—ripping green velvet off a brush, engaging in heated quarrels—seemingly provide the referential basis for the label. As such, "politics" is a familial argument, or a violent gesticulation. But of course, this cannot be quite right, and Stephen acknowledges as such, fretting that "it pained him that he did not know what well what politics meant." Here the latent conflict between things that can be ostensively defined and those that cannot emerges more forcefully, and with greater consequence. At the heart of these attempts at labeling is an overwhelming impulse to privilege the demonstrable. Yet when a non-demonstrable object is at stake, his emphasis on the visible particular, or the symptom, forecloses an understanding of what diverse meaning the concept might in fact hold. This is the case with something like "politics," which is not, and can never be, demonstrably particular. If, to return to Ockham, every universal exists as a particular (because it is instantiated within them), and thus is only universal in its *signification* of many things, then Stephen's mistake is to recognize only half of this equation. He sees politics in a particular gesture, but does not yet understand that this gesture

[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 13-14.

does not, in and of itself, define politics. Other instantiations naturally fit under this common category. The urge to see something and label *that* politics arises out of Stephen's attempt to grasp non-ostensive concepts by providing them with a name. But, as we will see, such concepts do not submit with certainty to naming, a problem that leads to confusion over their range of symbolic meaning.

The Color of Political Strife

Stephen's impulse to label crystallizes in a set of visual details that provides an organizing force for abstract and non-demonstrable ideas. In negotiating this thing called "politics" for instance, color emerges as a distinguishing feature of Stephen's childhood experience. The maroon associated with Land League agitator Michael Davitt, and the green with Parnell, here become organizing codes for the partisan discord surrounding him. He begins by initially abstracting color: from the first page of the geography textbook where Fleming has colored the earth green and the clouds dark red, he recalls Dante's similarly colored brushes, which constitute one of his earliest childhood memories. Their presence, in fact, appears on the very first page of the novel: "Dante had two brushes in her press. The brush with the maroon velvet back was for Michael Davitt and the brush with the green velvet back was for Parnell."[28] This chromatic frame of reference impresses upon him, and by the time he reaches Clongowes he understands the colors to possess powerful symbolic associations, even if he does not yet know what they are. Crucially, the moral weight of such symbolism, in Stephen's eyes, rests on the colors *themselves*, regardless of their context. One is "for" either green or maroon, whether instantiated in a drawing of clouds and earth, in brushes, or in clothing (recalling Parnell's death, he remembers Dante "in a maroon velvet dress and with a green velvet mantle").[29] While in historical context these particular colors are visual indicators of the fraught narratives of Home Rule and land reform, Stephen grasps only their sensory force, eliding the as-yet unavailable symbolic meaning and attributing such power to the color itself. Thus if Parnell is represented by the color green, and Parnell is, as Dante claims, a "bad man," then the color green is itself compromised. Stephen's world is, quite literally, colored by the predetermined symbolic range attached to a chromatic scheme. Writing of how color reveals the mapping of public narrative onto individual perception in *Portrait*, Luke Gibbons notes that "politics, and the fraught narratives of the nation under the charismatic leadership of Parnell and Davitt, are not confined to current affairs or the public sphere, but … frame the child's emerging inner life, shaping the very contours of his consciousness."[30] Gibbons's account of the attention to color in these early sections of the novel emphasizes how such "throwaway details" contribute to the visual framing of Stephen's perspective, evincing what he asserts is Joyce's filmic sensibility—the visual effects that ultimately suggest that politics (in this instance, the "muted Parnell subtext") are part of the "innermost structures of feeling of the characters in the Dedalus household."[31]

In fact, the intrusion of politics into Stephen's consciousness via color is one of the clearest indications that Joyce is framing Stephen's cognitive difficulties in the terms of nominalist debate. Recall that color terms like greenness and maroonness are universal ideas, and so remain predicable of many things while instantiated differently in each. It is this crucial distinction between universals and particulars, experienced as a division between the demonstrable and the non-, with which

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[28] Ibid., 3-4.
[29] Ibid., 25.
[30] Gibbons, *Joyce's Ghosts: Ireland, Modernism, and Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 107.
[31] Ibid., 111.

Stephen is struggling most vividly: here, the symbolic relationship between "universal" colors and "particular" political figures with whom those colors are associated. Indeed, color is an archetypal instance of a universal in scholastic discourse, in which it plays a recurring role in debates over the ontological status of universals—does a quality like "green" actually exist or is it, per Ockham, a solely mental construction? And if it does exist, then where and how does it do so: within the green object itself, or as a separate ideal form apart from the existence of the object? The scholastic debate over universals repeatedly makes use of the concept of color as an illustrative explanatory tool; so a particular thing can be red, while "redness" is a universal quality shared by all red things. Stephen, in his craving for order and clarity, latches on to color as an easily available heuristic for decoding the abstruse narratives of the world around him. Indeed, Stephen's penchant for responding to color extends beyond the associations of Parnell and Davitt; many of the early scenes of *Portrait* are narrated in vivid color, prompting Gibbons's focus on the specifically "chromatic range of Stephen's perception."[32] Color becomes an apparent means of working through questions of shared and relevant instantiations of certain qualities: for instance, does *anything* green signify Parnell, or only *this* instance of green? In what circumstances would labeling something green constitute an attribution of a political position, and when is green "just" green (to say nothing of the possible chromatic range an object might exhibit to even qualify as green)? Of course, Stephen does not directly pose these questions—his cognizance of such problems does not yet extend to verbal articulation—but they loom large in the background of his ruminations on color and fixation on politics. If, as Stephen's encounter with the foundational issues of nominalist debate would suggest, something like color exists only in the minds of those who perceive it, then it ceases to be a matter of objective conceptual reality, and instead becomes a matter of subjective attribution. Essentially, color consists in an agreement that we will both call this thing "green," and that it will symbolically stand for Parnell.

The problem, however, is that the provision of such labels ultimately proves disappointing, as they fail to offer any ontological significance for Stephen: they say nothing about the sort of concept to which they are attached, where its boundaries are, or what other things might fit within its scope. Hugh Kenner's foundational reading of *Portrait* notes the ostensible inversion of power by which names impose themselves on Stephen: "it is neither sufficient nor even initially accurate to say that by naming things he acquires power over them; on the contrary, the names of things are already given, and it is through their names that they have power over him."[33] In fact, what the above passages illustrate is precisely the uncertain endeavor of naming, and the subsequent imaginative possibilities that arise—or remain occluded—from the labels upon which Stephen lands. Even if the history of the split between Parnell and Davitt, and the former's scandalous downfall, is present in the symbolic reference indicated via color, Stephen does not yet grasp it. This epistemic struggle is the continually frustrated, frustrating process dramatized throughout the first chapter, as Stephen muddles through geography lessons, fixates on the colors of surrounding objects, and listens with mute captivation to the divisive conversation over Parnell at Christmas dinner.

Indeed, this last scene provides a tangible script for his earlier supposition that domestic arguments constitute politics: the quarrel regards the scandal of Parnell's political demise and death, and quickly escalates to the contested role of church figures in parliamentary politics and the relationship between religion and nationalism more broadly. Throughout the heated exchange, his family remains openly concerned over the issue of language; his mother expresses distress over the impropriety of "political discussion" at a holiday dinner and chastises Simon Dedalus for speaking crudely in front of Stephen. But the preoccupation with speaking extends beyond a plausible

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[32] *Joyce's Ghosts*, 107.
[33] "The *Portrait* in Perspective," *The Kenyon Review* 10, no. 3 (1948), 365.

concern with decorum in the presence of children, as discussion explicitly revolves around the types of discourse being mobilized. Dante, ever the devout Catholic, takes umbrage at the irreverent way Mr. Dedalus and Mr. Casey refer to the priestly order and criticize the church's interference in electoral politics. "Nice language for any catholic to use!" she retorts, bemoaning the men's "language … against God and religion"; she eventually resorts to intoning liturgical formulas—"the language of the Holy Ghost"—as a corrective.[34] Mr. Dedalus's riposte, that her sermonizing in fact constitutes "very bad language," inverts her own term and tosses it back to her as an insult. Meanwhile Uncle Charles diplomatically pleads for a peaceful exchange of opinions "without … this bad language," offering yet another connotative turn, this time suggesting that the nature of offense hinges on the use of profanity.

Notably, although Parnell remains the catalyst and central figure of the argument, his name is only mentioned once, quite briefly, over the course of the dinner: "Let [Stephen] remember too … the language with which the priests and the priests' pawns broke Parnell's heart and hounded him into his grave," cries Mr. Casey.[35] His words explicitly charge "language" itself as precipitating Parnell's death, figuring the fallout from his adulterous public imbroglio, and subsequent moral repudiation by the Catholic Church, as first and foremost a matter of discourse. Yet otherwise Parnell's name remains unspoken: in addition to simply relying on pronouns, the adults enlist a variety of epithets instead: traitor, adulterer, king, sinner (all categorical terms).[36] Their vocabulary provides a variety of lexical options for referring to the Irish politician, while largely avoiding a singular appellation: in a version of Ockham's mentalism, the name "Parnell" conjures differently for each character (not to mention the reader). Stephen's perspective, through which the entire scene is filtered, offers little by way of exposition; he listens to the dialogue and allows his mind to wander, tracing loosely associative connections in his puzzlement. (One such train of thought follows Stephen's confusion over a baffling phrase in the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, "tower of ivory"; following his above reliance on colors and ostensive logic, he decides that its meaning is connected to the "long, white hands" of his neighbor Eileen: "That was ivory: a cold white thing. That was the meaning of *Tower of Ivory.*")[37] Stephen observes the conversation grow progressively more heated, watching with a "terrorstricken face" as Mr. Casey's and Dante's screams of rage provide the closing salvo to the affair. Such affectively explicit behavior conflicts, in Stephen's mind, with the implicit meanings of the "spoken words" tossed about, which seem to imply far more than the literal figure(s) to which they point. In tandem with the scene's patent emphasis on multiple, conflicting forms of language, the absence of explicit references in favor of pronominal forms and categorical monikers suggests that a name's meaning is a matter of conceptual attachment, located in the mind of each interlocutor.

The issue, then, is not just that names are already provided to Stephen, as Kenner states, but more precisely that the provision of names does not suffice to clarify the variety of symbolic import attached to the thing named. Names, we might say, are "given" in multiple ways. The dinner table conversation is arguably the formative scene of Stephen's introduction to Irish politics, or at least to the ways in which "political discussion"—primarily conflicts over nationalism and religion—is performed through naming. This performance is one in which the terms of debate elude common

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[34] Joyce, *Portrait*, 30-33.
[35] Ibid., 33.
[36] Following his success in agitating for Home Rule support across North America in 1879, Parnell was dubbed the "uncrowned king of Ireland," a sobriquet shared with the earlier reformist Minister of Parliament Daniel O'Connell. The Fenian Mr. Casey employs this devotional term as he sobs in anger and grief; the derisive monikers are, of course, Dante's.
[37] Ibid., 35.

comprehension, even as they elicit clear material consequences. The difficulty that Stephen finds in grasping historical circumstances through hearing others' forms of contested speech is one that continues to play out, in various guises, over the course of his development and growth. The key question then becomes how, when, and under what circumstances names are arrived upon. As we have seen, this negotiation begins with the struggle to remember proper names, but it becomes more troublesome when considering non-demonstrative terms which—to again borrow Ockham's phrasing—can be predicable of many things (politics), or predicable in many ways (Parnell). The determining power Stephen repeatedly places upon proper names, by which to name is to know, fails to neatly apply to non-demonstrative and abstract concepts, whose instantiations and "meanings" shift according to usage and context. Even while ideas like politics and religion are presented to Stephen's young mind as, first and foremost, names, these names fail to provide the epistemic certainty that seems to attend particular and concrete objects.

Indeed, what we might aptly call the "ungiven-ness" of abstractions becomes explicitly dramatized as a scene of incomprehension as Stephen's father and granduncle initiate him into the social world of middle-class Irish masculinity. Invited to partake of their weekly "constitutionals" that meander through the villages on the outskirts of the Dublin suburbs, Stephen again imbibes the discourse of national debate:

> [H]is elders spoke constantly of the subjects nearer their hearts, of Irish politics, of Munster and of the legends of their own family, to all of which Stephen lent an avid ear. Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learned them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world about him. The hour when he too would take part in the life of that world seemed drawing near and in secret he began to make ready for the great part which he felt awaited him, the nature of which he only dimly apprehended.[38]

In contrast to the Christmas dinner scene, which relies on direct speech, this scene is narrated indirectly, emphasizing discursive repetition as the older generation speaks "constantly" of "Irish politics" and legends, the terms of which Stephen then repeats to himself "over and over." This moment offers a continuation of Stephen's ill-fated geography lesson, as he attempts (this time successfully) to memorize words he does not actually understand. Such a congenial scene of masculine sociality further inverts the earlier drama of domestic politics by figuring the public encounter with national politics as a decidedly less contentious matter than private exchange. In fact, his memorization indicates a process of assimilation, as Stephen begins to internalize these larger disputes. But even when the terms of debate are not evidently under heated scrutiny, "dim apprehension" is all that remains available to Stephen, accompanied by a vague sense of foreboding. The fact that these misunderstood words (which, following the necessary restrictions of indirect discourse, remain unelaborated to the reader as well) are the vehicles through which he discerns the "real world"—even if only partially—tells of the contradictory dynamic at the root of his burgeoning perceptive capacities.[39] On the one hand, the terms of political debate seem to offer a

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[38] Ibid., 64.

[39] Passages such as this provide fodder for a vein of poststructuralist Joyce scholarship that reads them as indicative of Stephen's conflicted relationship with language in general, including Colin MacCabe's *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: MacMillan, 1979) and Vicki Mahaffey's *Reauthorizing Joyce* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995). Mahaffey, for instance, identifies in Stephen an "acute sensitivity to the latent metaphoricity of language," *Reauthorizing Joyce,* 56. I am taking up such concerns within a more precise framework, centering on how problems of naming

means of comprehending the significance of the world around him, which repeatedly seems to elude his grasp. Yet on the other hand, these terms remain either incomprehensible or misleading, offering only the illusion of substance while obstinately hovering in the realm of abstraction.

From Stephen's initial isolation of names as epistemically valuable, to his muddled grasp of the difference between ostensive and non-ostensive things, to the realization that labels (both proper nouns and abstract concepts) may contain multiple symbolic references, the arc of the Joycean *Bildung* moves along a trajectory tethered to Stephen's developing sense of what and how names signify. His entry into adolescence is characterized by an encroaching yet ill-defined sense of change, as Stephen becomes, somewhat paradoxically, more aware of his own partial awareness. Maturity comes with greater knowledge of his own ignorance. As the novel progresses, his growth traces an increased attunement to the ambiguity invited by the variety of symbolic references attached to a particular label. This development, as we will see, introduces the problem of vagueness plaguing Stephen's adolescent consciousness. Attendant with this intruding haziness is a shift in his orientation to names. Stephen learns, that is, to provide names where before he could not, even if the full force of their signification still escapes him.

Naming Historical Vagueness

While it is certainly true that a sense of ambiguity infiltrates the entire novel, it emerges with particular potency in the second chapter, which concludes with the infamous scene of Stephen's sexual initiation as he absorbs a prostitute's "vague speech" through her kiss. For Megan Quigley, Joycean vagueness arises out of the ludic wordplay characteristic of his oeuvre; the vagueness she finds endemic to Joyce's literary style emerges from his attempt to torque the social and contextual malleability of language.[40] In such a reading, *Portrait* offers an early version of Joyce's aesthetic illumination of a pragmatist strain of philosophy allergic to positivism, which culminates in the masterpiece of linguistic complexity, *Finnegans Wake* (1939). The fact that *Portrait's* first chapters dramatize Stephen's desire for clear definitions, and for logically precise relationships between linguistic and material phenomena, seems to suggest that this later emphasis on vagueness (a word whose derivatives proliferate throughout the rest of the novel) constitutes a *volte-face* with regard to Stephen's experience of language. So if at first the child yearns naively for clarity, the adolescent comes to understand this very desire as misguided, and accepts that language is a slippery medium. This reading, to which Quigley, Vicki Mahaffey, and Colin MacCabe generally subscribe, posits a developmental telos by which Stephen's eventual disillusionment with logos—witnessed in the suffusion of vagueness that pervades the language of the text—accompanies a renunciation of (patriarchal, religious, national) authority.[41]

Yet even as the second chapter introduces the "vague dissatisfaction" that will plague Stephen throughout his religious, aesthetic, and intellectual *Bildung*, his sense of dawning awareness

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open onto the disconnect between particularity and abstraction, which bears upon how historical events are perceived and assimilated.

[40] "Joyce's writing is vague not because it is romantic or aesthetic … but because it depicts facts through the vagueness of language and style." Quigley, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness,* 113.

[41] Mahaffey's reading is admittedly less concerned with defining the arc of Stephen's development over the course of the novel, and instead emphasizes a paradigm of unresolved "rhythmic alternation" between opposing authorities throughout the text; she identifies the "tension between … the precision of definition and its inadequacy" to be the central conflict in *Portrait. Reauthorizing Joyce,* 66, 73.

remains tethered to the shifting circumstances "reshaping the world about him."[42] He becomes increasingly cognizant of a gulf between the social circumstances surrounding him and the language employed to describe or point to such phenomena. This sensitivity is initially attuned to the affective changes in the house resulting from his father's impending bankruptcy and dispossession. When Stephen listens to the "long and incoherent monologue" of his father, and slowly comes to grasp the true gravity of the Dedalus family's impoverished situation, his comprehension bypasses linguistic understanding and emerges instead as an atmospheric sense that "some fight is going to take place."[43] This awareness derives from the lived, material particularities of their changing world: the "sudden flight" from the comfort of suburban Blackrock into the gloominess of the Dublin slums, the sparsely furnished new house, the hushed whispers of the servants, his father's agitated stance before the fire. These sensory realities—not words—are the actual indicators illuminating the situation, however dimly and partially. Indeed, Dublin is "a new and complex sensation" for Stephen, who awakens to the novelties of metropolitan Irish existence at the same time that he comes to realize his family's tenuous economic position within such socio-political formations. Wandering the docks and quays bustling with commercial activity, he exhibits what Andrew Gibson identifies as "Parnellite melancholia," symptomatic of the decline in Catholic middle-class cultural and economic prospects following Parnell's death.[44] His developing awareness remains firmly tethered to an empirical sensibility that attaches his own shifting social status to the broader urban sensorium of 1890s Dublin. Accompanying the sense of emergence into this "vast and strange" world is a recognition of ambient precarity.[45] The chapter, infused with simmering tension and inchoate yearning, traces a parallel narrative of disappointment as efforts for Home Rule stagnate and Stephen confronts a tangle of fraught intellectual and sexual desires amidst the stifling constraints of Catholic morality. As the chapter's focus vacillates between individual and historical disillusionment, Stephen remains preoccupied with the insufficient language that fails to clearly articulate the connections and distinctions between the two.

Consider a moment that explicitly binds problems of naming and apprehension to the historical circumstances of post-Parnellite Irish melancholia. In a minute of idle reflection while trying his hand at romantic versification, Stephen's mind wanders back to the memorable Christmas dinner quarrel, that primal scene of political awakening:

> He saw himself sitting at his table in Bray the morning after the discussion at the Christmas dinnertable, trying to write a poem about Parnell on the back of one of his father's second

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[42] Joyce, *Portrait,* 69.

[43] Ibid., 68.

[44] Gibson, *The Strong Spirit: History, Politics and Aesthetics in the Writings of James Joyce 1898-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 143-6. Gibson traces, with notable historical detail, the cultural and political "formations and counter-formations" providing the backdrop for Stephen's *Bildung* across the course of the novel; he explicitly links the Dedalus family's fall with that of Parnell. In particular, he notes that the second chapter is suffused with contemporaneous mid-1890s Irish revivalist discourse, drawing upon the "melancholic" vocabulary, tropes, and moods of figures such as W.B. Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Standish James O'Grady, and George Russell, 148-9.

[45] Joyce, *Portrait*, 69. Gregory Castle reads Stephen's position—on the "fringes of the emergent Catholic middle class"—as in some sense akin to that of the Anglo-Irish, on account of both classes' liminal, unsettled histories. While this is an obviously limited comparison, it does offer an historical grounding for Stephen's indebtedness to revivalist discourse, a predominantly Anglo-Irish cultural phenomenon. Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), 178.

> moiety notices. But his brain had then refused to grapple with the theme and, desisting, he had covered the page with the names and addresses of certain of his classmates.[46]

Here multiple layers of frustrated apprehension map onto each other with tactile clarity: the disputed figure of Parnell emerges as the singular topic of poetic composition as Stephen struggles to give aesthetic form to the political discourse he inherits. The site of such an attempt is a (second) moiety notice, no less: a vivid reminder of impending familial insolvency. As such, the literal backdrop of the abortive Parnell poem is the economic decline of the Catholic middle-class family; the discursive legacy of political strife supplants any likelihood of financial inheritance. But in fact, it all comes to naught, since the boy cannot actually "grapple with the theme" and resorts to scribbling the names of fellow classmates instead. Yet while Stephen's poetic attempt fails, he notably manages something he could not do in the earlier scene: he is able to invoke the names himself. That is, he can name Bray, the location of the original argument, and he can name Parnell, the subject of the argument, even if he cannot yet apply the symbolic fields most properly attached to those names. Though the frames of reference for Parnell remains un-cognized—as the leader of parliamentary Irish nationalism, as the symbol of Catholic middle-class decline, etc.—Stephen is nonetheless able to identify Parnell as a central figure in the unfolding drama, something that remained impossible in the original event. Recall that Parnell's name was mentioned only once, as the speakers invoked a range of alternate epithets; Stephen himself, of course, remained entirely mute. His memory here constitutes a subtle shift in his orientation, whereby he is now able to assert the key figure around whom the argument revolves. Nevertheless, his eventual recourse to writing the names of his classmates reveals the persistent unreality of the identified label: he still does not know what Parnell "means." At this stage, he can only contend with names that possess direct empirical associations (people he actually knows), as opposed to those that lack direct perception (figures for whom political and historical signification still remains out of grasp). Here again the distinction between things that are immediately experienced and those that are indirectly related surfaces with clear force, determining what, exactly, Stephen is able to sufficiently "grapple with."

This memory serves as a touchstone for later moments of frustration, illuminating the increasingly uneasy overlap between the historical past and the personal present—between, in other words, the national and the psychological—both of which continue to elude clear focus. Indeed, Stephen's "grappl[ing] with the theme[s]" remains an intractable problem, only exacerbated by his concerted attempts to parse his own thoughts. His trip to Cork with his father, during which Simon regales his son with tales of his youth as Stephen recoils from the elder's bravado, registers the insufficiency of familial speech in vivid detail. As with the episode of bankruptcy, his father's words remain "powerless to evoke" his own former life, while the names he mentions suggest only a bygone era: all morning he speaks with a local waiter "at crosspurposes when a name was mentioned, the waiter having in mind the present holder and Mr Dedalus his father or perhaps his grandfather."[47] If the names of the "scattered and dead revellers" put forth by the elder Dedalus serve largely to mark the passing of time and suggest his increasing irrelevance, Stephen's own invocation of names acts as a means to ground himself in the present.[48] Recalling his childhood effort to impose nominal order through an ascending list of geographic entities, Stephen resorts to reciting names in an attempt to stave off what appears to be an impending breakdown:

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[46] Joyce, *Portrait*, 73.
[47] Ibid., 94-5.
[48] Ibid., 96.

> His very brain was sick and powerless. He could scarcely interpret the letters of the signboards of the shops. By his monstrous way of life he seemed to have put himself beyond the limits of reality … He could scarcely recognize as his his own thoughts, and repeated slowly to himself: I am Stephen Dedalus. I am walking beside my father whose name is Simon Dedalus. We are in Cork, in Ireland. Cork is a city. Our room is in the Victoria Hotel. Victoria and Stephen and Simon. Simon and Stephen and Victoria. Names.[49]

This enduring recourse to names in the event of hermeneutic crisis solidifies the power of names themselves, which have come to indicate things he can now, in one way or another, actually grasp: self, father, ancestral city and known surroundings. Even if at this point they seem to offer nothing beyond their immediate signification of person or place, they still mark the progressive development of Stephen's consciousness, characterized by a heightened attunement to geography.

Notably, his geographic sense layers immediate personal references onto the swirling jumble of political discourse as he asserts a kind of control over his surroundings by labeling what he knows. If the available language, inherited from familial, religious, and educational institutions, remains impenetrable—if, in fact, the partial internalization of such discourse renders his own thoughts unrecognizable—then Stephen's recitation of the most concrete of empirical facts offers a countermeasure. Against the bloviating of his father and the illegible exchanges of his elders, Stephen attempts to affirm minimal, experiential truths: his name, his location, his physical actions. As he struggles to remember the foundational memories from his childhood tutelage under his governess, he recalls "only names: Dante, Parnell, Clane, Clongowes."[50] What emerges is a flattened combination of geography, history, and personal narrative, as Dante and Parnell come to occupy the same associative plane. In a singularly vivid instance of the imbrication of the personal and the historical, his recollection of Parnell's funeral exchanges his own body for that of the deceased politician. As he forcibly reminds himself that "He had not died then. Parnell had died," he feels himself, however momentarily, to *be* Parnell, an embodied exchange that reinforces the authority of Parnell's presence in Stephen's formative memories.[51] Yet this vision—somewhere between a dream and a memory—also evidences the power of asserting a name in order to bring clarity: only by labeling the body in his mind's eye as not his own, but that of Parnell, is he able to begin the process of disarticulating his personal memories from the historical narratives with which they are intertwined. Crucially, this hallucinatory moment transforms the historical figure into a demonstrable object, in the form of the thing one knows most intimately: the self. In other words, he can now propose a concrete reference for Parnell, even if wrongly attributed. The crucial point emerging here regards Stephen's developmental trajectory, as he is no longer unable to grasp the name of *anything*. Now, he grasps some things for which he has names, even if others remain out of reach—such as Dublin, which remains a "dull phenomenon" throughout the chapter.

Stephen's interpretive frustration and growing sense of alienation lays bare the desire for labels and names that seem to promise privileged access to an imagined explanatory narrative, one that remains ever illusory. The epistemic, pseudo-nominalist drama of his gradual awakening—a latticed process layering political, intellectual, and sexual development—reveals the painful absence of clear, singular conceptual meaning. Stephen does not so much discover this to be true (in, for instance, some classical moment of *anagnorisis*) as stumble his way through a prolonged performance of recognition, to which we bear witness via Joyce's free indirect discourse. For Seamus Deane, the recognition of the determining power of language in fact owes much to Joyce's own fraught

[49] Ibid., 98.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid, 99.

relationship to nationalism; Deane argues that Joyce "learned from Irish nationalism the power of a vocabulary in bringing to existence that which otherwise had none except in the theatre of words. Joyce, we may say, discovered the fictive nature of politics."[52] In Deane's sense of the word, the fictitiousness revealed by Joyce's work points to the actively constructed quality of conceptual meaning, rather than its falsity. This fictitiousness—while most clearly developed with regard to the concept of politics, as evidenced by the repeated intrusion of Parnell—likewise applies to the social and religious formations that pervade Stephen's colonial *Bildung*, including the Jesuit disciplinary ideology at Clongowes and Belvedere, and the melancholic aura of economic decline and shifting class formations of 1890s Dublin. The young Stephen's recourse to the particular instance emphasizes direct knowledge over "fictitious" abstractions, a tendency that privileges empirical data—sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feels—as a means of concretizing the "vague speech" and "dim apprehension" that plagues his sense of historical events. Indeed, what becomes clear in the course of his torturous adolescent ruminations is that sensuous particulars are those things most urgently requiring names: Stephen must find a way to name the world made available through sensation.

Such is the movement of *Bildung* across the novel, which, as I have been arguing, traces the development of naming as a means of acquiring different modes of knowledge. By way of the philosophical tradition concerned with the problem of names, Joyce dramatizes the difficulties of historical apprehension; as we have seen, this involves parsing the differences between empirical, direct knowledge of particulars, and the kind of indirect knowledge required to grasp an abstract category that possesses, in Deane's words, a "fictive nature." And so from his early, vain efforts to ostensively define something like "politics," Stephen arrives at a more refined understanding of what *can* be identified ostensively. No longer confusing particulars with universals, or concrete objects with abstract ones, he limits his naming to people and places. Crucially, however, he is still unable to sort out the historical-symbolic range of meaning provided by names—what, for instance, Parnell "means"—a phase that must wait for the culminating stage of his intellectual arc.

Geographies of Knowing

By the time Stephen arrives at the university in chapter five, he is awash in people and places; a litany of literary associations accompanies the geographic details with which he is now surrounded. To be sure, it is in this final chapter that the intensity of his fixation on naming reaches its highest pitch. His morning walk across the city is filled with poets and dramatists called to mind by the neighborhoods and roads that he passes:

> he foreknew that as he passed the sloblands of Fairview he would think of the cloistral silverveined prose of Newman, that as he walked along the North Strand Road … he would recall the dark humour of Guido Cavalcanti and smile, that as he went by Baird's stonecutting works in Talbot Place the spirit of Ibsen would blow through him like a keen wind … and that passing a grimy marinedealer's shop beyond the Liffey he would repeat the song by Ben Jonson …[53]

These are the associative patterns that structure his daily meanderings. This propensity to yoke places to dramatists and theologians is an attempt to reinscribe the urban environment—notably, a

[52] Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature*, 1880-1980 (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1985), 105.
[53] Joyce, *Portrait*, 190.

rather miserable one, filled with "heaps of wet rubbish" and the stench of offal—with his own intellectual associations. He asserts, as it were, a kind of control through the suggestive power of naming, which offers refuge from both the environmental squalor and his muddled thoughts, plagued as they are by a "dusk of doubt and selfmistrust."[54] However, it is not solely the rambling musings of a precocious university student that such passages (of which there are many) display. In the course of his growth, Stephen's available repertoire of names has expanded, and his childhood difficulties have all but disappeared. No longer troubled by the apparently arbitrary nature of names, he now exists in a state of nominal proliferation, whereby he displays notable facility with a wide variety of figures from a range of contexts.[55] In place of the names he could not remember as a child, and the limited selection that was available as a young adolescent (Dante, Parnell, Clane, Clongowes), he is now in command of numerous labels beyond those of his immediate acquaintance. If a sense of authority is evidenced by his newfound ability to wield names, it is notable that those he provides are admittedly of an intellectually rarefied sort. Deane, addressing the apparently loose correlations between references such as Cavalcanti's "dark humour" and the "provision shops," notes that "the very obscurity of the associations is itself the sign of his preciousness."[56] Such a passage points, certainly, to the cosmopolitan, dandyish figure into which Stephen has styled himself, while also reinforcing the developmental progression by which he has given shape to his newly attained knowledge—two qualities that, as we will see, come to figure heavily in the novel's denouement.

Emerging out of his "reading" of the city through a learned display of references is a geography that, building on his burgeoning associations between the national and the psychological in previous chapters, more explicitly merges the historical with the personal. To take one exemplary instance, his morning journey takes him by the Anglo-Irish, Protestant Trinity College (an intellectual seat of wealth and power traditionally representing Anglican, Unionist interests), which stands in historical opposition to the more recently established University College Dublin, the Catholic institution of which he is now a part. As he struggles to free himself from the oppressive "fetters of the reformed conscience" characterizing Trinity—depicted in no uncertain terms as an unappealing "gray block" of a building "set heavily in the city's ignorance"—his disdain for the Protestant institution is followed in short order by an irreverent encounter with a statue of the "national poet of Ireland."[57] The statue's likeness, Thomas Moore, whose popular verses embody the kind of nostalgic, kitschy Catholic nationalism that Joyce likewise held in contempt, prompts Stephen to think of his friend and fellow student Davin. Davin, an Irish nationalist figured by his classmates as a revolutionary Fenian, offers a personal point of reference as Stephen's mind turns to "the broken lights of Irish myth" and his vexed relationship to nationalist cultural heritage and Gaelic revivalism. Davin's earnest charm and national pride offer a clear alternative to the historical residues of English domination and cultural imposition, even if, in the end, Stephen will famously cast off such national mythmaking as yet another "net" of authority to be "flown by."

Stephen's train of thought demonstrates an archetypal moment of stratification that layers personal references with "official" national history, assimilating the intimate and immediately available details of his life (here, conversations with Davin) with the larger formations that structure and give shape to such details (here, Catholic-Celtic nationalism, represented by Moore). Such

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[54] Ibid., 190-1.

[55] One clear quantitative indication of such proliferation is merely the number of footnotes deemed necessary to explain the array of references: Seamus Deane's edition includes 273 for the fifth chapter alone, averaging a little over three per page.

[56] Deane, introduction to *Portrait,* xiii.

[57] Joyce, *Portrait,* 194.

associations are a means of connecting names, like Moore, which represent abstract ideas, with relevant empirically known names, like Davin. Davin, in other words, gives concrete sensual reality—a face, quite literally—to an abstract idea like Irish revolutionary nationalism. In a moment immediately following this memory, he comes across a slab on Grafton Street in honor of Irish republican Wolfe Tone, at the laying of which he was present with his father: a "tawdry tribute," he wryly recalls, combining his bitter memories of his father with the cheapness of national(ist) mourning. Associations like these comprise Stephen's more sophisticated attempt to integrate the two different kinds of knowledge with which he has been grappling throughout the novel.

In fact, what I have been describing as particulars, universals, and abstractions in fact points to an epistemological distinction between two categorically different ways of knowing. Such a schema in effect differentiates between inferential, mediated knowledge of ideas and immediate awareness, constituted by actual familiarity with a person, place, or thing. Bertrand Russell's classic 1911 account categorizes these two ways of knowing as "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description," an explanation that—due to his status as a popular public intellectual—brought the concepts into contemporary philosophy, though he was by no means the first to adduce such a distinction. For instance, several decades earlier, William James was writing in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) on the various ways we come to know things outside our own sensory experience. And decades before James, the German physician Hermann von Helmholtz was distinguishing between *das Kennan*—sensible impressions of phenomena—and *das Wissen*—inferential knowledge communicated primarily by speech. Though labeled in various ways, this is the difference between propositional (or declarative) knowledge and perceptual experience, and the distinction emerges as the crucial hinge that characterizes Stephen's difficulties in coming to grips with the intertwined trajectories of national-historical and individual narrative forms. Pithily encapsulating the embeddedness of such stratified references, Stephen refers in passing to "crossing Stephen's, that is, my green," in one of his diary entries at the close of the novel.[58] The sly dual reference points to St. Stephen's Green, where University College was located at the time, blending the religious-historical figure after whom the park is named—Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, venerated in the Catholic and Anglican traditions—with the protagonist himself. Akin to his hallucinatory personification as Parnell, he casually elides that which is most immediately known with the historical icon, fusing the two narrative and epistemic modalities. It is an act of naming that asserts a nascent possessiveness, prefiguring his eventual sense of control over the city that is only realized later in *Ulysses* (1922), upon his return from self-imposed exile in Paris.

As it integrates perceptual with inferential knowledge, the intensity of naming in this final chapter brings a sharpened sense of history to bear on Stephen's *Bildung*. The collegiate stage is fittingly the most sophisticated with regard to Stephen's awareness of and receptivity to the formations of Irish revolutionary nationalism and ongoing campaigns for independence. Yet notably, as he enters the corridors of the university, this awareness registers as an absence: meandering down the hall in avoidance of his French lecture, he senses that "the Ireland of Tone and of Parnell seemed to have receded in space."[59] The withdrawal of the representative heroes of Irish nationalism (albeit of two quite different forms, Tone's nationalism embracing a more radical, secularized republicanism, Parnell's espousing parliamentary independence while appealing to Irish Catholic patriotism) leaves a hollow core at the center of ongoing fractured debates over the problem of Ireland. This felt lack is marked by a suspicion of "extraterritoriality," occurring in the presence of what Deane labels the "two masters": the dual hierarchies of the British empire and the

[58] Joyce, *Portrait,* 271.
[59] Ibid., 199.

Catholic Church, each of which lays claims to Ireland.[60] In step with this thought, Stephen suspects himself to be "walking among aliens" in traversing the halls; his alienation from the twin imperialisms, whose extranational authority he comes to recognize in the Anglophilic intellectual ethos and the Jesuit cultural orthodoxy of the college, feeds an increasingly cynical aestheticism.[61] Neither model of cultural heritage suffices for Stephen, who—in sneering at Davin's prideful, nostalgic patriotism—likewise discards Irish nativism. Crucially, his professed trifold rejection of Roman, English, and Irish authorities emerges out of the elemental ability to identify these forces in the first place: it is both apogee and end of the trajectory charted over the course of the novel. This route traces a path from his juvenile preoccupation with "know[ing] well what politics mean[s]," to realizing politics are instantiated in names like Parnell (and eventually, many others), to rejecting all instantiations of political authority. And, as we will see, he locates an alternative solution in the intellectual context of a different scholastic figure: Thomas Aquinas, who provides a unifying model for Stephen's epistemic and perceptual struggles.

From Ockham to Aquinas

As Stephen absorbs the "spectral words of Aristotle and Aquinas" in the course of his university career, his sensibilities progress from an ambient awareness of the symptoms of Irish nationalist politics to a more clearly developed recognition of their presence, even as he distances himself from the conversations and material concerns surrounding him. Indeed, he attempts not only to reject this emergent political awareness, but to displace it with an ostensibly apolitical aesthetic sensibility. So while his friends and classmates bicker and jest over "nationality, language, religion," Stephen remains aloof, preoccupied with the development of his ambitious and ultimately derivative aesthetic theory, indebted to scholastic philosophy.[62] His theorizations are drawn directly from Aquinas, whose statement on beauty from *Summa Theologica* he quotes to the dean of studies in their well-known encounter in the lecture hall: "*pulcra sunt quae visa placent*" ("those things are beautiful that please the eye"). He has become, in fact, a self-proclaimed budding Thomist, working "by the light of one or two ideas of Aristotle and Aquinas" and brooding over "a garner of slender sentences from Aristotle's poetics and psychology and *Synopsis Philosophiae Scholasticae ad mentem divi Thomae*" (the latter is a slim handbook of Aquinas's thought).[63] It is, therefore, worth looking briefly at these "one or two ideas" of Aquinas from which his version of aesthetics derives; as we will see, the theory he submits to his classmates marks a radical transformation in his understanding of the nature of concepts.

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[60] Deane, *Celtic Revivals,* 92. Deane further notes that Joyce (like Stephen) understood himself to be a "slave" of these two masters, both of which he also rejected. Joyce touches on these dual, opposing forms of authority his 1907 lecture "Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages," as well as his 1910 essay "The Home Rule Comet." *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

[61] For an historical overview of the "University Question," including an accounting of the colonial politics behind University College Dublin's formation—as well as its development under the Jesuit rector William Delany in the 1890s—see the section "Forms of the Community" in chapter 5 of Gibson's *The Strong Spirit,* 182-206.

[62] Joyce, *Portrait*, 220.

[63] Ibid., 202, 191. Fran O'Rourke notes that this is the only Thomist work explicitly referenced in the novel, and that its use for Stephen is likely fictional: "the title suited Joyce's purpose, as it suggested pithily the kind of volume likely to contain the pennyworth of Thomism needed to creatively stimulate a personal aesthetic." *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2022), 44-5.

Stephen's account of aesthetics, articulated at length to Lynch, emphasizes stasis, whereby the "mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing" in the presence of that which is properly beautiful.[64] "Improper art," on the contrary, arouses the "kinetic" feelings of desire or loathing: we are either pulled in or pushed away in response to pornographic or didactic forms of art. Only when the mind is elevated into a higher state of transcendence, whereby it ceases to experience the intensity of dynamic affective states (whether positive or negative), does true "esthetic apprehension" occur.[65] The concept of achieving cognitive equilibrium via the aesthetic encounter is an idea lifted directly from the Thomist understanding of beauty, by which the beautiful interrupts desire: "*ad rationem pulchri pertinet quod in ejus aspectu seu cognitione quietetur appetitus"* ("It appertains to the nature of beauty that, when it is seen or known, desire ceases").[66] In effect, the beautiful provides access to a higher state of being, one of pleasure and stasis, that counters the libidinal and overwhelming effects of environment, experience, and sensation. In emphasizing three formal criteria of beauty—*integritas, consonantia, claritas,* or proportion, integrity, and clarity (translated by Stephen as wholeness, harmony, and radiance)—the Thomist aesthetic is fundamentally concerned with the relationship of essence to existence. Beauty attaches to existence as such, constituting what Umberto Eco describes as "ontological": "A thing may be said to 'be' in the act of combining its essence with its existence, and this act involves a proportion, a concordance, a harmony. This proportion, furthermore, is constitutive of beauty. Thus, everything is beautiful insofar as it 'is,' because it 'is' in virtue of a harmony of essence with existence."[67] This is an admittedly capacious definition of the beautiful, offering in effect a transcendental understanding that places beauty on "a rarified metaphysical level"; it is, for Aquinas, a category that offers access to the real, via its grounding in the "concrete substantiality of things."[68]

Access to the aesthetic, as it were, nevertheless comes from the power of the sensible, even as the act of apprehension points beyond the material substance to the metaphysical quality of existence. Sensory perception is, after all, the first stage in Thomist epistemology, which proceeds in a series of distinct steps: sensation, perception, and imagination come first, followed by the provision of the concept, and concluding with judgment (a process that culminates in naming). As O'Rourke summarizes, knowledge "germinates in sensation, buds in perception, blossoms in the concept, and bears fruit in judgment."[69] For Aquinas, then, it all begins in the initial moment of apprehension (*apprehensio)*, a term that looms large in the lexicon of Joyce's early notebooks, and one that has a long association in the history of philosophy with knowledge. In the scholastic tradition, *simplex apprehensio* refers to the intellect's perception of a thing's nature or essence (its *quidditas,* literally whatness). It is an originary cognitive act of sense-perception prior to affirmation or judgment, dependent on "the analogy between physically 'taking hold of,' or 'seizing,' an object and mentally 'grasping' a thing's nature through intellectual intuition."[70] This phase in particular captivates Stephen, who in his lecture to Lynch on beauty, reaffirms the fundamentally sensible (specifically, visual) nature of the process as he details the phases through which one passes in the process of apprehension. Taking a basket "which a butcher's boy had slung inverted on his head" as an aesthetic object, he claims that one must first "separate the basket from the rest of the visible

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[64] Joyce, *Portrait*, 222.
[65] Ibid., 225.
[66] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (London: Blackfriars), 1964-76, I 2ae, I.
[67] Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas,* trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 85.
[68] Ibid., 85, 70.
[69] O'Rourke, *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas*, 178.
[70] Ibid., 183.

universe which is not the basket … the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehend it as *one* thing."[71] Following this moment of wholeness (*integritas*), one comes in time to see the basket in its greater complexity, moving from a sense of its unity to a heightened sensitivity to its composition, apprehending it as "complex, multiple, divisible, separable."[72] At the crux of this theory is the fundamental importance of the perceptual act in determining everything that follows. By this logic, the way we perceive something—the extent of its borders, what it includes and excludes, or in Stephen's words, the "bounding line" about the object—determines what becomes possible to say or think about it.[73] Once the sensible parameters are determined, judgment then proceeds as the moment of final realist naming: it is the act of judgment that guarantees that the name is not a mere mental act.

To be sure, Aquinas nowhere offers a coherent treatise on aesthetics; Stephen's "applied Aquinas" is necessarily derived from Thomistic thought on a range of other topics, including his metaphysics, theories of knowledge, and psychology.[74] In fact, this makes sense when we consider the problems with which Stephen has been grappling throughout the novel, which, at root, concern questions of ontology (what and how things exist) and epistemology (how we come to—and what it means to—know). In particular, as this chapter has explored, Stephen's focus remains trained upon the ontological and epistemic nature of abstract and universal concepts: that is, whether and how general, non-demonstrative terms exist, and how we might come to understand them. What his Thomist theory of aesthetics ultimately offers is a solution to the nominalist suspicions symptomatized by the fraught endeavor of naming. While Ockham's nominalism grants that only particulars exist, allowing that universals are solely a creation of the mind, Aquinas's realism provides an ontology that serves both Stephen's burgeoning aestheticism and his ongoing preoccupation with the meaning of abstract concepts, including those he attempts to reject: "nationality, language, and religion." For Aquinas, universals and abstractions do exist as concepts in the mind (and not in a separate ideal realm, as per Platonic realism). Against Ockham, he contends that real connections pertain among generically similar things, and that—crucially—we can know and name them. The name inheres as a kind of end, though one that must be discovered in the act of judgment. In Aquinas, then, Stephen finds the resolution to his naming problem.

The Joycean Bildungsroman traces a path from Ockham's nominalist ontology to Aquinas's realist one, embedded in Stephen's version of Thomist aesthetics. Realism, in this context, indexes a

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[71] Joyce, *Portrait*, 230.

[72] Ibid.

[73] It is worth noting that Stephen's explanation of Thomist cognition is not, strictly speaking, quite correct. As O'Rourke clarifies, his "use of terms is at variance with Aquinas when he states that to apprehend the basket, the mind must first draw a line separating it from everything else" (*Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas,* 189). Stephen erroneously gives priority to an object's distinction from every other being (in Thomist terms, the transcendental *aliquid,* or *aliud quid,* "some other thing"). For Aquinas, then, seeing the basket would not necessitate the mind separating it "from the rest of the visible universe," as apprehension is not a multi-step process. Rather, for Aquinas—as for Aristotle—we perceive an object directly, in all its autonomy, as *res* (a thing). For a detailed account of Stephen's analysis of Thomist aesthetics, see O'Rourke, 187-90.

[74] O'Rourke, *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas,* 166. O'Rourke excavates the influence of Aquinas on Joyce's early "reflections on beauty," taking Stephen's pronouncements in *Portrait,* as well as in the earlier prototype *Stephen Hero,* as starting points. She notes as well the enormous influence of Joyce's university career, where he—like Stephen—was steeped in the explicitly Thomist atmosphere of University College.

belief that universals and abstractions—those non-demonstrable concepts—actually do exist in one form or another, and this offers Stephen a kind of solution for the questions that have dogged him throughout the novel. He lands on a Thomist aesthetic that asserts the relation of essence to existence; recall that, as Eco expounds, the quality of beauty itself derives from this proportion. The aesthetic, then, confers real existence on a thing that was initially, per Stephen's earlier understanding, just a name. Beauty *is* being, for Aquinas, because of its teleological nature: it possesses an end. Thus, over the course of the novel, Joyce takes us from a nominalist problematic to a realist solution, which transpires for Stephen via the work of art—his chosen medium being poetry, evidenced by the villanelle he produces in this final chapter; though widely derided in the critical corpus for its crudeness and banality, it is nevertheless a vivid indication of his newfound conviction. Art, by offering access to the aesthetic, makes concepts real. More precisely, it specifies the very manner of their reality. In one of his expository moments at the close of the novel, Stephen famously states to Cranly that he "will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church," prefiguring his climactic proclamation of *non serviam* in *Ulysses*. The chosen alternative to such servitude is what he figures as an aesthetic "revolt": "I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can."[75] This, then, is his answer to the perceived insufficiency of descriptive categories exposed by the problem of naming: art is the medium through which concepts gain meaningful reality. The disconnect repeatedly revealed in the movement away from particulars—from concrete, immediate experience to non-demonstrable, contested concepts—is one for which nominalism offers an initial explanatory paradigm, and Thomist aesthetics an eventual solution. If the endpoint of Joycean historical perception, routed through the epistemic drama of names, results in (Stephen's) political rejection, it also offers a framework for comprehension.

Rather than offering a singular resolution to Stephen's preoccupation with how and what a term like "politics" signifies, his realist teleology leads to a different understanding of politics—one that sharpens its relation to other non-demonstrable, abstract concepts swirling more explicitly through this final chapter, like nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism. His revolt against national forms of authority (whether British or Irish) returns us to Seamus Deane's earlier claim that Joyce "discovered the fictive nature of politics" through Irish nationalist discourse.[76] In fact, Stephen comes to grasp the meaning of "politics" by recognizing that it is not an object in the first place. The relevant object here is, rather, Ireland: politics happens when it is named, contested, and laid claim to. As such, politics is a problem of relationality, and so it is not subject to the same problem of uncertain signification that Stephen initially encounters with labels for people and places, especially those that are not immediately experienced. Simply put, one does not need to name politics itself; rather, it occurs in the naming of something else, such as a nation, a form of authority, or even—in one of the more openly charged scenes of linguistic dispute in the novel—a tundish.[77] Politics, then, is the *contestation* of naming. This is perhaps most evident with the example of "Ireland": by the

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[75] Joyce, *Portrait,* 268-9.

[76] Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 105.

[77] Stephen's famous confrontation with the dean of studies over a supposedly Irish word, "tundish," that in fact turns out to be "good old blunt English" is the most explicit encounter with colonial discursive authority. Stephen reflects: "The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine… I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech." *Portrait,* 274, 205. Here, a single instance of naming takes on the weight of Irish displacement, a history condensed into the word "tundish," which concisely "names" the dispossession of Stephen's "native" language even as his linguistic knowledge outstrips the dean's.

novel's end, what Stephen's journey of *Bildung* demonstrates is a sequence of contested namings of Ireland: Catholic, Protestant, Wolfe Tone, Parnell, Trinity College, University College, England, Rome, and so on.

The "proto-revolutionary" formations that suffuse Stephen's world are defined by debates over what Ireland is and should be: these are the essential questions that form the basis of the conflict over which forms of independence are appropriate. *Portrait's* very setting is thus a subject of dispute; as it obliquely records a prologue to the Irish revolutionary period, in which a (contested) nation teeters on the verge of revolt, Stephen's troubles with naming register an imperial configuration that is steadily, if gradually, corroding. Such are the eventually realized critical stakes of the problems regarding universals, abstractions, and non-demonstrative ideas that are indexed by naming. It is through these linguistic difficulties, provoked by the limitations of empirical observation, that he eventually uncovers the drama of imperial contestation and national emergence. What Joyce finally means by politics, then, is simply this: it is the situation in which we find ourselves when the name of the object is *itself* the thing that has to be asserted, denied, or fought over. The Thomistic framework, discovered in his later adolescence, gives Stephen a way to settle the problems that arise with perceived deficiencies of labels by allowing him to finally give names to contested places and abstract concepts. When he does so, they have become art. And art, in this sense (at least for Stephen) pauses the nominal contestation, thereby solving these uncertainties. Via Aquinas, Stephen comes to see the persistent concepts churning in the atmosphere of his youth, including ideas of nation, language, and religion—those things whose names are a matter of politics—as real only in their aesthetic manifestations.

CHAPTER THREE

The Grammar of Waning Empire: Elizabeth Bowen's Indirect Coloniality

From the contested endeavor of naming in Joyce, which comes to reveal a disputed national setting, we turn to a novel where these terms of debate are so poorly articulated that any form of direct engagement with historical setting is foreclosed. The descriptive evasions of Elizabeth Bowen's historical novel *The Last September* (1929) take up Irish national emergence as a central yet unstated presence at the heart of the text. If Stephen Dedalus ends his novel with a profusion of names, Bowen's text, in confronting the nature of British imperial rule, performs precisely the opposite gesture: in her novel we witness a total failure of naming. And yet, by most critical accounts, her text rather clearly concerns the Irish War of Independence (1919-21), comprising a narrative that apprehends a pivotal moment in the shifting contours of British imperial power. It seems evident that the ongoing guerilla warfare between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and British forces provides the tense backdrop for the main drive of the narrative. The novel's historical moment—September of 1920—offers a snapshot within a much longer narrative of colonial devolution, capturing an effort to understand Ireland's struggles against British imperial rule, and the place of nationhood in the decline of empire marked by the end of the Union. At least, so the standard reception has it. And yet, what exactly do we mean when we state that this novel is about the establishment of the Irish Free State, or about the Troubles, or about—more generally—war and colonial strife?[1] The apparent subject is complicated by Bowen's recalcitrant language, which only gingerly touches upon the historical landscape. After all, the novel persistently avoids explicit mention of the war, precluding any common consensus regarding the ongoing state of affairs and cultivating a pervasive atmospheric of indeterminacy. Strange, then, to label this text "about" something that it can neither name nor define.

Of course, this is not to say that the novel *isn't* about the last, violent days of British rule in Ireland, but rather, that the *way* it is about them is in itself revealing. Bowen's narrative, so resolutely evasive when it comes to the specifics of anti-colonial conflict, complicates any straightforward claim of revolutionary setting. Indeed, whether or not the situation can be properly understood in terms of the model of coloniality is a tacit problematic at the center of the text, contributing to the paucity of available terms by which to understand the unfolding events. Instead, the novel offers a world that resists objectification: both through the eschewal of definite description and through the perspective of its characters, who defy reciprocal understanding as they speak beyond each other. If concrete specificity—the labeling of wars, armies, national boundaries, and the materialism of colonial modernity—appears unimportant in Bowen, this speaks not to its irrelevance, but to the variability of characters' orientations to their world, which exceed the containment of descriptive specificity.

To illustrate this narrative resistance, take a particularly telling scene from near the end of the novel, in which Lady Naylor attempts to dissolve the engagement between her niece Lois Farquar, a member of the Anglo-Irish upper class, and the English subaltern Gerald Lesworth. Confronting Gerald, she states with sharp disapproval: "The less talk, the less indirect discussion round and

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[1] The use of the term "Troubles" is Bowen's own; here it does not refer to the era of IRA struggle in the later twentieth century, with which it has now come to be associated. My use of this term will be consistent with the contemporaneous understanding, designating the Irish revolutionary period of the early twentieth century.

about things, the better, I always think."[2] The scene is full of awkward miscues and palpable discomfort, with Gerald taking offense at Lady Naylor's suggestion of his relative poverty, and Lady Naylor too embarrassed to directly mention the premarital relations she fears are occurring. Lurking in the background is Gerald's identity: a representative of British imperial authority, his presence in Ireland remains deeply and violently contested. The conversation is not entirely futile—in the end, Gerald registers her point well enough—but it falls far short of clear consensus, leaving even the precise subject under discussion undefined ("For the present, I'd leave love out of the question—" Lady Naylor remarks, to which Gerald retorts, "But I thought that *was* the question!").[3] What is most remarkable about Lady Naylor's statement, however, is that it captures, in one pithy sentence, contradictory tendencies dramatized throughout the novel: the characters' abiding impulses to confront, alongside their persistent inability to do so. As Lady Naylor ostensibly pushes for more direct clarity about the subject at hand—in this case, of Gerald's marital unsuitability as a relatively poor English officer—her utterance thwarts its own stated goal. Her language urges candor but performs the opposite: curling around the prepositions "round and about" (which spatially contrast "direct"), she refuses to name the "things" that they should, supposedly, be candidly discussing. Ultimately, Lady Naylor is unable to speak the "thing" with which she is so preoccupied; her language remains at a level of generality that makes conversation available as it simultaneously frustrates apprehension of the very subject at hand.

As I will argue in this chapter, Lady Naylor's response to Gerald is characteristic of discursive exchange in *The Last September*. Dialogic discourse frequently makes use of terms so general in reference—such as, for instance, "thing"—that they impede clarity and mutual understanding. Yet the remarkable paucity of available terms with which to understand the unfolding events and circumstances is accompanied by an equally powerful impetus toward attempted revelation. As characters attempt to broach the circumstances of their lives, whether in regard to the messy cross-cultural ties between the Anglo-Irish and the English, or the configurations of imperial conquest and Ascendancy settler privilege that enable such unions to occur in the first place, they employ language that weaves a circuitous web around the objects of their concern. Lady Naylor's incongruous statement typifies a narrative technique that offers an ill-defined, hazily sketched perspective on its diegetic surroundings, even as, again and again, it attempts to point to that very context. Her refusal to name the marital circumstances supposedly under discussion, which fundamentally hinge on Gerald's very presence in Ireland, discloses a fraught orientation toward her own milieu.

Indeed, for all its traction as an historical novel, *The Last September* possesses no easily assumed, definable setting. By this I do not mean that its characters are unaware of their localized physical place within the novel at any given time, whether at Danielstown, the archetypal Anglo-Irish Big House where much of the novel is set, or in the Fogarty's drawing-room in nearby Clonmore. Rather, these spaces comprise a setting whose historical and conceptual ambiguity renders it indescribable—or, indeed, unsayable. The problem hinges on the *scale* of setting, which I here take to be operating at a conceptual level beyond that of material surroundings: at once temporal and geographic, setting indexes the political landscape that suffuses the social atmosphere of the novel.[4]

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[2] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 181.

[3] Ibid., 182.

[4] To be sure, the issue of how to describe British imperialism in Ireland has remained a heated point of contention in scholarly debates over the last several decades. Joe Cleary's chapter on "Postcolonial Writing in Ireland" makes the case that while Ireland was granted parliamentary representation in Westminster after the Acts of Union in 1800, its domestic structures (including

And so, what cannot be assumed are the historical events constituting the narrative background, the imperial arrangements to which Danielstown and the Fogarty's drawing-room owe their existence. This problem of setting offers an opportunity to reflect on the phenomenology of waning empire, one made available by the novel's discrepancy between what its reader and its characters perceive as the novel's setting. For while it may seem obvious to the reader that the novel takes place in County Cork, Ireland in September of 1920, during the midst of the Anglo-Irish War, the novel's characters are resolutely unable to say—or even perceive—as much. By staging a conflict between the historical landscape and the available discourse with which to describe it, *The Last September* dramatizes the lack of shared language for what might otherwise seem to be the most basic "given," one's own surroundings.

This chapter explores the possibilities that arise in a novel oriented toward, yet unable to name, the circumstances of anti-colonial, revolutionary conflict at the twilight of British imperial rule in Ireland. In doing so, it proposes a connection between referential instability and imperial collapse. In attending to the ambiguity of setting, exposed through problems of perception and dialogue, my focus re-orients much of the critical discussion of the novel—which foregrounds Lois as the irresolute protagonist at the narrative center—by instead demonstrating how Bowen destabilizes the entire referential apparatus via dialogic and perceptual indeterminacy. In what follows, I explore the intersections of Bowen's narrative form and the waning imperial situation it obliquely depicts. First, I establish how a fundamental un-shareability lies at the heart of characters' partial and oblique perceptions of the novel's setting, which remains a topic of constant negotiation. Indeed, for much of the novel, the "situation" in Ireland eludes not only definition but concrete recognition, lending the narrative a blurry focus that Neil Corcoran aptly terms "tangential perception."[5] The estrangement that follows from this perceptual isolation, by which no two subjectivities share a common point of view or understanding of events, is symptomatic of the novel's unstable frame of reference. Yet it is in moments of dialogic interaction—those frustrated and opaque exchanges so characteristic of Bowen's narrative art—that we most clearly see the articulation of referential instability. The second part of this chapter turns to these moments of day-to-day discourse to explore the friction resulting from the linguistic encounter with historical experience. What we find in these fumbling encounters is not a failure or negation of language, but rather the intensification of a particular sort of generality, whereby language remains at a high enough level of abstraction to allow for multiple referential possibilities. I call this an "enabling generality," and I take it to facilitate conversation, while revealing that there is no innocent neutrality with regard to supposedly vague terminology like "things" or "the situation" (another widely employed, and widely variable, term discussed below). The lack of discursive specificity—apparent in the many instances in which characters speak past each other, even when using the same lexicon—exposes the absence of a shared idiom of "empire" by which subjects could frame their milieu and the events occurring

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property and landlord relations) were resolutely colonial, defined by processes of conquest, settlement, dismantling and replacement (in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, ed. Ato Quayson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 2012, 539-42). For a historiographical approach, see Stephen Howe's pointedly titled article "Questioning the (Bad) Question: 'Was Ireland a Colony?'," which provides a concise overview of late-twentieth century debates over the applicability of (post)colonial theoretical frameworks in Irish studies. He notes that the disputes have tended to be characterized as revisionist or postcolonial, while also suggesting that the terms on which they are based (such as, most basically, "colony") are simultaneously under-defined and over-worked (*Irish Historical Studies* 36, no. 142 (2008), 138).

[5] Corcoran, "Discovery of a Lack: History and Ellipsis in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*," *Irish University Review* 31.2 (2001): 206.

within it. To put this another way, for Bowen's characters the devolution of the empire of which they are a part is never fully cognized, but rather felt. This felt-but-not-fully-known quality is rendered linguistically: none of the actual historical contours are given in the novel, and there is no common vocabulary or referrable framework for characters to grasp the circumstances they face. They are, so to speak, caught between events they do not have a language for, and the use of the very language that they do not possess.

By identifying character's vague perceptions and equivocal dialogue as problems of setting, this chapter reframes past scholarly accounts of Bowen's engagement with questions of Irish revolutionary politics. My approach intervenes in a critical tendency to read Bowen's indirect and often obscure prose as either generically characteristic of the Anglo-Irish Big House novel of manners inflected with Gothic conventions (Nicholas Allen, Maria DiBattista, W.J. McCormack), or symptomatic of delusional political quietism and/or class ambivalence (Declan Kiberd, Seamus Deane, Neil Corcoran).[6] In fact, the perceptual and communicative patterns that emerge in the novel privilege multiplicity as characters negotiate terms adequate to describing the experience of imperial crisis and to labeling its effects. I ultimately suggest that such language signifies *more,* rather than less, about the world it concerns, indicating not avoidance, but a form of indirection that resists the rigidity of direct and explicit narrativizing. Emerging from these readings is a reinforced notion that setting is not a neutral category, but freighted with the baggage of social and cultural determinants that inflect how we might understand what might otherwise seem to be the most basic "given."[7]

The "Half-Glimpse" of Revolutionary Violence

Let us begin with the contested nature of partial apprehension, which introduces a marked volatility into even the most arguably overt scenes of revolutionary encounter. To speak of ambiguity with regard to revolutionary turmoil is not to dismiss the physical effects of violent conflict; indeed, the most explicit moment of violence in the novel is notable precisely for its exhibition of the narrative's unstable orientation to the late colonial landscape. This is the infamous mill scene, which comprises the sole confrontation between colonial antagonists in the entire text, and it vividly dramatizes the elusive paradigm of perception that structures the novel's atmospheric of indeterminacy. The scene opens with Marda Norton, a guest to the Danielstown estate, strolling in the Darra Valley with the older Hugo Montmorency, a fellow visitor, and the young protagonist

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[6] A range of scholarly literature by John Coates, Julian Moynahan, and Neil Corcoran—and more recently James Wurtz, Nicholas Allen, Matthew Brown, and Derek Hand—addresses ambivalent colonialism in the Irish literary context, though with varying degrees of concern over language. A pervasive inquiry, however, remains occupied with the disjunction between colonial situations and their recognition as such: essentially, offering an understanding of colonial crisis as existential, a framework in which this article engages.

[7] And yet the setting of Bowen's novel is frequently identified in unequivocal terms. To take one example, in her 1992 monograph *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), Heather Jordan Bryant argues for the centrality of wartime experience in Bowen's fiction; of *The Last September* she writes that the "bitterness of the struggles" suffuses the novel, which "depicts Bowen's intense reaction to her proximity to the battles tearing apart southern Ireland," 47. Similarly, John Coates affirms a scholarly insistence "that the Anglo-Irish political crisis is the subject" of the novel, citing the political atmosphere as the primary scholarly frame of reference, albeit one with which he takes issue. "Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*: The Loss of the Past and the Modern Consciousness," *Durham University Journal* 51, no. 2 (1990): 205-6.

Lois. All three, it should be noted, are Anglo-Irish, and all three evince deep ambivalence about the British presence in Ireland. Upon discovering an ostensibly abandoned water mill, one of many such features of the landscape ("those dead mills—the country was full of them"), Lois and Marda enter the derelict building, leaving Hugo to his own devices.[8] In the course of their exploration, the two women discover an Irish Republican soldier hiding out in the ruins, and a brief confrontation ensues. At the precise moment of physical violence, however, the narrative viewpoint shifts, and we inhabit the perspective of the absent Hugo. It is through his confusion that the nature of the incident emerges:

> A shot, making rings in the silence. Eardrums throbbing, he gathered up the reverberations with incredulity. A battle—a death in the mill? *Whose* death? … They appeared in a doorway and looked at him gravely, rather suspiciously. Marda put up a hand to her mouth—in an incredible half-glimpse, he thought he saw blood round the lips … Marda, perplexedly, continued sucking her hand. Then she took Lois's handkerchief, dabbed at her knuckles, wiped the blood from her lips—where no more came—returned to her knuckles. 'I have lost some skin,' she said at last resentfully. 'Just, a pistol went off—you heard?—by accident. I seem to have lost some pieces of skin.'[9]

The scene unfolds via multiple interruptions embedded within one another: Lois and Marda interrupt a sleeping soldier, and the resulting confrontation interrupts the reverie of Hugo, who subsequently interrupts the women's exchange with the unknown soldier. In a broader sense, narrative disruption impedes the reader's access to the gunshot. In accordance with the incompletion that frames these proceedings, Hugo's apprehension of the physical encounter—which is ours as well—is resolutely partial. Marda's wound, itself a result of an indirect trajectory, appears to him in a "half-glimpse," while the blood is displaced from the site of injury to her lips. The whole event is one of awkwardness rather than fear, underscored by the perplexity and embarrassment that the two women are repeatedly described as feeling. The recurrence of questions (a death in the mill? whose death? you heard?), in addition to the characters' fragmented attempts at communication, evidence epistemic constraints that impede certain knowledge—in this case, the circumstances of the shooting.

Indeed, the violence enacted remains uncircumscribed by any definitive interpretive valence, be it classed or gendered antipathy, nationalist aggression, or purely coincidental bad luck. Marda, for her part, insists that the gunshot was entirely accidental, and her reaction is one of steadfast denial: "Someone went upstairs backward, not very sensibly, not having eaten much for four days. There was some plaster—the pistol went off, naturally. It was silly, really. Look at my beastly hand—I was holding on to the door."[10] Her story, told to Hugo upon his arrival at the scene, elides the suggestion of malign intent and attributes the pistol's firing to a physical awkwardness: a stumble on the stairs, occasioned by the weakness of hunger. That the pistol would go off in such circumstances is only "natural," she states, suggesting an inevitability that renders no one culpable. She further reimagines the Irish soldier as a nondescript "someone," a label that decidedly erases his ethno-national signification. And yet, Marda's account of the event varies from what the narrator appears to suggest. In the moments leading up to the discharge, the narrator describes the soldier as gazing upon the women with "calculating intentness, like a monkey," not scrupling to hide his

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[8] Bowen, *The Last September*, 123.
[9] Ibid., 126.
[10] Ibid.

"evident dislike."[11] The unflattering (and racially tinged) simile, alongside his manifest distrust of and hostility toward the women, inscribes the soldier with malevolence, providing him with more motive for violence than Marda ever intimates. Most damning is his warning to the women, a threat that resonates with the novel's numerous portents of destruction: "It is time … that yourselves give up walking. If you have nothing better to do, you had better keep in the house while y'have it."[12] It is a threat marked by class antagonism, leveled at the idle caste of Anglo-Irish landowners who, though they may express a limited sympathy with the national claims of the "native" Irish, remain nevertheless outside the sphere of revolutionary solidarity.

These threatening implications are entirely dismissed by the women once Hugo enters the mill. Marda chooses not only to rebuff the possibility of the soldier's malintent, but to re-write the encounter entirely. She declares that the story to be recounted back at Danielstown will be one of an innocent, clumsy accident—this time, on her part. Her re-telling enacts a complete erasure of the gun itself, replacing its violence with a piece of the ruined mill itself: "No, I might have done—*this*—on the broken edge of a slate: it will be the edge of a slate if you don't mind. And, being me, it was bound to happen."[13] While her lie is partly motivated by a wish to avoid later conflict, the impulse to reject the conditions in which they find themselves—to deny, that is, her literal confrontation with a subject of nationalist resistance—erases the guerilla violence roiling the countryside around them. Though the encounter has the latent energy of revolutionary Irish republicanism, its potential as an act of political aggression is defused by Marda's casual dismissal: her (semi)consciousness of the country around her collides with the immutable fact of the soldier's existence. What's more, this secondary version of events excludes not only the politics of the soldier's position, but his very existence (in the eyes of the two women, at least). Lois accedes, as she chimes in to reinscribe the reality of the apparent circumstances: "There was never anybody, we never saw anybody, *you* never heard—"[14] In this light, the answer to Hugo's question—a death in the mill? *whose* death?—becomes the Irishman himself, who is written out of the narrative entirely. The culminating moment of violence in the novel is thus also a moment of its utter denial.

Or, rather, its utter *deniability*. What is most striking in this scene is not necessarily the fact that Marda wants to cover up the discomfort of their confrontation, but that, in her attempt to do so, she illuminates the narrative's abiding emphasis on indeterminacy. Embedded within the partial descriptions and dialogic interruptions comprising the entire scene is an irresolvable ambiguity regarding what "actually" happened—that is, whether the solider intended to shoot Marda, and whether Marda actually believes that he didn't. While the narrator's initial descriptions might insinuate otherwise, no narrative clarification intrudes to assert its truth; Hugo clearly believes in the malevolence of the soldier, while Lois repeatedly insists that the two women "swore" themselves to secrecy (between themselves or with the soldier is a likewise unelaborated detail). And so the novel maintains, at the climax of colonial encounter, a fundamental instability: no one version of events is ever recognized by the text. The mill encounter encapsulates, in nearly every possible way, dialogic and perceptual indirection: physically, as the bullet only grazes Marda's hand; visually, as indicated by Hugo's "half-glimpse"; and verbally, as the encounter is dismissed and then re-inscribed as a non-event. In so doing, the scene *insists* on its deliberate ambiguity. To be sure, this structure of partial apprehension is troped throughout the novel, repeatedly troubling the possibility of a singular version of events. What is dramatized here is an epistemic problem, where the "true" nature of

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[11] Ibid., 125.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 127.
[14] Ibid.

colonial encounter is not merely unknown, but unknowable, at least as a singular and shared instantiation of knowledge.

While the mill scene vividly captures the manifold nature of narrative indirection, it is not solely in moments of violence or face-to-face confrontation that such indeterminacy surfaces. Lois, as the protagonist to whose thoughts we are most privy, anchors the novelistic perspective; it is her judgments and fleeting impressions upon which the narrator dwells. In one particularly charged scene, a trench-coated soldier brushes past her in the demesne of Danielstown, her uncle's estate, as she remains hidden from sight. The near encounter prompts a rather knotty reflection upon her relationship to Ireland, which reveals the depths of her sense of isolation and estrangement. The entirety of the scene is worth quoting in its richness:

> First, she did not hear footsteps coming, and as she began to notice the displaced darkness thought what she dreaded was coming, was there within her … Then steps, hard on the smooth earth; branches slipping against a trench-coat …
>
> 'It's a fine night,' she would have liked to observe; or, to engage his sympathies: 'Up Dublin!' or even—since it was in her uncle's demesne she was straining under a holly—boldly—'What do you want?'
>
> It must be because of Ireland he was in such a hurry; down from the mountains, making a short cut through their demesne. Here was something else that she could not share. She could not conceive of her country emotionally: it was a way of living, an abstract of several landscapes, or an oblique frayed island, moored at the north but with an air of being detached and washed out west from the British coast.
>
> Quite still, she let him go past in contemptuous unawareness. His intentions burnt on the dark an almost visible trail; he might well have been a murderer he seemed so inspired … She thought: 'Has he come for the guns?' A man in a trench-coat had passed without seeing her: that was what it amounted to.[15]

There are multiple currents happening in such a short passage. Lois first apprehends the presence of the other only through a secondary phenomenon, that of the "displaced darkness"; she fears at first a ghostly presence, and is momentarily relieved by the physical, fleshy existence of the soldier. And yet, though the two briefly inhabit the same physical space, they are resolutely not on the same ground. Lois, for her part, seems to lack *any* firm grounding, and vacillates over whether to greet the man with a pleasant banality, a sympathetic nationalistic salutation, or a threatening demand. The radically different possibilities all indicate not only her own sense of uncertainty, but the equal likelihood that she could occupy any site on the spectrum of political positionality: neutrality, solidarity, or partisan aggression. Crucially, none of these possibilities are ever realized, as she remains silent, preferring to inhabit the space of mere potential. This latency resonates with the multiple possibilities of encounter in the mill; in both scenes, Bowen quite clearly maps out the numerous avenues of mutually exclusive options that are never resolved, but which exist in paradoxical simultaneity. This unresolvability is precisely the point, as it pushes against definition writ large: we cannot in this moment pinpoint Lois's own relationship to a marked subject of otherness (though we may locate her by way of her class position, this remains an external supposition). The indirectness of Lois's faculties enables and abets such multiplicity: after all, as we cannot define, neither can she.

Indeed, so "tangential" is her perception that she can only reflect that the soldier's sense of urgency must be "because of Ireland." Here the country itself comes to signify a broad range of

[15] Ibid., 34.

potential motivations that remain not only unsaid, but *unthought*, expressed only in metonymic terms that reveal Lois's failure to precisely identify, or likewise articulate, the object of her senses. Even as she appears mindful of the organizing power that the label "Ireland" holds, she cannot move beyond the primacy of the name itself. The metonymic figuration of "Ireland," in this case, comes to pick up a range of associated meanings, which remain unenumerated, precisely because they are not registered consciously by Lois. Because of what specific aspect of Ireland is the man in such a hurry? Why, and how, has "Ireland" become an object of awareness, and a contested one at that? After all, Ireland is not something that, strictly speaking, can be perceived, nor is it typically a concept that warrants consideration—that is, unless the very idea itself has become uncertain. That Lois is considering the country in its most abstract figuration, while wandering through its underbrush, indicates most clearly its status as a problematic category. Yet she is unable to move beyond this mere awareness of uncertainty, or to formulate either reasons for or clarifications to its ambiguity. Rather, Ireland becomes such a vaguely laden signifier for Lois that its mere invocation is reason enough to explain the soldier's actions.

Despite the evident presence of un-cognized significations, Lois possesses what we might call a meta-cognitive awareness: she acutely perceives a gulf in perception. Immediately following the above reflections on the man's motivations, she notes an unbreachable chasm separating her from the soldier: "Here was something else that she could not share." While the indexical "here" declines to point decisively to any quality or object—indeed, *that* the two figures cannot share is emphasized over *what* they cannot share—it is positioned directly after the sentence in which Ireland serves as the object, indicating that it refers, most generally, to Ireland itself. By pointing back to the metonymic expansiveness of "Ireland," Lois illuminates the basis for their lack of shared experience. Heavy with signification but poorly distinguished, the term thus not only marks the supposed motivation for the soldier's rush, but the crux of the two figures' estrangement from each other. And yet the country—or their respective conceptions of it—is identified as merely one among numerous unshared things ("here was *something else*…"), indicating that the grounds of separation are more extensive than their experiences of Ireland. Because the "something else" remains unarticulated and ancillary, the effect is to emphasize the gap between the two figures as fundamental, a given element of their relationality that need not be elaborated: here is yet another thing that cannot be shared between them. What is more, Bowen identifies this as a failure of capacity rather than will, as marked by the "could not." The incommensurability presented is, then, an entrenched one that neither party appears to have the power to bridge. Each figure exists in their own insular reality, each in their own perspectival isolation. Ultimately, the perceptual gulf extends to a lack of basic mutual awareness: the soldier himself remains ignorant to her presence, as Lois hides silently in the demesne and allows him to pass in "contemptuous unawareness."[16]

While the soldier's conception of "Ireland" remains a mystery, Lois, for her part, regards it as an abstracted entity: "it was a way of living, an abstract of several landscapes, or an oblique frayed island, moored at the north but with an air of being detached and washed out west from the British coast." The country is characterized by a paradoxical attachment to and detachment from Great Britain, to which it is "moored" at the north, the historic site of stronger support for Unionism.[17]

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[16] Ibid., 34.

[17] The nine counties in the northwest comprising the region of Ulster were targeted in the early seventeenth century by James I for plantation; since then the province has retained a large population of Protestants with strong ties to Britain, a community that has traditionally opposed movements for Irish sovereignty. Bowen is obviously acutely aware of this political division, writing in *Bowen's Court* that "…in Ulster, the Protestant Ascendancy was a living fact … and [it] knew that its backbone was English rule" (430).

Though it appears to drift west, and thus away from the epicenter of imperial rule, the island's separation is framed in terms of atmospherics, suggesting that its detachment is not only partial, but in fact illusory: the "frayed island," after all, possesses only an "air" of isolation from Britain—diction that likewise registers an attitudinal position, or a mere *affectation* of detachment.[18] The language here hovers between Lois and the narrator, muddying a forthright ascription of these ruminations to a particular discursive level. While Lois's understanding of Ireland is evidently nebulous and fragmentary, she attributes this epistemic haziness to the island itself, whose rough-hewn edges suggest a state of being neither finished nor polished. Evidently, the "oblique" island is not a stable point of reference between the two; it can be neither shared perceptually nor expressed verbally. In fact, Ireland fails to serve as a stable referential point for Lois herself, evidenced by the resolute abstraction that it remains for her, as if the country itself cannot be individually cognized.

This is a scene of recognition that dramatizes the unrecognized, represented by the narrative formulation of what Lois cannot say. The conflict between perception and expression further cements an underlying tension in the narrative discourse surrounding colonial contact. Akin to the mill encounter, Lois's near confrontation offers a material incarnation of indirection alongside a figurative one. Literally, we might visualize such tangentiality in the not-quite intersecting paths of Lois and the soldier, who come harrowingly close to meeting in the shadowy undergrowth of her uncle's land. Figuratively, the impossibility of shared experience that Lois identifies precludes external expression—so she fails to greet or make contact with the soldier—while it also forestalls internal articulation. That is, she is unable to formulate a fully realized cognition of the myriad possibilities signified by "Ireland," even if it is "her country." Her sense of overpowering estrangement, resulting from this unexpected confrontation with a native Irishman, comprises a recognition of her own unstable, ill-defined national and class position within the rapidly evolving landscape of late colonial crisis.

This scene's abiding resistance to direct knowledge and apprehension exemplifies the novel's preoccupation with the unshared, the unexpressed, and the imprecise. The inability to confront collides with the refusal to look away; to modify Hugo's earlier means of apprehension, we might characterize the characters' model of perception as a *persistent* half-glimpse, one that maintains a steady hold on that which it cannot fully apprehend. To take another illustrative moment, in a particularly explicit instance of performative evasion, Marda casually asks, during an afternoon walk with Hugo, "How far do you think this war is going to go? Will there ever be anything we can all do except not notice?"[19] The notable use of the word "war" here appears at first to place a more concrete label on what has heretofore been an absent descriptor. But it is a peculiar term for Marda to employ, considering this widespread instability of setting that renders the landscape so indefinite. And in fact, at this moment, there is no readily legible and recognizable war, but rather a partially organized paramilitary insurgency; certainly, the Anglo-Irish would not have uniformly conceded to the idea that the situation was describable as a war. R.F. Foster notes that even Britain's use of troops was a deeply controversial decision, as it would necessitate an implicit acknowledgment that the aggressions of the Irish republicans warranted military intervention: "As long as the government refused to accept the republican version of reality as a 'war,' they had to rely chiefly on the police."[20] In addition to marking the word "war" as an uncertain concept, Marda's question cheekily highlights the paradoxical nature of partial apprehension, by which things are perceived without being delimited. The irony here, of course, is that Marda *notices* her ostensible non-noticing (just as Lois

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[18] It is worth noting that the phrasing "washed out west" also evokes the derogatory slur "West Briton," which marks an Anglophilic posture that resists a Celtic Revival-style Irish culturalism.
[19] Ibid., 82.
[20] R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 497.

earlier perceives the limits of her perceptive capacity). As such, Marda's query belies its own meaning, performing a passing acquaintance with the subject as it simultaneously disavows such knowledge. But Marda's remark is telling of more than her dry wit. The contradictory movement between recognition and disavowal throws the central characters' positionality into stark relief against the reality to which they gesture. War, even if the suitability of the label is in question, would appear to be something rather difficult to "not notice," and the misapprehension of an extreme case of conflict such as this indicates the tenacious sense of alienation from even the most empirically obvious circumstances.

These scenes of "half-glimpses" dramatize not only isolation, but perspectival incommensurability. And so, even as the ongoing guerilla warfare between the IRA and British forces remains a near-constant focus of rumination, the topic itself is never precisely perceived or defined. This is an aspect of Bowen's prose that previous criticism tends to identify as either a vague byproduct of bourgeois decorum or (rather less generously) poorly crafted, claims to which I will return at the end of the chapter. While perceptual estrangement emphasizes states of monadic interiority—a sense of profound alienation from the historical landscape—the dialogic consequences of indirection tend in a different direction: toward proliferation. In the variability that Bowen's ambiguous dialogue invites, I suggest that we see an expansion of the possibilities of signification, enabled by the novel's unstable frame of reference. In what follows, I argue that this indefinite language—characterized by "enabling generalities"—indicates not pseudo-aristocratic avoidance, with which it has been previously charged, but a form of purposeful indirection that resists the prescriptiveness of direct and explicit narrativizing.[21] Conversational ambiguity, as I read it, operates in two ways. First, it is an indicator of referential instability, indexing the shifting grounds of British imperial crisis, by which nationalist politics destabilize the authority of the Crown, while the terms of political and social autonomy vacillate rapidly. Second, it functions as a means of invoking excess, and thereby resisting objectification. It is to this language that we now turn.

"The Horrible Thing"

The Last September dramatizes early and often what happens when a single word like "thing"—so common and seemingly innocuous as to pass virtually unnoticed—becomes the source of a troubling, and troublesome, ambiguity. Consider, for example, a scene from early in the novel that stages the problematic of variability. Shortly after their arrival in Danielstown, the Montmorencys gather in the drawing-room with hosts Lady Myra and Sir Richard Naylor and the Naylors' nephew and niece, Laurence and Lois. All are members of the historically ambivalent Anglo-Irish class, split between sympathy with the Irish republicans, with whom they share territorial proximity, and the British, with whom they share social intimacy.[22] Laurence, the young and effete Oxonian, appears the most cognizant of (and sympathetic to) a critique of British rule in the novel, though he always stops short of explicit solidarity. In the midst of otherwise idle

[21] Nicholas Allen, for instance, reads the dinner table scene that I discuss in the next section as part of the "arch manners of aristocratic life" that uphold the "illusion of gentility." "Modernism and the Big House," in *A History of the Modernist Novel,* ed. Gregory Castle (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 455.

[22] It is worth noting, however, that many of the Anglo-Irish, though often seen by the "native," Catholic Irish as too Anglicized to be "real" Irish, were politically aligned with Irish republicans. Indeed, nearly every movement against British Rule since the Union of 1800 was Protestant Ascendancy (or later, Anglo-Irish) led, complicating a clear division of national loyalty by class or religion.

conversation, Francie Montmorency, an old family friend, worries about the likelihood of being shot at by English soldiers while sitting out on the steps of the house. The group is amused at Francie's concerns, and Richard dismisses them out of hand. But as the perspective shifts to Francie's inner thoughts, we learn that "in County Carlow they had said things were bad round here, that she made a grave mistake in coming at all. But then, as Richard would certainly say, that was County Carlow all over."[23] At first glance, Francie's recollection of what "they" had said in County Carlow is unremarkable, even if jarring in its lack of antecedent. "Things were bad," after all, is a common enough phrase. And yet, it points to a conspicuous—and vital—feature of the language of Bowen's characters: their tendency to employ categorically vast terms when describing what is happening around them.

Consider another instance shortly following Francie's recollection. Here, as the group sits down to their meal, Lady Naylor reminisces about the past while the dinner guests wait silently for her to finish. Bowen writes:

> Lady Naylor spoke of the way things were, with her pointed spoon poised over her plate. She noticed the others were waiting, and with a last bright emphatic look in Hugo's direction bent to finish her soup. He said at once to Laurence: "'And what do *you* think of things?'
> 'Things? Over here?'
> 'Yes—yes.'
> 'Seem to be closing in,' said Laurence, crumbling his bread detachedly; 'rolling up rather.[24]

The brevity of this exchange belies its interpretive possibilities. As the reader moves between direct and indirect speech, all three characters—Lady Naylor, Hugo, and Laurence—rely equally on the same word, "thing." Bowen moves swiftly from one application to the next in what is, in fact, a series of remarkable transitions. The very repetition of the word serves to mark its presence, signaling its import at the crux of this passage. In each instance, notably, the context is different, and the sense shifts. When Lady Naylor first speaks of "the way things were," the phrase slides by almost imperceptibly: the colloquial, quotidian nature of the expression seems to warrant no explanation. As a statement, it relies on an assumption of mutual understanding, a presumed order of relations that is undefined because it is undisputed. To speak of how things are (or were) requires no additional clarification and emphasis; it is a phrase that—when successfully deployed—conscripts interlocutors into a shared understanding of the world (or at least the portion of the world being pointed to). And yet, the fact that Lady Naylor holds forth on this subject while the others wait, her "pointed" spoon poised as if for emphasis (indeed, as if to make a point), appears to contradict its seemingly unneeded elaboration. The "bright emphatic" glance she gives to Hugo as she concludes accentuates her otherwise casual, unmarked speech, undermining the presumed assurance that the phrase purportedly commands. In this case, the way things are (or were) is not such a settled matter.

In fact, "the way things were" is not a diegetic phrase—it is the narrator's parlance, and not one, presumably, that the characters hear. As such, though it appears to us in past tense, it does not necessarily follow that it indicates the past *within* the narrative world. From the perspective of the characters, then, Lady Naylor might be speaking of the way things *used to be* or, just as plausibly, the way things *currently are*. The sense of the phrase therefore splits into two temporal possibilities, past and present, each equally conceivable, opening a narrative fissure in which two mutually exclusive meanings silently coexist alongside each other. Neither possibility is given particular weight until Hugo's sudden, confrontational inquiry to Laurence—"And what do *you* think of things?"—shifts

[23] Bowen, *The Last September*, 23.
[24] Ibid., 24-5.

the discursive terrain to the present. Hugo's question further inverts the underlying presumption of Lady Naylor's minor disquisition: that the very discussion of "things" needs no specification. His utterance moves us, subtly, from unmarked to marked speech, from "things" as undisputed to "things" as warranting consideration.

The tonal shift from Lady Naylor's assertiveness to Hugo's interrogatory stance, easy to miss due to its rapidity and the subtle pronoun shift ("she" to "he"), offers a further turn in the passage. Because his demand follows on the heels of Lady Naylor's assumed narrative, he seems to be asking Laurence his opinion on two very different senses of "things": Lady Naylor's and Laurence's own. Of course, the turn is entirely tacit, as Montmorency offers no additional contextual information to specify what he might mean. Certainly, Laurence's initial response, clarifying "Things? Over here?," indicates that this ambiguity is diegetic as well. Laurence's first query, repeating the terms of the question, highlights the very word upon which this entire passage rests, and confirms that "things" do indeed deserve debate: it is a subject about which one might have thoughts, meaning it is not a settled matter (as Lady Naylor might have assumed). His second question enacts a spatial shift—now the subject at hand is what is happening *here* as opposed to *there*—at the same time that it alerts us to the fact that this orientation was, due to the very need of the question, never completely established. It suggests first that Lady Naylor might have been speaking of "the way things were" over *there,* in some undefined location, and not *here,* in southern Ireland, where the conversation is taking place. Second, his question suggests that (at least from Laurence's perspective) Hugo has already shifted the terms of conversation to the current location; to ask "over here?" communicates confirmation and not real doubt. And whether or not Lady Naylor was speaking of past or present happenings, Laurence's curt answer that things "seem to be closing in … rolling up rather" moves us, through its tense, into the present. He assumes, again, that Hugo means to ask about the current situation in County Cork—where Danielstown and other Big Houses are located, and an epicenter of paramilitary activity due to an increasingly dominant Sinn Féin presence—and not about the past elsewhere. Laurence's offhand remark that things are "closing in" and "rolling up" offers an ominously atmospheric appraisal of the situation. It ostensibly (though not necessarily) gestures to the increasingly violent clashes between the IRA and British military forces, and effectively presages the eventual conflagration of Danielstown in the spate of IRA burnings that destroyed hundreds of Big Houses across Ireland. Of course, these are tacit realities that constitute merely probable cause for the ambient apprehension swirling behind such a portentous yet nebulous aside.

In the end, we do not actually know what Hugo meant, for he does not respond to Laurence's pithy reply. Lady Naylor instead interjects with unease, nervously hushing him and insisting on his proclivity for exaggeration (one shared, she assures the company, by all Oxford men). The fact that Laurence's seemingly anodyne remark elicits such an amplified response suggests that more is communicated beyond the mere lexical meaning of his words (or that the lexical sense itself is up for negotiation). The statement that "things" are closing in and rolling up, that is, signifies an overreach to Lady Naylor, however ambiguous an assessment it may appear to us. Crucially, her reaction suggests that Lady Naylor does not understand the situation to be as bad as Laurence thinks it is. Clearly, the two do not agree on how bad "things" really are—that is, if they even have in mind the same set of circumstances, a precondition that is never established.

I dwell at length on this conversational excerpt to underscore how apparently quotidian exchanges in fact contain crucial knots of referential instability. As we can see, even within such a short passage, multiple layers of reference are at work. We move from the assumption of a shared, unspoken order of relations ("the way things were/are") to a direct interrogation of that very order ("and what do *you* think of things?"), to an attempt to spatially pin it down ("things? Over here?"). Each layer complicates the last, each turn shifts the preceding suggestion, and as such the sense of the word "things" points in different directions simultaneously. "Things" comes to refer, in other

words, to an array of late imperial settings, past and present, here and there, suffused with a questionable violence that elicits varying degrees of sympathy and fear. The reader may naturally suppose what each party means by "things," but they cannot move firmly beyond supposition, and neither can the characters themselves. Perhaps Lady Naylor's discussion of "the way things were" indicates the ostensibly halcyon days of (less violently disputed) Ascendancy authority prior to the revolutionary period. But because of the temporal ambiguity of the narrative's phrasing, she could also be referring to some current state of affairs, be it the increasingly violent encounters between the British and Irish or which latest regiment of the British Army is stationed nearby (both of which are mentioned later). Hugo's sense of "things," because he queries the younger Laurence about it, probably does not refer to the pre-revolutionary period; Laurence would have been but a child, and so the question would not make much sense. And so, he likely means the ongoing republican struggle for Irish independence, but the specifics are of course hazy—the violence of the struggle? the legitimacy of Ireland's claim to independence? the aggressions of the British Army? Laurence's reply clarifies very little, except to reveal that his opinion differs from his aunt's: he thinks "things" are worse than she does. Perhaps his understanding of the current situation accords more closely with Francie's, who after all is nervous because she has been told that "things were bad round here," pointing presumably to the acceleration of raids by Irish republicans and the reprisals of the British army. Yet at no point are any of these possible definitions *necessary* to the text; at most they can be considered plausible points of reference. The same word has different referential points for different people; each time it is deployed, its significance is altered. Because of this instability, it falls short of commanding a shared definition—a shared setting—that is identifiable to each of the interlocutors, the reader included. Indeed, the word may "mean" differently even within the *exact same* utterance.

"Things" is not so vague as to be entirely inscrutable, however, either to us or to the characters: after all, communication, even if stilted, does happen. The point here is that the meaning of "things" cannot be precisely stated at any one moment or for any single utterance, and that there is thus no easy or clear alignment by which the reader can attach singular meaning to a particular character's position. "Things" is therefore an instance of what I am calling an enabling generality—a term whose specific content is eschewed in favor of a larger, indeed abstract, categorical distinction with few restrictive contours. Such terms contain multiple references at once. Or to put it another way: because the generality of the words or phrases used by Bowen's characters can be imbued with many definitions, no *single* definition of them can be fixed. The capaciousness of the terms thus allows for a wide range of variability: "things" could refer to the republican raids *and/or* the dances with the British garrison *and/or* imperial disintegration *and/or* the sense of political stability pre-1916. All possibilities exist at once in the text, even if not for each character. The generality of "things" results in a crucial abundance of political significations: it is not devoid of meaning, but rather filled with it. And it is exactly this "unpinnable" quality of the word that allows patently conflicting political sympathies—including nativist Irish territorialism and British imperial dominance—to mutely co-exist.

To be sure, though the extent of variability above is relatively wide, the range of signification is nevertheless circumscribed. "Things," that is, cannot mean just *anything.* Indeed, these referential possibilities all possess a commonality: they point to, most generally, the setting of the novel itself, circumscribed by the escalations of Irish nationalist agitation against British rule. On opposing ends of the spectrum of potential meaning lie the unstated positions of Irish nationalism—aligned historically, though not necessarily, with republicanism—and the often-twinned ideologies of unionism and empire. Within the sprawling array of potential alignments borne of the conveniently ambiguous phrasing, the question of Irish sovereignty remains the tacit crux. As such, it is the very particulars of conflict that a word like "things" fails to capture. The level of generality at work here is notable: it is high enough to sow uncertainty, yet low enough to enable conversation, even if only in

the broadest strokes. This kind of generalization, saturated with meaning and yet persistently indirect, is most often employed when characters attempt to gesture to the circumstances surrounding them. In this way, excessive signification maps onto the contested contours of Britain's imperial claim on Ireland: "things" emerge at the moment when colonial setting comes under discussion.

We can observe the connection between generality of term and setting more clearly in the phrase used to describe a gruesome attack on the Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) barracks: "the horrible thing." The phrase occurs at the Naylors' tennis party the day following the dinner scene above. Here Bowen's narrator introduces us to the latest topic of discussion:

> Five days ago, an R.I.C. barracks at Ballydrum had been attacked and burnt out after a long defence. Two of the defenders were burnt inside it, the others shot coming out. The wires were cut, the roads blocked; there had been no one to send for help, so there was no help for them. It was this they had all been discussing, at tea, between tennis: 'the horrible thing.' No one could quite understand why Captain Vermont and the subalterns did not seem more appalled and interested. It was not apparent how the subject rasped on their sensibilities. These things happened, were deplored and accepted, and still no one seemed to look on David or Gerald, Smith, Carmichael or Mrs Vermont's Timmie as a possible remedy. [25]

The narrator provides the reader with a description of the violent events that have transpired, but gives the guests only an ambiguous phrase, tethered to the very word in circulation at Danielstown the night before: "things." Here "the horrible thing" is marked in a way that the previous "things" were not; the addition of the adjective qualifies the word and so limits its possible range of sense. Because it is deployed to refer to an identified topic indirectly, the phrase verges on euphemism (a label of politesse bolstered by its circulation, rather incongruously, "at tea"), even as it directly marks the event's gravity in a manner euphemisms tend not to do. As such, only the affective resonance is identified: the horror is clearly noted, but the object to which it attaches is not. Nor, indeed, it is attributed to any particular speaker. The phrase is reported to us only second-hand, as it floats around in the conversational ether of the tennis party. It is nevertheless in heavy circulation (it was what "they" all talked about), echoing amongst the characters, even while it is mentioned in the narrative only once. As in the Danielstown dinner conversation, the repeated nature of the word emphasizes its import; here, however, the exact nature of the imagined repetition indicates a relative consensus on phrasing—there are no rapid shifts in sense, and rather than being a subject of evident dispute, "the horrible thing" appears to be an established topic.

The plausible point of reference, then, is here less variable than in the above scene, as it refers explicitly to the raid on the barracks. Yet once again, the topic of discussion is labeled a "thing" quite deliberately, offset by a colon and quotation marks as if to highlight the wording. Following the narrator's description of the event, the purposeful ambiguity of the dislocated utterance lands with particular weight. For a subject of such import under so much consideration, it remains curiously unnamed. The most notable aspect, of course, is the perceived horror of the event, but even this quality lacks attribution—horrible for what reason, exactly? One could suppose that the horror describes the violent death of English officers; at the same time, it might also point to the imperial entanglements which have led to such raids in the first place. It is also quite possible to infer that the horror registers the violence toward that with whom an identification is assumed, namely the British. This line of reasoning affirms the novel's lack of ready language for such an event, because the event itself does not conform to the presumed social landscape. After all, the

[25] Ibid., 47-8.

attack provides evidence of the untenability of a set of arrangements (the presence of the British army, for instance) that might have been assumed natural. In any case, the horror is clearly not potent enough to prevent the party from continuing and tennis from being played. "These things happened," after all, suggesting not only the commonness of such an event, but the casual nature in which they are received, undercutting the gravity of the situation. The fact that such incidents are "deplored" and "accepted"—two rather incongruous reactions to have at once—indicates as well the contradictory combination of responsive tendencies. The disconnection succinctly illustrates a stubborn inconsistency at the heart of Anglo-Irish positionality in Bowen, one that maintains a sense of identity as Irish—defined against a Tory version of Englishness, even if Anglicized—but that yields easily to a tolerance of "things" that might facilitate an ability to maintain an increasingly precarious way of life.

Ultimately, "the horrible thing" possesses a variability akin to the "things" in circulation at the Danielstown dinner. This time, however, the variability hinges on significance, rather than reference. The "horrible thing" refers more precisely to one incident, but it "means" different things to everyone. The narrator notes that the guests experience a lingering bewilderment at the nonchalance of the English: "No one could quite understand why Captain Vermont and the subalterns did not seem more appalled and interested." While the Anglo-Irish partygoers are seemingly more concerned with the raid than the officers themselves, even as everyone continues the festivities, the English officers in fact quietly chafe at the mention of the raid ("It was not apparent how the subject rasped on their sensibilities"). Here, to display outrage, or even interest, would indicate, on a most basic level, that the event is significant. And admitting to the significance of the raid would suggest that it poses a threat to the established order of British rule. If the implicit goal for the British troops is to maintain a sense of undisputed authority, acknowledging that the subject "rasp[s] on their sensibilities" provides a clear indication that their authority *is,* in fact, being questioned. Maintaining, in this case, a nonchalance appropriate to the atmosphere of the tennis party allows them to retain a façade of control—anger, fear, or frustration would give up the game, after all. The lack of mutually intelligible responses within the narrative points to a gap in understanding, as the effects of the incident land differently, neither equally distributed nor felt. No general grasp of "the horrible thing's" qualities, other than its admitted awfulness, appears to be conceivable. No general grasp of setting, that is, is available.

And yet, while the English are not viewed as possible "remedies" to the "horrible things" that happen, this is not to say that their perspective is entirely ignored. Several days after the tennis party, when the English subaltern Gerald is over to Danielstown for lunch, Lady Naylor eagerly probes him for his thoughts on current events: "I particularly want to talk to Mr Lesworth. When he comes he is always playing tennis, or I forget. But now there are some things I really want to ask him … I really want his point of view …"[26] Though à propos of nothing, the phrasing of her remark tacitly suggests that she desires his "point of view" on the military activities in the nearby Clonmore, or perhaps on their presence in Ireland in general. The very phrase, proffered by Lady Naylor in the novel multiple times, is a pointed one. It specifies a quantity of knowledge and a marked social position, as opposed to emphasizing one's interior orientation to—and experience of—the world. Lady Naylor's words in fact echo the query Laurence puts to Gerald directly preceding this exchange, where the former asks the subaltern what he thinks about "all this," and the two converse obliquely about the ongoing war (a moment to which we will shortly return). The entire reason Gerald's thoughts are wanted, presumably, is due to his position in the British Army, and his proximity to the action, however spasmodic. Indeed, as Lady Naylor makes clear, Gerald is a good authority primarily because of his immersion in "things": "As Lady Naylor said at the time … an

[26] Ibid., 94.

opinion on it from anyone so much 'in things' as Mr Lesworth was well worth hearing."[27] Here, as opposed to the conversations in the two preceding scenes, the subject in question is not "things" themselves, but rather what knowledge "things" might impart to one—what it might mean, that is, to be "in things" in the first place. Further, the "things" in which Gerald finds himself are less marked than previously: they are not qualified (as "horrible" or otherwise), nor are they questioned. The phrase lacks surrounding dialogue to provide orientation for possible referential points, though we may again suppose that Lady Naylor means, generally, his participation in the war. And yet, as in the Danielstown conversation, a problem of contradictory emphasis emerges: the narrative makes clear the import of being "in things" and the purposeful nature of its wording, offset by quotation marks. At the same time, the true weight of the question is undermined, considering that Lady Naylor is always forgetting to actually ask him, or he is engaged with tennis and the topic clearly does not warrant an interruption. Ultimately Gerald's proximity to "things" results in little actual insight, as he merely parrots what he has read in the morning paper: "And Gerald, half hypnotized, consciously barren and not in his Colonel's confidence, repeated to them what he had read in the *Morning Post.*"[28] His automatic, unthinking reply provides one last turn regarding the significance of "things": in the end, being in them means very little for one's understanding or perspective.

The Death of "Explaining Clamour"

While general terms like "thing" provide a precarious basis of conversation, attempts at clarity frustrate mutual understanding between the Anglo-Irish and the British. The novel's dialogue, we might therefore say, relies upon an inverse correlation between specificity and agreement: the more precise the terms of conversation, the less agreement they generate. When matters are broached more directly, even if only to be subverted, the door is opened for dispute, and the problem of setting necessarily becomes a political one. For instance: is there or isn't there a war? The question depends on what one means by war, and whether or not that meaning is perceived to be applicable to the current situation—neither of which are ever established. A conversation early in the novel between Gerald and two young Anglo-Irish women presents this problem. Embedded in cheerfully courteous language, their dialogue pointedly illustrates the failure to agree on appropriate words:

> 'It was splendid of you to forget I was English. Well, we shall all be leaving you soon, I dare say; all we jolly old army of occupation.'
> 'Oh, one wouldn't like to call you *that,*' said Miss Hartigan, deprecatingly.
> '—As soon as we've lost this jolly old war.'
> 'Oh, but one wouldn't call it a *war*.'[29]

Whether the misalignment is linguistic or perceptual in origin—that is, whether their definitions of war and army diverge, or whether their perceptions of reality conflict—the result is similar, a dispute over the proper application of word to world. As at the Danielstown dinner, the inability to establish mutually accepted terminology results not in total communicative failure (the three manage to carry on a conversation passably well), but rather obviates mutual understanding. Gerald understands

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[27] Ibid., 95.
[28] Ibid. The *Morning Post* is a conservative Tory paper that historically maintained a Kipling-esque attitude toward empire, indicating that Gerald's response is not only unthinking, but an affirmation of extreme resistance to Irish sovereignty.
[29] Ibid., 37-8.

himself to be part of an imperial occupying force, fighting a (losing) war, while the Hartigans understand there to be neither an occupying army nor a war. The impasse, the contested terms of which are further emphasized by the italicized weight Miss Hartigan places on them, is seemingly irreconcilable; no further ground is gained as the conversational topic shifts to the shame it would constitute if the English officers were sent home.

Moments such as these, of dialogue about the landscape of political violence that stop short of clear reciprocal engagement, are plentiful throughout the novel. They constitute what Jed Esty calls "bad conversation," that particularly Bowenesque mode of circumlocutory discussion that trails off into incompletion.[30] These are the discursive exchanges in which the fundamental problem of contested setting becomes explicitly political. And yet, for all their elliptical restraint, these attempts to discuss the "war" and to gain another's point of view illuminate the novel's patterning of intersubjective futility, its principle of resistance to the endeavor of reciprocal understanding. When, amidst the ambiguity of "things" and "all this," an effort at precision is marked by the use of more explicit terms, the absence of clear referential grounding becomes most apparent. One of the knottiest—and perhaps most awkward—of such encounters occurs between Gerald and Laurence, who, in a moment of shrewd curiosity, asks Gerald for his thoughts on the recent events. His question comes on the heels of an uncomfortable exchange wherein Gerald realizes that he participated in an arms raid that captured the IRA-affiliated son of a Naylor family acquaintance. Yet even after this momentary confrontation with the personal consequences of supposedly impersonal imperial violence (Gerald specifically imagines his military duties as "bright and abstract"), the two lapse into painful miscommunication.[31] True to the label of "bad conversation," ellipses and dashes proliferate, offering a model of communication premised upon embarrassment, partial articulation, and interruption. The entire exchange is quoted here:

> 'For instance, what do you, personally, think about all this?'
> 'Well, my opinion is—'
> 'Oh, but I don't want your opinion. I want your point of view.'
> 'Well, the situation's rotten. But right *is* right.'
> 'Why?'
> 'Well … from the point of view of civilization. Also, you see, they don't fight clean.'
> 'Oh, there's no public school spirit in Ireland. But do tell me—what do you mean by the point of view of civilization?'
> 'Oh—ours.'
> Laurence smiled his appreciation: the conviction, stated without arrogance, had a ring of integrity. Gerald, embarrassed by this benevolence, had recourse again to the back of his head, so gratifyingly polished. 'If you come to think,' he explained, 'I mean, looking back on history—not that I'm intellectual—we *do* seem the only people.'
> 'Difficulty being to make them see it.'
> '—And that we have what they really want … though of course the more one thinks of it all, the smaller, personally, it makes one feel.'
> 'Oh? I don't feel small in that way. But I'm not English—'
> 'Oh, no—I beg your pardon.'
> '—Thank God!'
> 'Don't understand.'

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[30] Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 189.
[31] Bowen, *The Last September*, 92.

> 'God may. Shall we look for the others?'
> Gerald, shocked, preceded Laurence into the drawing-room. Their conversation, torn off rough at this edge, seemed doomed from its very nature to incompletion.[32]

At first blush, their brief conversation appears to revolve around the question of "civilization." Like the words "war" and "army," "civilization" is a term of fraught signification: it does not possess the same unpinnable, over-general quality as "things," but it nevertheless eludes a singular definition, being a term infamously malleable to the descriptive desires of hegemonic power. Indeed, Laurence reflects immediately following the conversation that he "had not hoped to explain, but had wished that Gerald could infer, that there was a contrariety in the notions that they each had of this thing, civilization."[33] Their views of civilization—and note that it is classified here as yet another "thing"—are at odds, illustrated to Laurence through the restrained and half-formed thoughts of Gerald. Laurence sees through the transparency of colonial politesse, understanding English attempts at cross-cultural communication to be ultimately vapid. Gerald's assumption that "civilization" naturally refers to the English (who seem, further, to be "the only people") denies subjectivity to all non-English: a statement delivered—with no awareness of its patent irony—to a non-English person. Gerald's bald-faced admission of his belief in the civilizing mission of the British Empire, the rhetoric of which justifies his very presence, comes unusually close to a direct self-confrontation, which would, as Esty points out, necessitate grappling with the paradox of Britain's violent suppression of nationalist claims in order to assure the right of national self-determination.[34] Gerald, for his part, possesses "some awareness of misdirection, even of paradox," but this dimly awakened cognizance dies out abruptly upon the pair's withdrawal into the drawing-room. The two are unable to reach a satisfactory close to their conversation, which peters out inconclusively, despite its brief brush with candor.

Gerald and Laurence's frustrated attempt at communication ultimately hinges on incompatible understandings of the role of explanation. Gerald wishes he could have explained himself better, while Laurence had hoped not to explain himself at all. Civilization designates a stable, normative entity to Gerald, one which presupposes moral authority and explanatory power; he only wishes that he could "explain [his] respect … for the whole principle of nationality," which would presumably facilitate agreement between the two. Laurence's notion of civilization is predicated on a refusal of this very cross-cultural enlightenment, resisting the facile means by which Gerald "explains" British imperial power ("right *is* right," he declares).[35] For Laurence, civilization signifies "silence cold with a comprehension in which the explaining clamour died away. He foresaw in it the end of art, of desire … but it was to this end, this faceless but beautiful negation that he had lifted a glass inwardly while he had said, 'Thank God!'"[36] Embedded in this strangely wrought phrasing—the end of civilization as a beautiful negation—is the idea that the telos of civilization comprises its own repudiation. Rather than offering an integrative model of explanatory power, by which colonial others are assimilated or annihilated, this teleology proceeds toward definitive silence.

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[32] Ibid., 93.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Esty, *Unseasonable Youth,* 190. This irony results from the fact that national self-determination was a central objective of the post-WWI European order, one advocated by the nations comprising the former Allied Powers—including, of course, Great Britain.
[35] Gerald's circular pronouncement is a fatuous pun on the aphorism "might is right"; the tautology signals his chauvinistic and coercive sense of superiority, at the same time that it illustrates his intellectually impoverished imagination.
[36] Bowen, 93.

The end of empire here, however, does not necessarily entail the end of the actual object (the lasting material realities of imperial British institutions would disabuse this idea immediately), but rather the end of the *concept*. What follows is the realization that if such an end enjoins silence, the attendant loss is in the language provided by the concept of empire. And so, rather than silence indicating an absence of speaking subjects, it suggests instead a loss of the paradigm of meaning offered by "empire": there is simply no way left to say at this juncture. No efforts at communication endure with the death of "explaining clamour," no cross-cultural or interpersonal attempts at comprehension, whether to the end of imperial integration or not. Indeed, the end of civilization is notably "faceless," a descriptor that gestures to its impersonality. This is an end in which national and cultural demarcations evidently cease to matter; further, its featureless quality patently rebuffs Gerald's emphasis on the ethnic singularity of the English people.

If for Laurence the direction of civilization tends toward silence and away from comprehension, then "bad conversation"—this frustrated, vain mode of discourse—is undoubtedly integral to this teleology. It constitutes, at least in part, his hope for the future as a "beautiful negation," to which he figuratively "lift[s] a glass" as he mocks Gerald by thanking God that he's not English. His move celebrates the failure of mutual understanding apparent in their conversation: such is its beauty. And yet while negation appears to include the death of explanation, it does so here by pointing to the impasse of a definitional antinomy. The two men's understandings of civilization are patently at odds, and any path toward reconciliation is shattered as their conversation sputters to a stop ("doomed from its very nature to incompletion," opines the narrator). What remains are two mutually incompatible definitions, neither of which is capable of displacing or incorporating the other in the space of the novel. As opposed to enabling generalities, which accommodate opposing perspectives without putting pressure on their potential discordance, the conflict here exists at the surface. In these more direct encounters with the freighted ideologies of empire, the lack of a singular referential frame—a singular setting—rises to the surface, its absence foreclosing shared definition and mutual comprehension. Laurence's logic of refusal offers a more explicit version of the communicative tendency within the novel to bypass singularity: his rejection of explanation marks the extreme end of a textual strategy that articulates the experience of imperial crisis in the language of indeterminacy.

Points of View, Pluralities of Setting

I have argued that perceptual indirection and dialogic indeterminacy are systemic problems within the novel, pointing to a broader dispute over colonial setting. And so, while the ongoing guerilla warfare between the IRA and British forces remains a near-constant focus of rumination, the topic itself is never precisely delimited or defined. The generalizations in frequent circulation include too much and distinguish too little, while more narrowly circumscribed words fail to engender agreement regarding their appropriate application. We see a profusion of references alongside a paucity of signification (as in the Danielstown scene); yet even when the reference is ostensibly more secure (as in the raid on the barracks), there is an abundance of signification. Upon more direct confrontations with current events, as in the above conversations, the lack of common idiom to describe setting forecloses a stable and shared grasp of what, exactly, is happening. Constant equivocation, evidenced by the multiple turns in emphasis, alternately marking and unmarking the "things" under discussion, ensures that nothing can be assumed or taken for granted. In each case, an excess intrudes that prevents shared understanding. The result is an abiding inability for characters to agree upon a sole frame of reference which, in turn, licenses multiple potential interpretive and experiential possibilities: from the violent imposition of British cultural and political hegemony to the legally justified duties of civil enforcement. As such, the increasingly fraught

circumstances of British rule take on a peculiar quality of excess, hazily encompassing a broad range of potential, if related, effects.

To be sure, the novel's persistent vagueness has garnered attention from a range of critics who have noted Bowen's prosaic reticence and often opaque prose. Scholars of the past few decades in particular—following the late twentieth-century critical reorientation around questions of empire and colonialism—have seized upon the political valences of her language. Indeed, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Bowen's style provides perennial fodder for controversy. Readers who have noticed her tendencies to evade and euphemize often read them in one of two ways: as part of a modernist penchant for vagueness and mystification, or as evidence of reactionary politics, conservativism, and nostalgia for the past prominence of the Ascendancy. Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (1995) provides probably the most well-known reading in the latter camp, positing that Bowen's "observant detachment" is a feature of the Ascendancy's "defiant decorum" in the face of imminent collapse.[37] Some scholarship of the past two decades concerning *The Last September* has attempted to chart a middle path, reconciling its unruly aesthetics with its focus on warfare and colonialism. So Corcoran begins his essay on *The Last September* by immediately stating that it is a "novel full of holes"; in his reading, the novel's lacunae are "thematically functional and historically relevant" insofar as they index the loss and unspoken but violent history of Anglo-Irish past.[38] For Corcoran, the form of the elliptical speaks to the pain of bilocation, or the liminality of living "between" England and Ireland. In a related vein, Matthew Brown labels Bowen's writing exclusionary, citing its reliance on devices such as euphemism, digression and ellipses.[39] The novel's penchant for unusual figurative language reveals its interest in the "testing of poetic language by political violence"; ultimately, he concludes that this style is a dramatization of war's disorienting effect on figurative language.[40] Brown's focus on figurative evasion in the novel is motivated, in part, by questions Susan Osborn raises regarding the "disorientation of sense" that Bowen's fiction elicits.[41] Osborn, for her part, offers the most sustained analysis of Bowen's style by suggesting that we look *at* its opacity rather than attempting to peer *through* it; as such, she advocates for an application to the surface of narrative—in her vivid phrasing, its "spectacular obscurity"—as the locus of interest, not the purported depths it conceals.[42] Most recently, Kelly Sullivan enlarges the scope of stylistic inquiry by exploring the broader structure of how architectural destruction, both literal and figurative, supplants narrative momentum.[43] The result is a novel that is all anticipation and very little delivery, as "all the plots seem to push toward non-event." Any holes, by Sullivan's account, are neither linguistic nor figurative, but narrative. The censorious evasions described by

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[37] Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), 366-7.
[38] Corcoran, "Discovery of a Lack," 315-6.
[39] Matthew Brown, "Strange Associations: Elizabeth Bowen and the Language of Exclusion," *Irish Studies Review* 20.1 (2012), 5.
[40] Ibid., 10.
[41] Susan Osborn, "'How to Measure this Unaccountable Darkness between the Trees': The Strange Relation of Style and Meaning in The Last September," in *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Osborn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 34.
[42] Ibid., 49. Osborn's analysis is concerned with how Bowen's "improprieties" and "aesthetic deformations" disrupt a recognizable referential framework, enacting a destabilization that, as she concludes, speaks to a modernist anti-mimetic impulse.
[43] Kelly Sullivan, "Elizabeth Bowen and 1916: An Architecture of Suspense," *Modernism/modernity Print Plus* 4, Cycle 3 (2020): https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/sullivan-1916-architecture-suspense.

Brown here are figured as a different kind of absence: the "suspense of non-catastrophe." In other words, things not said become things not done.

The trend in much of this work is to see Bowen's "vagueness" as essentially demonstrating a figurative and/or historical lack. Whether this is attributed to a kind of colonial myopia, an embedded condition of historical limitation, or a stylistic experimentation in line with wider modernist literary trends, the tendency throughout such criticism displays a similar pattern that reads ambiguity as a marker of absence. Yet I want to suggest that we move against the grain of such assumptions, seeing in Bowen's language an inclination toward expansion, an inclusiveness of a kind that under-discriminates and over-signifies. The issue lies in the internal attempt to grasp external problems, like "Ireland," which fail to submit to private experience. As the novel attends to the perceptual paradigm of Britain's waning imperial authority—the effects of which emerge in the difficulties of discursive exchange—so its form is also shaped by the historical contingencies in which it is embedded.[44] Bowen's language offers an expression of late imperial indeterminacy alongside an active recalcitrance to defining its contours, a pattern that figures colonial encounter as a fundamentally volatile structure. The awkward conversations of Bowen's characters signal the weight of colonial conflict that escapes a common framework of reference and signification.

So far, variability has primarily acted as an atomizing force: "things" refers to something different for each person at Danielstown, while "the horrible thing" lands with unique affective resonance on partygoers. In what follows, I'd like to extend this thought and suggest that such variability also precludes authoritative control: "things" cannot be reduced to fit a singular and privileged narrative. Ultimately, the resulting excess inhibits narrative imposition of a primary version of events, precisely because setting itself cannot be pinned down. As a final example, consider the way that Moira Ralte, a young acquaintance of Lois's, relays her father's concerns about the prudence of a dance in the British regimental hut: "He says … that the whole proceeding is not only criminal but lunatic. He says he can't understand the C.O. allowing it, with the country the way it is."[45] Moira speaks to a mixed Anglo-Irish and English audience, including the captain of the local regiment. The ambiguous phrasing should by now sound familiar; its circumlocution resembles the subdued politesse of "the horrible thing." And yet, as at the tennis party above, the utterance's relationship to tactful euphemism is only surface level. After all, as Moira reports, her father labels the planning of the dance "lunatic" and "criminal," two adjectives that could hardly be charged with the understatement of decorum. It is, rather, at the turn to the state of the country that Moira's father takes up indirection, in speaking of the country "the way it is." In so saying, Moira's father leaves open a vast field of possibilities for what "the way" might signify: the dangers of raids and ambushes by the IRA, the general military occupation of Ireland by the British, reprisals by the Black and Tans and the rest of the R.I.C., the overall atmosphere of fear and distrust, etc. In fact, "the way" indicates all of these possibilities, and so any more circumscribed description would prove insufficient. To speak in such a manner is to indicate a general knowledge of the current state of affairs—to gesture knowingly and abstractly—while providing the interlocuter(s) with generous interpretive latitude to fill in the blanks.

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[44] My methodological approach here finds resonance with Siân White's, who contends that political implications emerge out of the narrative's spatial organization. White understands the novel's hesitancy to describe encounters in clearly defined political terms to indicate an Anglo-Irish denial of reality: pointing to the title, she states that "the novel is about what it says it is about" (i.e. the last September of a people in decline). My point, however, is that the novel complicates such explicit claims of intentionality, or "aboutness," via the contestation of setting. "Spatial Politics/Poetics, Late Modernism, and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*." *Genre* 49, no. 1 (2016): 38.

[45] Bowen, *The Last September*, 142.

His phrase recalls Lady Naylor's "the way things were," and it likewise presumes a tacitly understood order of relations, though here these relations are explicitly marked in a negative light (the dance is a terrible idea, precisely because the "way" the country is remains violent and unstable). And yet, no turn comes by which this remark is questioned: the statement merely stands on its own, asserting—the country is *this way*—without delimiting. If "the way it is" presupposes a shared understanding of relationality, it does so twice: once in the original utterance, when Moira's father says it to her and her sister, and again when Moira repeats it in the company of the dance. The two contexts widen the sphere of possibility by broadening the range of perspectives conscripted into the order of relations. In the first context, among the Anglo-Irish Raltes, "the way" presumably indicates the inconvenience of the war's sporadic violence, allowing for a dose of British chauvinism and aggression. In the second, amongst the English officers, it signifies the errant rebellion of Union subjects that leads to unfortunate, but necessary, violence. But because the utterance is never disputed or undermined, the emphasis here is less on the atomization of individual perspectives, and more on the expansiveness of possible significations that all exist, side by side, simultaneously. The term gestures noncommittally to a probable mixture of tense negotiation, political posturing, and guerrilla insurgency, without establishing any of these realities as definitive. Crucially, this instance of indirect encounter is—rather paradoxically—conspicuously marked, flagged by the narrator as inviting a moment "of slight discomfort, of national consciousness."[46] Even in instances where the violent chaos of colonial devolution is less explicitly contested, then, its ill-defined presence produces an uneasy tension. To be aware of the competing political versions of colonial setting is to sense the shifting ground of historical narratives.

Characters' reliance on the language of enabling generalities and their defiance of reciprocal understanding is a discursive symptom of this referential instability. By foregrounding both perceptual estrangement and the opacity of definition during moments of situational negotiation, the novel insists on a volatility at the heart of the experience of imperial decline. Bowen's notorious "vagueness" in fact offers a generative framework for reading imperial contraction as a set of contested structures of meaning. Because generalizations invite dilation—a widening of the possible scope of both reference and significance—they elicit conjecture, both from readers and characters, whose questions and conversational miscues disclose an interpretive struggle over the (il)legitimacy of imperial claims on Ireland. Excess, in short, disrupts singularity: the purported "holes" speak less to a cognitive gap than to an expansion of possibility, which resists the reified categorical distinctions informed by the history of settler colonialism and dispossession. Defying the transparency of fixed labels—such as "war," "army" and "civilization"—offers a means of challenging the ostensible stability of the distinctions such labels are meant to uphold.

In essence, Ireland's union with Britain occasions an expressive and experiential rift; whether this relationship constitutes "occupation" is the very definitional problem underwriting the communicative difficulties performed in the novel. And yet, the structure of British rule provides the contested presence that comprises much of the forward impetus of the narrative: rather than turning away from that which eludes clear definition, the characters resolutely circle around the problem of setting, stumbling through generalities and wrestling against conflicting understandings of apparently more definite terms. The devolving British empire, an entity that remains ever-present, offers an unreliable frame of reference premised upon constant fluctuations. In the *longue durée*, these fluctuating structures describe a shifting territorial map rendered by centuries of recurrent dispossession and national re-definition; in more contemporaneous terms, empire comprises a set of violent effects, the precise configurations of which are not visible. This is in part due to the extended temporal scope of the "causes," which exist on a scale incongruous with the lived experience of

[46] Ibid.

current events—so only the *result* of structures such as Protestant plantation, British military and economic dominance, and Irish dependency on forms of English hegemony is perceptible. The scale and complexity of historical flux, in other words, impedes both perception and definitional security.

From a readerly distance, the novel's setting seems clear—the British Empire, at least in Ireland, is coming to an end. But no one within the novel can actually say this, because no one possesses—or can agree upon—the appropriate words to label their lived reality, transforming the purportedly neutral matter of setting into a decidedly contentious problem. As such, the novel turns the experience of living through the end of empire into a problem, first and foremost, of language. Bowen's dialogically variable prose should therefore be understood as both an exposure of the unstable nature of colonial identification, as well as a strategy for grappling with that very instability. Rather than offering a clearly utopian moment of proleptic postcolonial reimagining, these dialogic moments linger in the discomfort of suspension between an overdetermined colonial past and a yet-to-be-defined future. This suspension, I want to suggest, fruitfully disrupts our assumptions of setting, revealing it to be a fundamentally unsettled category that must be continually reestablished, reconfigured, and reconceived. Bowen's novelistic style, in other words, generates postcolonial setting as a problem. The purchase of ambiguity is one of simultaneous disclosure and disruption; what I am here calling the grammar of waning empire constitutes a formal maneuver that makes the political landscape newly available for imaginative remapping outside the confines of available, and ultimately insufficient, discourse.

In *The Last September*, scenes of everyday, mundane interactions provide the framework by which imperial history is negotiated and reimagined at a crucial period of devolution. Here, the terms of negotiation eschew the re-imposition of a particular kind of representational politics. Instead, the novel's enabling generalities destabilize the totalizing nature of an imperial authority that seeks to discursively delimit zones of colonial contact. Bowen, that is, offers something perhaps paradoxically more passive and more extreme in its concerns, through an excessive signification that renders the very landscape of conflict in doubt. Her recalcitrant style, I suggest, demonstrates the need to incorporate setting as a key problematic in the intricate web of historical and political concerns characteristic of the postcolonial novel as a genre. This elusive, conflicted grammar formally (re)negotiates what, precisely, constitutes a "colonial" landscape in the first place, and by what terms it might be called.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Peripheries of War: Isaac Babel's Factographic Grotesque

«Поля пурпурного мака цветут вокруг нас, полуденный ветер играет в желтеющей ржи, девственная гречиха встает на горизонте … Оранжевое солнце катится по небу, как отрубленная голова, нежный свет загорается в ущельях туч, и штандарты заката веют над нашими головами. Запах вчерашней крови и убитых лошадей каплет в вечернюю прохладу.»

"Fields flower around us, purple with poppies, the midday breeze plays in the yellowing rye, virginal buckwheat emerges on the horizon … The orange sun rolls down the sky like a lopped-off head, gentle light glows from the gorges in the clouds, the standards of sunset trail above our heads. The smell of the blood and slaughtered horses from yesterday drips into the evening chill."

—Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry* (1926)

«Смысл приема Бабеля состоит в том, что он одним голосом говорит и о звездах и о триппере.»

"Babel's principal device is to speak in the same voice of the stars above and of gonorrhea."

—Viktor Shklovsky, "Isaac Babel: A Critical Romance," *LEF* (1924)

The Multiple Babels

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, the indeterminacy of setting in the wake of British imperial contraction emerges in the novels of Joyce and Bowen as a set of problems primarily concerning language—issues of labeling, naming, and definitional insecurity. In this final chapter, we return to the revolutionary moment with which we opened: a period of roughly contemporaneous imperial collapse in Russia, one in which the protracted timeline of British colonial decline accelerates into a rapid and total breakdown of empire. In the aftermath of the Russian revolutions, as we have seen in the dissociative logic of Shklovsky's memoir, the empiricist problematic traced across this dissertation—that of moving from sensuous, material details to abstract categories—is worked out through the breakdown of narrative form. This last chapter revisits the narrative recalcitrance of the revolutions and early Soviet period, returning us to the tensions animating Shklovsky's own generically hybrid formal experiments: a desire to record the sensory details (the empirical "facts") of revolutionary experience, alongside a recognition of the impossibility of constructing a narrative that bridges the gap between sensuous particulars and the organizing idea of revolution. If for Shklovsky the central question remains how to grasp an empirically imperceptible phenomenon, for his contemporary Isaac Babel, this issue is torqued into a matter primarily of perspective—specifically, of the distorted and partial perspectives from the margins of post-revolutionary conflict. Babel's provocatively fictionalized collection of historical sketches, published three years after Shklovsky's 1923 memoir, locates in the peripheral a capacity for accommodating incongruities such as factual deformations and warped proportions.

Babel—Odessan trickster, Jewish intellectual, unlikely war correspondent, ironic propagandist, Soviet mythologist—occupies a colorful assortment of identities across Soviet, Jewish,

and Russian cultural imaginations. In the mid-1920s, with the publication of his stories concerning the post-revolutionary war in Western Ukraine and Eastern Poland, another epithet was added to the list: inveterate liar. His short sketches from the Polish-Soviet conflict, the earliest of which were published in the Odessa journal *Izvestiia* (though not assembled together until 1926 under the name *Red Cavalry [Konarmiia]*), provoked the ire of some contemporaneous readers. Taking issue with Babel's purported exaggerations, critics asserted that the stories offered a disingenuous representation of the First Cavalry Army, the Cossack division of Lev Trotsky's Red Army in which Babel served as war correspondent. Of particular offense were Babel's depictions of the Red Army's indiscriminate cruelty and criminally violent behavior toward prisoners of war and civilians.[1] To make matters apparently worse, such descriptions are not contextualized with explanatory narration, which might offer an ethical and interpretive framework. Rather, viscerally gruesome imagery repeatedly and quite matter-of-factly emerges, after which the stories continue apace. Consider the first quotation of the epigraph above, which comprises the opening of *Red Cavalry*'s first story, "The Crossing of the Zbruch." This excerpt offers a typical sample of Babel's prose, which rapidly vacillates between two descriptive poles: the bucolic impression initially offered by the narrator (flowering fields, rolling hills of grain) is suddenly punctuated by morbid reminders of the previous day's slaughter. Even the sun recalls a decapitated head as it rolls across the sky. The abrupt shift from virgin buckwheat to slaughtered horses—from an image of untapped natural abundance to one of defilement and death—captures in miniature a dynamic that is performed continually throughout Babel's collection. Shklovsky's quip, about the stars above and gonorrhea, captures the overwhelming sense of thematic discordance—alongside a strangely consistent tonal-affective register—that has invited the frequent appellation of "grotesque" to Babel's stories.[2]

Jarring and violent descriptions, stripped of contextual apparatus, layered with lyrical passages of the landscape: this narrative strategy in fact elicits both of the interpretive reactions mentioned above. Claims of inaccuracy and grotesquery, that is, both hinge on the sense of disproportion generated by lurid imagery and an uneven narratorial style that refuses a clear ethical orientation. The difference in response depends on the expectations one has of the text, as historical

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[1] "Criminal" because such behavior was explicitly forbidden by Lev Trotsky, commander of the Red Army. One of his orders is in fact directly mentioned in Babel's story "A Letter"; in Order #217 from May 10, 1920, he commands: "Spare the captured and wounded enemies … it would be wrong and unworthy of revolutionary fighters to take vengeance on Polish captives. No, the Red Army is generous to the wounded and captured enemy … We will turn these unconscious enemies into conscious friends"; «Щадите пленных и раненых неприятелей … Было бы, однако, неправильно и недостойно революционных борцов мстить пленным полякам. Нет, к пленному и раненому врагу Красная армия относится великодушно. Мы этих несознательных врагов превратим в сознательных друзей.» E. Pogorel'skaia, "Primechaniia," in *Konarmiia* (Moskva: Nauka, 2018), 353-4.

[2] While numerous readers—including Edyta Bojanowska, Val Vinokur, Efraim Sicher, and Rebecca Stanton—employ the adjective "grotesque" in their description of Babel's style and/or various colorful characters in his prose, it is often a passing reference used to register a sense of coarseness, defilement, or excess. Efraim Sicher rather generally states that Babel was fascinated by the "grotesque contradictions of human nature" evident in Russia, while Val Vinokur acknowledges that Babel's style is often characterized as "grotesque, decadent, or ornamentalist" (though these are qualities he seeks to recalibrate as revealing an "ethical horizon"). Sicher, *Babel' in Context: A Study in Cultural Identity* (Academic Studies Press, 2012), 14; Vinokur, *The Trace of Judaism: Dostoevsky, Babel, Mandelstam, Levinas* (Evanston, Northwestern UP, 2008), 62. See also Bojanowska, "E Pluribus Unim: Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry* as Story Cycle," *The Russian Review* 59, no. 3 (2000), 375, 380, 385.

truth or imaginative fiction. As we will see in this chapter, this distinction is a surprisingly tenuous one. It rests on the shaky status of fact, itself undergoing a contested discursive re-evaluation during the post-revolutionary period. Babel's particular prose style, characterized by a hybridity of linguistic registers and polyvocal narration, enters the terrain of this debate over factuality as it incorporates the "grotesque" or "inaccurate" distortions noted by readers over the decades. Such distortions become either markers of Babel's literary flair or deceptive trickery, depending on the generic assumptions made. And yet, as I aim to show in this chapter, his propensity for yoking together disparate elements, both formally and contextually, reveals a partiality of perspective that troubles the very relationship between truth and fact. Through their historical and discursive distortions, his stories reveal the fundamentally limited nature of perception, which contests the possibility of a clear, direct representational form. *Red Cavalry*'s grotesque style—its reliance on rhetorical embellishment, pseudo-factual exaggeration, and linguistic contrast—reimagines what it means to be truthful in the context of post-revolutionary narrative.

In considering these circulating notions of truth, lies, and the distorted perceptions that underpin them, it is revealing to note the various generic terms by which scholars and critics have referred to the collection, which indicate a shifting understanding of its truth claims. Many of Babel's contemporaries and early readers—including the commander of the Red Cavalry himself, as we will soon see—essentially understood the stories to be at least somewhat autobiographical, and thus oriented toward "truth" (and so open to charges of libel). This perspective was no doubt influenced by Babel's cultivation of an authorial persona invested in autobiographical narratives—though his apparently "authentic" childhood tales, published around the same time as the *Red Cavalry* stories, in fact turned out to be largely falsified. In contrast, scholarship of the last few decades almost exclusively refers to the cycle as fictional, with a conspicuous lack of qualification or reference to its slippery textual history: for instance, Michael Gorham points to Babel's participation in articulating emergent Soviet ideology as a "professional storyteller" of narrative fiction, while Val Vinokur proclaims the collection to be a "masterwork … of poetically charged fiction."[3] Against this tendency of contemporary scholars to label the story cycle "fiction" without much stipulation regarding the epistemic assumptions of this term, I instead locate in Babel's discourse an abiding preoccupation with the unstable relations between fact, fiction, and lies, which prevent a clear referential status from emerging. This instability is suggested not only by the collection's counter-factual tendencies, but by the very medium of narration, which ventriloquizes a multitude of voices through interpolated tales and a heavy reliance on *skaz,* or performed oral speech in narrative (essentially a form of ventriloquism, often of "lower" or more popular registers). Even as Babel's stories provide an impression of active proximity by gesturing toward historical fact, they are simultaneously enlivened with repeated markers of fictionality, including unreliable and contradictory narrative personas, lyrical passages replete with freighted metaphors, and ekphrastic

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[3] Gorham, "Writers at the Front: Language of State in the Civil War Narratives of Isaac Babel and Dmitrii Furmanov," in *The Enigma of Isaac Babel: Biography, History, Context*, ed. Gregory Freidin (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 101; Vinokur, "Morality and Orality in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry,*" *The Massachusetts Review* 45, no. 4 (2005), 674. A notable exception to this is Joachen Hellbeck, who cites Babel's cycle in his 2001 article on Soviet autobiography as an early attempt to record the development of revolutionary subjecthood. "Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts," *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (2001), 342. And in an early example of critical oversight, Victor Terras elides the difference between author and narrator entirely, declaring that the "presence of a constant 'I' [is] presumably Babel himself." "Line and Color: The Structure of I. Babel's Short Stories in *Red Cavalry,*" *Studies in Short Fiction* 3, no. 2 (1966), 141.

excurses (this is not to mention the partly fictionalized cast of characters that appear, in addition to actual historical personages).

The story cycle thus yokes together what Rebecca Stanton refers to as two discursive categories that feature falsehoods, albeit in a mutually exclusive manner: fiction, as "fabrication that does not masquerade as truth," and lies, which do.[4] The operative distinction is, of course, intent. Even when fiction offers a realistic or plausible relationship to its objects and events of concern, it depends on a mere pretense to actual referentiality, without an assumption of sincerity—there is no deceit where there is no claim to truth.[5] Yet with regard to ostensibly referential material, such as the details of the Polish-Soviet offensive (including its relevant names, dates, places, etc.), this supposed lack of truth claim rests on shakier grounds. What Catherine Gallagher refers to as (novelistic) fiction's reliance on states of suspended disbelief becomes, in Babel's hands, a rather duplicitous invitation.[6] That is, Babel's stories solicit a form of readerly engagement dependent on the historical actuality of the post-revolutionary circumstances that constitute the setting and characters; yet they also rebuff credulity in their reliance on the aforementioned forms of fiction and patent inaccuracies. As a meticulous editor and inveterate revisor of his craft, Babel offers a highly mediated and painstakingly crafted version of "immediate" historical experience.

It is here that the affordances of the literary grotesque, as a mode privileging distortion and contrast, enter as an organizing strategy. While the term "grotesque" is frequently proffered in descriptions of Babel's prose—mostly offhand, and mostly in reference to bodily deformations—I contend that its importance for Babel's collection is primarily formal. The grotesque, an ornamental technique hailing from visual arts, itself possesses a long literary tradition; it was memorably described by Germanist Wolfgang Kayser in his formative study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature (Das Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, 1957) as a fusion of opposing realms, comprising the abolition of "natural" physical laws and the distortion of size and shape.[7] As he succinctly states, the "grotesque is the estranged world."[8] Kayser emphasizes incongruity as a constitutive feature of the grotesque in his synoptic historical and geographic study, a structure of contrast that emerges in part as an effect of reception: so the grotesque work is one that is *experienced* by the reader or viewer as comedic, horrifying, or absurd. In the Russian literary context, Kevin Platt draws on Kayser's definition of the concept to describe a more abstract set of social transformations, landing on the term "revolutionary grotesque" to index literary responses to rapid social changes in modern Russian history.[9] These quick glosses of the grotesque indicate the term's

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[4] Rebecca Stanton, *Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2012), 44.

[5] Such is the historical defense of poetry, from Philip Sidney on. For Catherine Gallagher, it is precisely the rise of more believable and "realistic" stories in the eighteenth century that led to the development of the discursive category of "fiction." Though earlier texts—romances, fables, allegories—likewise made no truth claims about the world of ordinary experience, they were not considered "fictional" at the time, precisely because of their "blatant incredibility." Only when stories became "likely" did they take on the quality of fiction. As she states, "plausible stories are thus the real test for fictional sophistication." "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel Volume I: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 339.

[6] Gallagher, 348-9.

[7] Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature,* trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: Columbia UP, 1981), 179-189.

[8] Ibid., 184.

[9] Specifically, Platt's treatment of the grotesque is primarily concerned with temporal distortion. As he argues, the literary encounter between the "opposite social worlds of past and future" in

conceptual basis in the deforming effects of contrasting elements: whether physical (harking back to the fantastical vegetal-animal-human creatures of its Italian ornamental origins), temporal (as in Platt's sense), or discursive. It is this last sense, drawing on Boris Eikhenbaum's formalist analysis of the grotesque in Nikolai Gogol, that I will argue is most pertinent to analyzing how Babel's contrastive technique realigns perceptual capacities toward the peripheral by foregrounding multiple perspectives that flout factual coherence. The inherent ambivalence of the grotesque offers Babel a paradoxically unifying formal approach, leveraged to narrate the seemingly irreconcilable elements of factual and fictional discourse. The resulting effect is one of warped proportions: not only of distorted people and landscapes, but of distorted *facts*.

In what follows, I sketch out the conditions under which Babel's stories were published and received, circumstances that animated contemporaneous discussions regarding what constituted truthful—and aesthetically legitimate—representations of revolutionary and post-revolutionary experiences. I then move to survey the historical landscape surrounding ideas of factuality and fictionality in the early Soviet period: that is, what it meant to be "true" or "false," and the associations that adhered to these poles of referential representation. Understanding how Babel's provision of mediated sensory experiences might relate to ideas of "truth" requires one to first establish what, exactly, defines such a fraught term.[10] His distortions of fact throughout the collection reveal an ambivalent attachment to the documentary impulse of the era, one that I contend relies upon grotesque forms of discordance. A consideration of this tradition, which saw renewed interest in the revolutionary era with Eikhenbaum's influential essay of 1918 on Nikolai Gogol, comprises the third section. For Eikhenbaum, the grotesque effect was achieved primarily through the device of *skaz,* a form that becomes a fundamental technique for Babel, and one uniquely suited to recording the rapid proliferation in discursive registers under the new Soviet state. His stories, I argue, probe the tension between the grotesque deformations of *skaz* and the documentary desires of the roughly contemporaneous "factographic" (*literatura fakta,* literally "literature of fact") movement. The result, as I explore in the final section through close consideration of several stories in the cycle, is a hybrid technique I term "factographic grotesque." This combination is an uneasy one, since at first glance these two practices seem to be fundamentally opposed: the former invested in offering factual material as a form of aesthetic authenticity, the latter in estranging perceptions and warping proportions. Yet it is precisely this ambivalent and oppositional formal strategy that proves capable of capturing the distorted, partial perspectives of peripheral voices in the midst of post-revolutionary conflict. These subjects speak a mediated, sensorial form of "truth" as they violate referential fidelity and narrative coherence. They thus demonstrate the crucial difference between the "truth" of perceptual experience and the "facts" established by historical record. Indeed, as I aim to show, these two properties become quite distinct in the hands of Babel.

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revolutionary periods deforms these mutually incompatible socio-historical orientations, primarily by "collapsing … visions of the past and future into a moment of simultaneity." *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1997), 3-26.

[10] It is worth noting that there are two words in Russian for "truth": *pravda* and *istina*. *Pravda* is by far the more common (and colloquial) term; it suggests a reflection of reality for an individual, often in accordance with moral categories. *Istina,* in contrast, belongs to the domain of logic and mathematics, describing something closer to an axiomatic truth. Babel's collection employs mostly the former term, which is, of course, also the name of the leading Soviet newspaper (where several of Babel's stories were first published).

Literary Vanguards, Military Rearguards

Of Babel's contemporaries who objected to the perceived falsity of his wartime stories, one of the most vehement attacks was issued by the military commander of the Red Cavalry himself, Semyon Budyonny. In an excoriating piece entitled "The 'Babism' of Babel" (*"Babism Babel'ia iz "Krasnoi novi"*), Budyonny protests that Babel patently fails to perceive the true nature of the historic class struggle being waged, of which the Polish offensive is but one manifestation.[11] He reasons that only a class enemy could produce such "irresponsible fairy tales" (*bezotvetstvennyye nebylitsy*) with no basis in truth. Yet Budyonny's central accusation runs deeper than charges of outright lies and deceit (though such indictments are also tossed around in tones of clear indignation). Rather, his sustained attack hinges not on Babel's capacity for falsehoods, but on his fundamental inability to see:

> Even though the author belonged to the ranks of the glorious Cavalry Army (assigned to the rear), he failed to notice (*on ne zametil)* with his eyes, ears, and brain its heroic struggle, its terrible, inhuman suffering and privations. Small-minded and ideologically alien by nature, he failed to notice the giant sweep of its struggle … Citizen Babel was unable to see (*ne mog videt')* the greatest tremors of class struggle.[12]

Here, Budyonny's quarrel with Babel hinges on the latter's observational shortcomings, figured as an ideological failure occasioned by empirical deficiencies in his "eyes, ears, and brain" (*glaza, ushi i ponimaniia).* The essential visual and auditory material of the struggle quite simply escapes Babel's notice (the Russian *proshlo mimo,* or "passed by," suggests a rather literal-minded image of combative oversight, as a bullet might scarcely graze one's person in the midst of battle). Babel, per Budyonny's assessment, is perceptually, and thus ideologically, impoverished. His misperceptions—exacerbated by the fact that he served in the rear of the detachment (*v tylu)*, a position that, it is assumed, does not afford the necessary perspective—lead him to elide the central nature of the conflict.

Even granting Budyonny's suggestion that Babel missed the essential nature of the conflict due to his marginal position in the rear, the latter's writing frankly makes no attempt to account for the "giant sweep" (*gigantskogo razmakha)* of the post-revolutionary struggle. The stories are unconcerned with providing a comprehensive, coherent account of conflict: they are often more interested in quarrels over horses, descriptions of desecrated churches, and minor interactions with the local peasantry (*muzhiks).* Rarely are battles mentioned; when they are, they remain on the periphery of the plot, providing what Elena Pogorel'skaia calls a "weak reflection" (*slabyii otsvet)* of

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[11] The piece appeared in a September 1924 issue of *October,* at which point more than a dozen of Babel's stories had been published in *LEF* and *Red Virgin Soil.* The title plays on a pun in Russian between Babel's last name and a pejorative term for an older peasant woman, *baba.* By turning *baba* into a distinctive practice through the addition of "-ism," Budyonny coins a term that indicates inane and confused nonsense, analogous to something like "the drivel of old wives' tales." The blatant misogyny here is clearly intended to emasculate Babel.

[12] "The Babism of Babel from *Red Virgin Soil,*" in *Isaac Babel's Selected Writings,* trans. Peter Constantine, ed. Gregory Freidin, 467. «Несмотря на то, что автор находился в рядах славной Конной Армии, хотя и в тылу, он не заметил, и это прошло мимо его ушей, глаз и понимания, ни ее героической борьбы, ни ее страшных нечеловеческих страданий и лишений. Будучи от природы мелкотравчатым и идеологически чуждым нам, он не заметил ее гигантского размаха борьбы … Гр. Бабель не мог видеть величайших сотрясений классовой борьбы», "Babism Babel'ia iz *"Krasnoi novi,"* *Oktiabr'* no 3 (1924), 136.

the war.[13] Indeed, the *Red Cavalry* stories are quite self-consciously marginal in their perspective, troping the partial nature of individual perceptive capacities through a largely plot-less collection of fragmented forms. The collection comprises an eclectic mix of interpolated *skaz* narratives, miniature ornamental depictions (the shortest story, "The Cemetery at Kozin," ["*Kladbishche v Kozine"*] clocks in at a mere 137 words) and fractured sketches (*ocherki).*[14] Kirill Vasil'evich Liutov—bespectacled, alienated, perennially beset by ethical dilemmas—is the rather hapless protagonist at the center of the stories, whose marginal and ambivalent position in the rearguard mirrors that of Babel himself. This perspectival affinity between author and narrator invites the assumption of veracity that Budyonny expresses: if Babel is writing about events he himself experienced, via a narrative persona to whom he bears a suspicious resemblance, then surely his intent must be to present a version of historical reality, a form of autobiography.

To be sure, Liutov's exterior profile maps with notable precision onto that of Babel's: both are Jewish intellectuals serving in the Red Cavalry as war correspondents for the journal *Red Cavalryman (Krasnyi kavalerist).* Liutov was even Babel's own *nom de guerre* during the war (a name derived from the Russian *liutyi,* or fierce, in an undoubtedly ironic jest), while much of the fodder for the stories is mined from Babel's own diary of 1920, kept during his service with the cavalry. Based on these diary entries, Liutov's psychological characteristics also appear to align rather neatly with Babel's own fraught orientation to his participation in the war. Elena Pogorel'skaia, editor of the 2018 scholarly *Nauka* volume, in fact correlates the *Red Cavalry* collection to Babel's entries, offering a meticulous account of the differences between Babel's personal records and his stories, as well as the affinities in their profoundly ambivalent psychological and affective states.[15] Both Babel and Liutov vacillate between excitement and despair, recording a persistent sense of ethical conflict regarding their shared liminal position as Jews traveling with Cossacks (a group notorious for its anti-Semitism) and bearing witness to arbitrary violence in the name of enlightened revolution.[16]

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[13] Pogorel'skaia, "*Konarmiia* Issaka Babel'ia," *Konarmiia* (Moskva: Nauka, 2018), 297.

[14] The Russian *ocherk* is a genre popularized in the nineteenth century, with the rise of prose fiction; these short, plotless, descriptive essays retain a strong association with the Natural School and the "physiological sketches" of the 1840s. Such sketches, popularized by the likes of Vissarion Belinsky, Nikolai Nekrasov, and Ivan Turgenev, aimed to depict various milieux of Russian life. Babel's own version of the *ocherk* is a particularly Odessan brand, joining other writers of the so-called "Southwestern School" (including Yuri Olesha, Valentin Kataev, and Eduard Bagritsky), which drew on the polyglot, Jewish, and Western European influences of the Ukrainian seaport. See Efraim Sicher's *Babel' in Context: A Study in Cultural Identity* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 18-19, and Yuri Shcheglov, "Some Themes and Archetypes in Babel's *Red Cavalry,*" *Slavic Review* 53, no. 3 (1994), 653.

[15] Indeed, a variety of critical approaches to Babel's work acknowledge a sense of alienation and equivocation throughout his oeuvre, qualities often reflected in his protagonists. In the past few decades, Yuri Shcheglov, Gregory Freidin, and Efraim Sicher all describe an embedded sense of cultural and ethical ambivalence at the heart of Babel's work, informed by his negotiation of a hyphenated triple (and post-revolution, quadruple) identity as Jewish, Russian-Ukrainian, and then Soviet. Shcheglov, "Some Themes and Archetypes in Babel's *Red Cavalry,*"; Gregory Freidin, introduction to *Isaac Babel's Selected Writings* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2010); Efraim Sicher, "Text, Intertext, Context: Babel, Bialik, and Others" in *The Enigma of Isaac Babel: Biography, History, Context,* ed. Gregory Freidin (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2009).

[16] Stephen Brown goes so far as to label this tension the paradox at the heart of the stories. It is true that, in addition to their explicit anti-Semitism, the Cossacks were strange bedfellows for the Bolsheviks: the semi-nomadic military caste historically performed military service for the tsars,

Additionally, as these biographical details intimate a level of truthfulness, the stories' publication history likewise suggests factual status. They were initially advertised as autobiographical sketches of the Red Army's exploits, explicitly labeled as reportage from the front lines of the war. Such promotion of factuality might be less troublesome if it were merely a question of misplaced emphasis: depicting the mess at the rear rather than the "true" action at the front, in Budyonny's framing. Yet greater problems regarding generic status arise with the departures from historical reality that Babel incorporates: indeed, his stories are often historically and factually incorrect, and flagrantly so. Returning to the collection's first story (excerpted in the epigraph), a second vital feature emerges: alongside his contrastive technique we find geographic volatility. "The Crossing of the Zbruch" (*"Perekhod cherez Zbruch"*) was published in the leading Soviet newspaper *Pravda* in 1924 under the unambiguous headline "news" (*novosti).* Yet the title and first sentences present an immediate complication. As it happens, the army's crossing into Poland to capture Novograd, the primary action narrated in the story, did not take place over the river Zbruch, which lies some 300 kilometers to the southwest of the area in question. Instead, it is the (phonically similar) river Sluch that served as the border to Poland in 1920. Simply looking at a map of present-day Ukraine (which now includes portions of what was then Poland) indicates that the geography narrated here is entirely scrambled; what is worse, not only is the river in the wrong place, but the dates mentioned do not align with the record provided by military sources. This is a pattern continued throughout the collection: a mere passing reference to Pogorel'skaia's voluminous scholarly apparatus illuminates the collection's sheer number of inaccuracies and distortions.[17] What does this brazen disregard for historical and topographical veracity indicate, especially in a collection that ostensibly—by virtue of its historical and (at least partially) autobiographical content—gestures toward a truthful referential status?

The radical contrasts so shrewdly noted by Shklovsky in this chapter's second epigraph were echoed by other of Babel's contemporaries, such as Georgy Gorbachev, who—somewhat less generous in his reception—faulted the writer for his reliance on unresolved paradox and contradiction (though in a more charitable conclusion, Gorbachev draws an insightful comparison between the two figures, calling Babel a "spiritual brother (*dukhovnyi brat)* of the author of *Sentimental Journey* and *Letters Not About Love,* that adventurer, witty thinker, cynic, mischief-maker and aesthete").[18] But by and large, the cultural and literary figures of Babel's day were overwhelmingly captivated by the writer's perspective on the young post-revolutionary state, despite its troubled status with regard to historical veracity. Freidin notes that in the first decade of the Soviet regime, Babel's work was frequently offered as evidence of the aesthetic legitimacy of the Bolshevik revolution. Pointing to his stylistically experimental and lyrically sophisticated portrayal of revolutionary violence, Soviet literati could cite Babel's work as a blueprint for the construction of a new cultural and literary paradigm: here was the "new art" that ostensibly symptomatized a successful and total revolutionary transformation under Bolshevik rule. As Freidin summarizes, "Babel's writings functioned as an artistically perfect paradox, a device capable of generating an

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defending frontiers and advancing the territorial expansion of the Russian Empire. Brown, "The Jew Among the Cossacks," *Slavonica* 3, no. 1 (1996), 29.

[17] Along with Babel's diary entries and correspondence from the war, Pogorel'skaia's edition carefully cites historical records for the events referred to in the stories. Babel's own record-keeping indicates that such factual errors were not mere lapses in memory, but rather intentional distortions.

[18] Gorbachev, "O Tvorchestve Babel'ia," *Zvezda* no. 4 (1925), cited in Freidin, "Revolution as an esthetic phenomenon: Nietzschean motifs in the reception of Isaac Babel (1923-32)," in *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 166. Translation slightly modified.

endless critical discourse on the contradictions of the Revolution—a whetstone on which various critics sharpened their theoretical and ideological knives."[19]

To take one prominent instance, Aleksandr Voronskii, the founder and editor of *Red Virgin Soil* (the literary journal in which Babel published a number of his stories), provides an enthusiastic description of Babel as a writer with an array of merits, all collated under the laudatory appellation "Soviet." Voronskii's 1924 article praises Babel's work as a "new achievement of post-October Soviet literature," exemplified by the latter's protean abilities as a "lyric poet," miniaturist, and "physiological writer."[20] Comparing Babel to Lev Tolstoy, who has long served as a common barometer for measuring literary achievement (and indeed, among writers and critics across a notable spectrum of ideological commitments, including Marxist critics for whom Tolstoy's craft transcends its class background), Voronskii proclaims that both writers share an epic vision. But rather than the sweeping panoramic perspective à la Tolstoy, the "epicness" (*epichnost')* of Babel's stories hinges on his ability to detach ostensibly insignificant details (*dat' "chut'-chut',"* literally "to give that "little bit") and mobilize them to reveal the true "essence" (*osnovnoe)* of things, people, and situations.[21] Each detail, rendered in "peculiar and unexpected" combinations of adjectives and nouns, possesses crucial significance. This technique, per Voronskii, constitutes Babel's investment in the "sacred givenness" (*sviashchenna dannost',* translated as "immediacy" by Freidin) of reality, and of the messy human instincts, passions, and urges that constitute it. In one particularly evocative passage, Voronskii sums up his appraisal of Babel's importance for the Soviet literary system, highlighting a materialist approach that is uniquely adequate to capturing the sensory and affective qualities of revolutionary experience:

> Babel strengthens ties between literature, the Soviet republic, and the Communist party. He is close to us, and vividly feels what our era, our life, "smells like." It can be said without exaggeration that Babel is a new landmark on the winding and complicated path of contemporary literature to communism. Some do not see this, but the contents of Babel's work are unambiguous.[22]

This is a striking inversion of Budyonny's description above, which charges Babel with a failure of vision. Here, in contrast, Babel's distinctive attunement to the sensory landscape of the era—including its more minor, olfactory sensations—indicates not only his proximity to the people, but fruitfully yokes together the domains of literary art (aesthetics) and Soviet state-building (politics).

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[19] Freidin, "Revolution as an esthetic phenomenon," 157.

[20] «новое достижение после-октябрьской советской литературы», Voronskii, "Babel'," *Krasnaia Nov'* no. 5, 1924. Freidin affirms the lasting influence of Voronskii's analysis in 1920s Soviet literary reception, noting that the latter's article "pretty much set the tone for the Bolshevik reception of Babel," 165.

[21] David Danow also employs this term, labeling the cycle a "Civil War epic," a generic mode apparently earned through Babel's lyrical, non-dialogic exploration of affective extremes: lamentation and celebration. Therein lies, in Danow's words, the cycle's "epic sweep." "A Poetics of Inversion: The Non-Dialogic Aspect in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*," *The Modern Language Review* vol. 86, no. 4 (1991): 939-40.

[22] «Бабель укрепляет связь литературы с республикой Советов и с коммунистической партией. Он близок к нам и хорошо ощущает, 'как пахнет' наша жизнь, наша эпоха. Можно, пожалуй, без преувеличения сказать, что Бабель—новая веха на извилистом и сложном пути современной литературы к коммунизму. Кое-кто не видит этого, но содержание произведений Бабеля совершенно недвусмысленно.», Voronskii, "Babel'."

His populist charisma is thus located in his facility for mapping the sensory and emotive range of the historical moment: its utopian longings, its abject violence, its seething tensions. To continue the olfactory metaphor, Babel's prose confronts the repulsive stench and intoxicating perfume of the revolution, giving textual shape to both extremes.

What is more, Voronskii claims that Babel is, somewhat paradoxically, unambiguously able to capture the bewildering contradictions and dynamic fluctuations of the revolution's "complex path" (*slozhnyi put'*). His work provides a definite assimilation of the indefinite arc of historical change, an expression of the contradictions of the revolution—indeed, according to some contemporaneous voices, Babel's short prose offers not only an articulation of such difficult contrasts, but an actual *resolution* on a formal level. To that end, another enthusiastic contemporary, Yakov Benni, praised Babel for "resolv[ing]" the "abiding contradictions [between art and life], especially powerful at the time of revolution."[23] Benni's assessment appears to hinge on Babel's capacity for "authentic" representation, which—in his supposition that vivid sensory details provide access to the "real"—accords with Voronskii's statement about *Red Cavalry's* investment in the "immediate actuality of life." These early critical responses foreground an enduring conviction that, at the root of Babel's jarring, fragmentary, and partly fictionalized collection, lies an honest depiction of reality, whose verisimilitude depends less on referential exactitude and more on a general intuition of sensory fidelity: how, that is, the era truly felt (or, indeed, smelt).

For Babel, one of the most famous experimental prose writers of the early Soviet era, the literary avant-garde is necessarily—and paradoxically—located at the rear of the action: an arrière-garde, to continue the metaphor. His mobilization of the sensory details and manifold voices at the margins of war spatially reverses the militaristic comparison that equates artistic innovation with the frontline viewpoint of a military vanguard unit. In so doing, his prose elevates the peripheral as a privileged site for grasping empirical limitations. This indirect accounting recalls Viktor Shklovsky's sense of revolutionary absence explored in the first chapter, evidencing a shared preoccupation with the conditions of perception, and the ways in which literary forms prove capable of illuminating abstractions of lived experience—for Shklovsky, the artifice of causal relations; for Babel, the non-equivalence of truth and fact—that otherwise elude direct engagement. The problem is therefore not that Babel missed the "giant sweep" of revolutionary struggle, but rather that such perspective is simply, and empirically, unavailable. His engagement with the contemporaneous preoccupations of Soviet documentary literary production—which often attacked assumptions that language passively reflects an inert and immutable material world—is routed through the transfiguring capacities of grotesque form, trained upon the ostensibly non-central material of the revolutionary rearguard. It is to such concerns over facts that we now turn.

Facts, Fictions, and What Lies Between

Before we delve into the debates regarding reportage and fictionality in the early Soviet period, let us first establish some facts. The stories of *Red Cavalry* were initially published, either individually or in clusters, in newspapers and journals beginning in 1923; they were only released as a full book in 1926. The 34 sketches (or 35 in the 1933 collection with the belated inclusion of the story "Argamak") chronicle the Soviet offensive campaign in Poland from April-September 1920, part of the conflict that pitted the newly formed Soviet Russia—brimming with an expansionist impetus to spread communist revolutions westward to the rest of Europe—against the emergent

[23] Cited in Freidin, 152. Benni, "I. Babel," *Pechat' i revoliutsiia,* no. 3 (1924).

Second Polish Republic, with its own designs on Ukrainian territories.[24] In Lenin's view, the newly sovereign Polish state posed a barrier to fomenting proletarian uprisings in Europe, and thus necessitated occupation to bring it into the Bolshevik fold. Yet the Red Army offensive ended in ignominious retreat: the Polish state successfully repulsed the Bolshevik incursion, and as the prospect of broader European socialist revolutions fizzled, Soviet ambitions turned eastward to Central Asia and China (where they would remain until the mid-to-late 30s). By late 1920, both sides signed a ceasefire, and the subsequent treaty of Riga in spring 1921 fixed the new Polish borders, which would remain in force until 1939.

The Polish-Soviet war is often folded into the larger context of the Russian civil war, a protracted and bloody struggle to establish the new post-revolutionary multinational state that would—with the incorporation of Ukraine, Belarus, and Transcaucasia—become the USSR in 1922. These conflicts contributed to the founding myths of the socialist state; and while the broader civil war of course ended in a Bolshevik victory, resulting in the consolidation of much of the former Russian empire into the Soviet Union, this particular conflict entered the historical record as a notorious failure. It is worth emphasizing that this defeat emerged out of the clash between two newly formed states vying for political legitimacy, a fact that highlights the twofold nature of the dispute as both territorial and ideological. Indeed, the landscape itself remained under heated and continual political contestation during this period: as a result of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, Russia ceded large swaths of land (including Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states) to Germany. Such territorial gains were short-lived, however, as in the wake of Germany's defeat, the 1919 Treaty of Versailles stripped the defeated German state of these new protectorates, portions of which were subsequently ceded to the newly independent Poland. And so, as Germans evacuated the formerly occupied territories of the *Ober Ost*, Polish forces were met by a westward Soviet offensive aiming to take advantage of the resultant power vacuum. In addition to the ambition of spreading revolution and establishing Soviet governments in the Eastern border regions, the Soviets were galvanized by the desire to re-take the lands lost by Russia the year prior: in essence, they understood these borderlands to still be "Russia," though properly Soviet and not imperial. The shifting contours of the land's signification suggest that Babel's own fugitive geography—his tendency to mis-label, mis-date, rearrange, and invent—is ironically authentic in conveying the overwhelming sense of terrestrial instability. As troops and civilians alike come into repeated confrontation with the variability of borders, names, and territorial sovereignty, the contingency of the landscape becomes increasingly evident.

Amidst this backdrop of shifting borders and contested sovereignties, of which Babel remains acutely aware, a crucial aesthetic debate was playing out in early Soviet culture regarding how to best respond to the sudden and radical transformations taking place. The varying approaches that developed—a wide range of "Futurist" leftist avant-garde movements including factography, montage, and productivism (*proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo)*—reflect what Elizabeth Papazian calls the "documentary impulse" of the post-revolutionary years, whereby Soviet artists and writers sought to forge new artistic methods adequate to depicting the processes of revolutionary transformation.[25]

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[24] The new Polish Republic, led by chief of state Jósef Piłsudski, invaded eastern Galicia in 1919 during the Polish-Ukrainian war; he later formed an alliance with Symon Petliura's Ukrainian People's Republic in 1920, in which much of western Ukraine was annexed to Poland. It is worth noting that Piłsudski's plans were if anything as ambitious as those of the Bolsheviks, and by no means purely defensive: they involved a revived version of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that would stretch from the Baltic to the Black and Adriatic Seas.

[25] Papazian identifies the "documentary moment" in Soviet culture as spanning from 1921-1934, a period that saw documentary trends and approaches move from the aesthetic periphery to the center

The ensuing tension between "objective" observation and "subjective" reflection returns us to a set of questions broached in chapter one, regarding the empiricist epistemological foundations of factual documentation in which Shklovsky's formalism is rooted (even as he departs from a documentarian orientation to objectivity). Against the supposed expressive individualism of a bourgeois art that was taken to have developed under a tsarist regime, early Soviet documentary works ostensibly aimed for authenticity and objectivity, bolstered by a Marxist-Leninist theoretical framework that offered an account of historical progress based on a dialectic of spontaneity (*stikhiinost)* and consciousness (*soznatel'nost*). Lenin's doctrine of the "vanguard of the proletariat" accorded priority to a relatively small group of politically "advanced" revolutionaries, who would guide the masses toward greater consciousness.[26] As such, the artists and intellectuals of the new Bolshevik regime, comprising an admittedly eclectic range of aesthetic ideologies and trends up until 1932, could unite under the shared goal of raising consciousness through the provision of ostensibly objective "facts."[27] Soviet documentarians thus aimed to provide accurate depictions of the class struggle being waged—with a prophetic eye to the socialist utopia that would result—as means of fomenting popular support for the revolution. Yet precisely what constituted accuracy and even objectivity was by no means a settled matter, a dispute evidenced by the wide variety of artistic methods to documentation.

For some cultural commentators, the provision of eyewitness accounts—when collected together *en masse*—offered a more "objective" description of historical development. Such accounts offered not only a record of external events and objects, they also provided access to the internal states of their authors. Following this emphasis on documentation, autobiographical writing became a major discursive practice by which Soviet subjecthood was both recorded and formed in the first decades after the revolutions. Via what would eventually become an established trajectory from political ignorance to consciousness, autobiographies were tasked with producing proper subjectivities by depicting the author's internal development traced alongside external, historical progressions. These narratives—whether produced voluntarily or extracted forcibly by the state—purported to offer an introspective account of political transformation as they probed the psyche of the author. Autobiographical texts might take various forms, including diaries, questionnaires, memoirs, and (as became common under Stalin) testimonials and confessions. As Jochen Hellbeck recounts, the most enduring form of textual self-presentation under the Soviet system was the simply titled *avtobiografia,* amounting to a relatively concise account of one's educational and professional achievements, with a focus on the development of one's personality and political consciousness. In writing and talking about themselves, Soviet citizens learned how to think and act as "conscious historical subjects."[28] Thus the process of documentation, including documentation of the self, became a state-sponsored endeavor that expanded beyond the purview of writers, engaging

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of artistic and social discourse. Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 4.

[26] See Katerina Clark's description of this dialectic for an account of how it fits into older ideological dichotomies in Russian politics, such as the Slavophile/Westernizer controversies of the nineteenth century. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981), 15-24.

[27] Though Socialist Realism was not officially adopted until 1934 at the First Writers' Union Congress, the term itself dates to 1932, when it was first suggested as an aesthetic doctrine by the Organizational Committee of the Writers' Union. The intervening two years saw a flurry of speeches, reports, and articles codifying and outlining the paradigm; as early as 1932, instructional leaflets for writers were being circulated, which—in Clark's wry assessment—essentially amounted to "do-it-yourself kits." *The Soviet Novel,* 35.

[28] Hellbeck, "Working, Struggling, Becoming," 341.

workers, peasants, and other non-professional writers.[29] Notably, the practice of self-narration was both descriptive and prescriptive, aimed at depicting the "facts" of one's life in the context of revolutionary history, while also serving as material for transformation into what one's life *ought* to be. It was, in short, a means of both expression and active creation. Igal Halfin characterizes this practice as a form of ritual, an essentially factual analogue to Clark's account of the socialist realist novel's "master plot" as a ritualized form of historical metanarrative. Such ritualistic autobiographical discourse amounted to, per Halfin, a "Communist hermeneutics of the soul" mobilized to ferret out "true revolutionaries from imposters."[30] As Edward Tyerman summarizes, autobiography thus became a tool for generating revolutionary consciousness as well as a litmus test for exposing its absence.[31]

In the early postrevolutionary years, however, these textual forms had not yet ossified into the rigid narrative constructions that they were to become in the 1930s. Amidst the still-heterogeneous landscape of 1920s prose, which included revolutionary *Bildungsromane,* confessional accounts of the self, and so-called "road to consciousness" narratives, Babel's approach synthesizes several apparently contradictory tendencies.[32] So he incorporates the contemporaneous concern for penetrating the psychological depths of revolutionary sentiment—how one *feels* about the revolutionary project—with a flair for fictional embellishment and exaggeration, techniques that emerged more forcefully with the advent of socialist realism. Notably, his experiments with the boundaries between fact and fiction reflect the era's abiding interest in documentation and the impulse to authentically record the rapid transformations of Soviet social and economic conditions. As Papazian notes, the "desire for concrete facts" remained a persistent, if also evolving, fixation throughout the 1920s; Lenin explicitly voiced this impulse in an early *Pravda* article from 1918 on the Soviet press, in which he demands, in no uncertain terms, "more documentation (*proverka).*"[33]

Even as Babel's collection engages with contemporary preoccupations over documentation, his stories also work through longstanding literary legacies in Russian culture, in which are found the roots of Soviet textual documentary practices. Featuring prominently in this prehistory is the *ocherk,* a hybrid genre combining sketch and descriptive essay that emerged during the late eighteenth century in Russia.[34] As Devin Fore summarizes, this prose genre is "part scientific inquiry, part

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[29] Papazian notes that the documentation of revolutionary progress and Soviet state-building was an integral component of the trajectory of the Soviet documentary moment across the 1920s and into the 30s. By the early 30s, documentary literary genres—including the *ocherk*—were being employed as models for new writers to document Soviet history: "workers contributed their autobiographies and memories to the histories of individual factories after receiving raining to understand their life stories in the correct Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist way." *Manufacturing Truth,* 17.

[30] Igor Halfin, *Terror in my Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 7.

[31] Edward Tyerman, *Internationalist Aesthetics: China and Early Soviet Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2022), 190.

[32] Clark identifies the "road-to-consciousness" pattern as a central component of essentially all varieties of Soviet novel, alongside the necessity of completing a particular "task." See her Appendix A in *The Soviet Novel* ("The Master Plot as Exemplified in the Production Novel and Other Basic Types of Novel of the Stalin Era") for a concise typology of these novelistic conventions across what she identifies as five categories of narrative, in addition to the production novel.

[33] Papazian, 7.

[34] Despite its status as a genre distinct from Western short sketch forms, the origins of the *ocherk* are generally considered to be tied to the Enlightenment era in Russia, which drew upon French and British Enlightenment ideas. The writer, journalist, and politician Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov is

literary composition" and finds its closest analogue in the Western European literary tradition in the essay or short sketch (or in France, the *feuilleton)*. Reaching a peak of popularity in the nineteenth century with its variant, the "physiological sketch," the form remains concerned with recording the material, "objective" world of things (indeed, due to its association with descriptions of the daily life and customs of minor officials and urban workers, the physiological sketch formed the basis of the so-called "Natural School" in the mid-1800s, an early stage in the development of Russian critical realism).[35] Due to its emphasis on documentation, is perhaps no surprise, then, that the *ocherk* became the literary genre privileged by Soviet documentarians in the 1920s—it was the paramount literary form for factography—and likewise the form that Babel's stories take. In its lack of narrative structure and ornamental embellishment, the *ocherk* served as an important educational tool for newly literate readers and writers in the 1920s, and thus rose to prominence as the primary textual form for documentation.[36] Yet for all its rich socio-literary history, the *ocherk* remains a malleable form, and its twentieth-century version proved adaptable to Soviet desires to record revolutionary history, arising from both the state and the various leftist avant-garde factions. According to *LEF*-affiliated writer, photographer, and playwright Sergei Tretiakov, the *ocherk* occupied an intermediary position between "artistic literature and journalism," making it ideal for the era's artistic ambitions to bring art and life closer together.[37]

Indeed, this emphasis on yoking together "art" and "life" was one of the founding aspirations of the factography (or "literature of fact") movement that developed amongst the writers and artists associated with the journal *LEF* (and later *Novyi LEF*) in the 1920s. The so-called *faktoviki,* led by avant-garde writers and theorists Tretiakov, Nikolai Chuzhak, and Vladimir Mayakovsky among others, built upon productivist artistic principles that emphasized the use of montage and concrete materials to reconceive of art as a process of collective labor, a tangible productive force in line with other modes of production. Though the movement was "officially" announced in 1929 with Chuzhak's publication of the anthology *Literatura fakta* (comprising articles and essays that were in fact published in *Novyi LEF* from 1927-1928), its primary debates and concerns long predate the anthology. Maria Zalambani states that by the time the collection appeared on the scene, the diverse range of avant-garde movements had mostly dispersed: factography comprised their "swan song."[38] Thus to consider the movement's practices and ambitions necessitates looking backward from its belated declaration as an official program: accordingly, in Zalambani's account of the movement's evolution, she locates its origins in a variety of heterogeneous, intersecting ideological and aesthetic developments, including productivism (*proizvodstvennoe dvizhenie)*, formalism, Marxism, and Soviet cinematography. The first issue of *Novyi LEF* in January 1927 included pronouncements about how "literature of fact" was the immediate heir to productivism, and its announcement of the death of the traditional novel and the end of plot

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considered to be the first practitioner of the *ocherk,* based on his contributions to Moscow satirical journals in the 1770s.

[35] Devin Fore, "Introduction," *Soviet Factography, October* 118 (Fall 2006), 9.

[36] Papazian summarizes this development by noting the genre's claims to "accessibility" and "clarity," qualities for which it was "promoted as a genre easier both to read and to write precisely because it lacked embellishment." *Manufacturing Truth,* 16.

[37] Fore, "Introduction," 9.

[38] «Когда в 1929 году вышел сборник под названием «Литература факта», русский авангард уже сходил со сцены. Фактография—это его лебединая песня». "When a collection under the name "Literature of Fact" appeared in 1929, the Russian avant-garde had already left the scene. Factography—this was its swan song." Maria Zalambani, *Literatura fakta: ot avangarda k sotsrealizmu* (Sankt-Peterburg: Academicheskii Proyekt, 2006), 11. Translation mine.

is, of course, a refrain that had long been active in productivist, formalist, futurist, and numerous other avant-garde circles. The fundamentals of factography, as Zalambani attests, were forged in the alliance of artists and writers that organized under the banner of *LEF* in 1922; this motley assortment included the first theoreticians of factography, who worked through questions of "fact" as a process of production, and the relationship between literature and truth, in their essays long before the movement's formal entry onto the scene.[39] Likewise, Devin Fore affirms that the majority of elements within the factographic program were already formulated by the mid-1920s, while Papazian notes that "'literature of fact' … was seen by many in the avant-garde camp starting in the mid-1920s as the dominant mode for the current epoch."[40] As case in point, Yuri Tynyanov's 1924 *LEF* essay "On the Literary Fact" (*"Literaturnyi Fakt")* meditates on some of the central formal and ideological concerns of the literature of fact, while also asserting that the "literature of fact"—more broadly, any literary genre—possesses no timeless or immutable formal markers. The "literature of fact" comprises a tendency or praxis rather than a fixed genre, which for Tynyanov functions to connect art and life (*k sviazi iskusstva i zhizni),* that shared avant-garde ambition.[41]

This praxis aimed not only for mass accessibility, but mass political transformation via the provision of reported facts. Such undertakings emphasized exterior, tangible realia in place of interior, psychological details, which were seen as obsolete relics of earlier bourgeois literary forms. As the *faktoviki* organized brigades of writers to observe and depict proletarian sites such as kolkhozes and factories, they insisted that selectively chosen descriptions from the recently industrialized environment—leveraged alongside a new array of media, including photography and cinema—could actively intervene in social life, and foment socialist consciousness, by expressing certain material qualities of social and historical reality. In this way, description could prove politically transformative. And so even as factographic works were invested in a kind of representation, their primary emphasis, as Devin Fore attests, was closer to *poiesis* than *mimesis.* Quoting Tretyakov, he stresses the movement's fundamental aversion to the verisimilitude of bourgeois realism, noting that "[factography's] interventionist, operative aesthetic called upon the producer 'not simply to depict life, but to create it anew in the process'."[42]

Against passive and interior depiction, dedicated to factual representation: in its commitment to a version of referential truth, factography sits uneasily alongside the related genres of documentary and autobiography (the latter of which, recall, relies on a reflective narration of one's inner political development, a psychologism that the *faktoviki* explicitly rejected). Considering that one of the animating tensions of Babel's short story cycle is a recurring vacillation between a seemingly factually grounded autobiographical account and distorted fictional narrative, his project accords in central ways with the idea of operativity *(operativnost')* as Tretiakov understood it: a mediated aesthetic intervention into life that actively shapes the objects and ideas under consideration. So even as they lay claim to direct referentiality, factographic works distort and modify "the facts" in ways that draw attention to their constructed and selective nature. As Edward

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[39] Zalambani, *Literatura fakta*, 13, 15.

[40] Fore, "Introduction," 6; Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth,* 38.

[41] See Fore, "Introduction," 4-5; and Zalambani, *Literatura Fakta,* 17.

[42] Devin Fore, "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography," *October* 118 (2006), 101. Fore also cites Chuzhak's provocative treatise "Literatura Zhiznestroeniia" ("Literature of Life-Construction"), which introduces the neologism *zhiznestroeniia,* literally "life building." This term circulated amongst the *Novyi LEF* crowd, indicating the radically transformative potential with which the *faktoviki* imbued artistic and cultural forms. Given Chuzhak's and Tretyakov's rejection of Marxist base-superstructure causality, Fore states that they were more akin to social constructivists, rather than "fact fetishists," as their opponents suggested, 103.

Tyerman explores in a detailed case study, Tretiakov's so-called "bio-interview" of Gao Shihua in *Den Shi-khua* (1927) is a clear example of such explicit truth construction. In terms that reverberate with certain conceptual premises of Russian formalism, which emphasize a distinction between "material" and "form," thus highlighting the constructive technologies behind texts, Tretiakov's introduction offers a clear model for understanding his work as a productive process of collective labor. In this instance, Gao Shihua provides the raw material (in the form of interviews) that Tretiakov then molds into a particular narrative shape.[43] Absent any pretense of direct reflection or "objective" representation (indeed, *Den Shi-khua* features flashbacks, dubiously detailed dialogue, and other markers of intervention), the bio-interview nonetheless claims to provide an authentic portrayal of the early life and education of a young Chinese revolutionary. As is evident in Tretiakov's framing of his work, the factographic endeavor is self-consciously defined in opposition to mimetic representation, positioned against Georgy Lukács's ideal of literary realism, which ostensibly presents an integrated totality.[44] Rather than the formal closure supplied by what Lukács terms *Gestaltung* (formation or arrangement), the *faktoviki* insisted on the necessarily fragmented nature of aesthetic representation.

As might be expected given the emphasis on active intervention, disruption occupies a crucial place in the landscape of early Soviet textual production. In addition to leveraging literary techniques identified by Russian formalists, such as laying bare the device (*obnazhenie priema*) and the imposition of narrative difficulty (*zatrudnenie),* factographic works also rely heavily on principles of montage. By incorporating heterogenous elements of varying origins, montage encourages a dynamic, dialogic process with the reader, who—upon confrontation with the raw and disparate materials of a particular text—must assume a more active role in the hermeneutic process, linking together seemingly disconnected materials in order to produce interpretive meaning.[45] It bears recalling here that montage is a cinematic term, and while an array of early Soviet theories of montage developed in the early 1920s, Sergei Eisenstein's and Yuri Tynyanov's ideas regarding audio-visual montage remain two of the most influential frameworks. The key aspect of both Eisenstein's and Tynyanov's paradigms is precisely this necessity of an active reader or viewer, who participates in the constantly oscillating dynamic between deconstruction and reconstruction upon which montage depends. Indeed, it was Lev Kuleshov's early experiments in associative cinematic editing that provided fodder for the focus on fragmentation, process, and reintegration so crucial to Soviet montage culture.[46] Kuleshov famously intercut an actor's affectively "neutral" face with three

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[43] "The book *Den Shi-khua* was made by two people. Deng Shihua was the provider of the raw material of facts [*syrev'shchik faktov*]; I was their moulder [*formovshchik*]." Quoted in Tyerman, *Internationalist Aesthetics*, 196.

[44] Lukács in fact directly attacked Tretyakov's work in his critique of "reportage," calling the bio-interview a "crass" instance of the fatal disconnect between content and form (or "mode of presentation"). "Reportage or Portrayal?" ("Reportage oder Gestaltung?"), in *Essays on Realism,* trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: MIT UP, 1980), 61.

[45] Tyerman, *Internationalist Aesthetics*, 201.

[46] Tomi Huttunen, in his survey of Russian postrevolutionary montage culture, identifies the process of reintegration to be a central dynamic, as the reader or viewer must conceptually assemble heterogenous materials provided by the author or filmmaker. Huttunen, "Montage Culture: The Semiotics of Post-Revolutionary Culture," in *Modernisation in Russia since 1900*, ed. Markku Kangaspuro and Jeremy Smith (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2006). In a similar vein, Joseph Schreuers, who reads Babel primarily through the technique of montage, identifies three central procedures to early Soviet montage: selection, decontextualization, and paradigmatic arrangement of semantic material. Schreuers, *Procedures of Montage in Isaak Babel's Red Cavalry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi

different shots—a corpse, a bowl of soup, and a reclining woman—that elicited varied reactions from spectators, who interpreted the face as expressing grief, hunger, and sexual desire, depending on the juxtaposition viewed.[47] This technique of re-editing resulted in what is known as the "Kuleshov effect," whereby the rapid sequential viewing of two pictures generates new meaning not contained within either image: a so-called "third" meaning is thereby produced by the hermeneutic activities of the viewer. The effect of a discordant arrangement, in other words, is more than the sum of its parts.

As such, practices of montage privilege viewers' perceptual abilities and hermeneutic powers, while tacitly acknowledging their susceptibility to influence. Elaborating on this inconsistency, John MacKay notes that the Kuleshov effect "takes latent, inchoate features" of a particular image and "activate[s] them in specific ways through carefully chosen juxtapositions," thus eliciting a "staged response" akin to visual trickery (at least in the case of "exposure-of-saints'-relics" films upon which MacKay focuses).[48] The power imputed to artistic mediation, accomplished cinematically via image selection and arrangement, is the object of a tense combination of enthusiasm and skepticism on behalf of Soviet practitioners of montage. Artists and filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov could not but help to acknowledge that these new technologies of revelation were also those of manipulation, indicating an uncomfortable porosity between the boundaries of authenticity and artifice. So a film edited to demonstrate the falsity of a particular belief also reveals the capacity of filmic techniques to condition that very interpretation. The logic of montage therefore hinges on an uncertain view of the authority of perception. Even as sensory faculties possess the radical power of discernment, no means of perception is "pure": they are all necessarily shaped, limited, and contingent.[49] Gesturing to the necessity of spectators' active desire to find "true" meaning in order for montage to achieve ostensible coherence, MacKay's contention is that such films thematize the "*capacity* to perceive," rather than any specific meaning.[50] The ambivalence between perception's necessity and its

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Press, 1989). For a comprehensive account of how Soviet montage practices comprise an "unofficial" and unified cultural form, see also Ilya Kukulin's *Mashiny zashumevshego vremeni: kak sovetskiy montazh stal neofitsial'noy kul'tury (The Machines of Noisy Time: How Soviet Montage Became a Method of Unofficial Culture)* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015).

[47] John MacKay notably traces this phenomenon to an even earlier moment in early Soviet history: the "exposure of saints' relics" propaganda films made during the Civil War period. One such film, co-produced by Dziga Vertov and Kuleshov in early 1919, incorporates rapid intercuts of a relic's unveiling and numerous "reaction shots" of the audience. MacKay's point is that these films, in attempting to denounce the false theatrics of religious belief, replicate the very rhetoric of visual deception that they ostensibly reject. "Built on a Lie: Propaganda, Pedagogy, and the Origins of the Kuleshov Effect," in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies,* ed. Johnathan Auerbach (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 219-36.

[48] MacKay, "Built on a Lie," 228.

[49] Such tension is clear in Vertov's concept of the *kinoglaz,* or kino-eye, which he proclaimed would constitute a new means of perception capable of grasping realities imperceptible to the human eye. The instrument of the camera, according to Vertov, could model a form of "objective" perception (using techniques of montage) distinct from human vision; nevertheless, the demiurgic power of the camera lens must still, in the end, reveal itself to the spectator via their perceptual faculties. As such, the authority of the *kinoglaz* is ultimately still dependent on human praxis, despite its desire to transcend it. See *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov,* ed. Annette Michaelson and trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) for a wide selection of Vertov's essays, articles, speeches, and proposals tracing the development of his theories on film.

[50] MacKay, "Built on a Lie," 229.

fundamental inadequacy is most visible, as MacKay notes, in the experimental films of Vertov and Eisenstein, but it is evident in nearly all cultural production of the era. In their emphases on perceptual reorganization and limitation, the visual rhetorics of montage resonate with the factographic desire to produce a new Soviet reality through selective documentary representation. And indeed, literary and cinematic montage techniques were embraced by the *faktoviki* as a means of providing transparently constructed, object-oriented representations of Soviet life, while also contesting "pure" documentation.

Two related tensions thus lie at the heart of montage techniques in particular and factographic ambitions more generally. First, though these practices dismiss invented narratives in favor of referentially truthful, "objective" material, they aim to incite the reader's development of political consciousness via textual reconstruction and reintegration, a process predicated on the effortful construction of "truth." And second, for both montage and factography, perception is simultaneously a tool of empowerment and an epistemically limited instrument, vulnerable to manipulation. Not all facts or fragments are equally valuable, nor are they transparently accessible to the untrained eye. The materials in question possess a didactic and consciousness-raising value, leveraged to an end at odds with an ostensibly passive materialist presentation of the world. These abiding tensions comprise the literary and artistic landscape into which *Red Cavalry* emerged in the early and mid-1920s, and they resonate with the stories' disinterest in narrative progression and attentive regard for the perceptions of peripheral subjects. While Babel's collection occupies a firm place in the post-revolutionary turn toward documentary prose, it anticipates some of the later artistic responses that probed the enduring conflict between historical documentation, the instrumental aims of social transformation, and the subjectivity of aesthetic representation. Even as some of the central techniques of early Soviet montage are clearly identifiable in Babel's collection—including erratic juxtapositions, dislocated (textual) fragments, and thematic collisions—the impetus behind such forms lacks the galvanizing energy of political intervention that characterizes cinematic and photomontage of the era. Babel, that is, remains less captivated with the contemporaneous optimism in the enlightening power of technology and media (indeed, there is little by way of optimism to be found in any of his oeuvre). His stories thus integrate the disruptive ethos and referential interest in historical events, places, and people that characterizes documentary practices like factography and montage, while foreclosing the tendentious potential of mass spectatorship and collective agitation.[51] This is not merely to say that Babel is uninterested in the kinds of agitprop advocated, to varying extents, by the heterogenous members of the Soviet avant-garde in the 20s. It is, rather, to point to the more primary epistemic concern over perceptual limitations with which his stories remain preoccupied.

As it enters the lively terrain of debate probing the dynamic between documenting and producing new conditions of reality, Babel's partially true and partially fictional approach rejects these distinctions outright. His collection blends factual reportage and fictional prose into an experimental, scandalous combination that reimagines the documentary tendencies, including the developing factographic movement, in early Soviet culture. In their continual invocation and distortion of "factuality," the *Red Cavalry* stories perform a resolute documentary impulse that

[51] Certainly this is, in part, due to the essentially disparate means of engagement with visual and textual media. It is no coincidence that a vast majority of agitprop took the form of theater, film, photomontage, or visual art: these media facilitate mass collective spectatorship, and require minimal, if any, literacy. Soviet avant-garde interest in emerging technologies encouraged new consideration of how (mass) audiences might determine form; as such, debates revolved around how aesthetic practices could establish the conditions of what Benjamin Buchloh calls "simultaneous collective reception." "From Factura to Factography," *October,* vol. 30 (1984), 95.

simultaneously suggests its own impossibility. The impetus to record collides not only with the partiality of empirical capabilities, but with the rather contradictory set of impulses with which the Soviet avant-garde was required to grapple: the desire to provide facts without merely "reflecting" reality, a semiotic intervention that aimed to transform the very reality that constituted its material basis. If reference occupies an uncertain status in the factographic paradigm, by laying claim to both veridical historical truth and aesthetically mediated construction, Babel's discursive distortions exploit this tension to a formal extreme. *Red Cavalry's* heteroglossic and radically contrastive performances of perceptual ambivalence—what I argue is a grotesque version of the factographic idiom—divest perception of radical authority and invest it with vagueness, doubt, and contradiction.[52] Akin to MacKay's contention that what the "exposure" films *truly* reveal is cinema's limited ability to affix meaning (in his case, to spectators' actual reactions), *Red Cavalry* tropes the restricted and contingent capacities of perception upon which any conception of political consciousness, revolutionary or otherwise, depends. To see how this works, we now turn to the affordances of the grotesque, in order to examine how Babel's stories exploit the mode's fractured perspectival sensibilities.

Of Stars and Gonorrhea; or, the Babelian Grotesque

To grasp the particular mode of grotesque contrast that forms the basis of Babel's eclectic style, it is helpful to return to fellow literary trickster and *LEF* contributor-cum-Civil War combatant Viktor Shklovsky's illustrative quote. Shklovsky proffered an early and vivid interpretive angle with his cheeky assertion—cited in this chapter's second epigraph—that Babel's "principal device is to speak in the same voice of the stars above and of gonorrhea."[53] His assessment of the Babelian

[52] I take the term "heteroglossia" from Mikhail Bakhtin's work on polyphonic discursive registers in prose, as a translation of *raznorechie* (literally "many" or "varied speech"). Though I am not primarily relying on his particular paradigm—invested as it is in the specifically destabilizing genre of the novel—I take as foundational the idea that the existence of multiple discursive forms provides a staging ground for competition of socially constituted modes of language. It is also worth noting that Bakhtin, a contemporary of Babel, comes out of the comparative philological tradition that produced the formalists, and his work largely critiques formalism for its failure to understand the social nature of language. See Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), especially his essay "Discourse in the Novel" *(Slovo v romane).*

[53] His quote offers a rather humorous echo of the famous concluding passage from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788): "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me," Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason,* ed. and transl. Mary J. Gregor, intro Andrews Reath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5:161-2. Shklovsky's statement effectively displaces moral reason with disease, one further burdened with the judgment of contagion and supposed sexual deviance. If, according to Kant, reflection on the "stars above" prompts consideration of the external infinitude accessed through the senses ("annihilat[ing] my importance as an *animal creature*"), the second perspective dignifies an individual's worth through the internal regard of reasoned intellect ("moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the entire world of the senses"). Shklovsky's version therefore torques this second source of rumination—the intelligence of moral law—into the oft-painful physical consequences of social, sexual life as "animal creatures." As such, for Shklovsky, Babel elevates the sensory and physical while erasing the legislative power of human understanding. In the world of *Red Cavalry*, there is no

tendency to vacillate in the substance of his prose, degrading the sacred and elevating the abject, is—per Shklovsky's own irreverent reputation—part playful exaggeration, part astute commentary. Principally, it highlights the vast aesthetic and symbolic disparities in the objects of Babel's narrative concern, which indeed range from venereal diseases to religious icons to expansive fields of wheat and rye. In fact, Shklovsky's sense of jarring contrast within a singular register of speech echoes fellow formalist Boris Eikhenbaum's analysis of Nikolai Gogol's 1842 short story "The Overcoat" (*Shinel'*) in his pivotal essay of 1918, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' is Made" (*Kak sdelana Shinel' Gogolia).* Eikhenbaum's approach subordinates a story's plot to the manner of its telling, focusing on Gogol's use of stylized oral speech, or *skaz.* Via his analysis of *skaz* as a contrived performance of extremes—"There is no neutral level of language in Gogol," he proclaims—he arrives at the resulting effect of the grotesque.[54] Here "the mimicry of laughter alternates with the mimicry of sorrow," a description that points to the affective charge (and common technique) of the contrastive style, one that elicits what earlier critic I. Mandelshtam labels "laughter through tears" (*smekh skvoz' slezy*).[55] For Eikhenbaum, the insertion of melodramatic or sentimental digressions into the flow of largely comedic elements constitutes the basis of Gogol's art. The collision of the solemn with the fantastical, of pathetic exaggeration with comedic *skaz,* creates the hallmark "grotesque" effect of deformation or distortion. Such is Gogol's ability to "join together what cannot be joined, to exaggerate what is small and diminish what is great" that Eikhenbaum proclaims the ending of Gogol's short story to constitute the "apotheosis" of the technique.[56]

What Shklovsky's epigrammatic judgment illuminates is the degree to which Babel, writing nearly a century after Gogol, builds upon—even amplifies—this grotesque sensibility in his short narrative prose, as he juxtaposes the profane with the sacred in short order. Yet because Babel's revolutionary version of the grotesque emerges out of the excessive violence and devastation of the civil war, it offers something of a limit case for what Eikhenbaum affirms as the mode's ability to give textual shape to structural deformations and social disparities. So *Red Cavalry* shuttles from graphic accounts of pogroms and wartime atrocities, to ekphrastic representations of Christian iconography and wistful descriptions of synagogues and Jewish spiritual leaders. Babel turns his stylistic flair for shocking discordance to the tumult of early Soviet state formation, and to the contradictions emerging out of revolutionary ideology that generate a medley of scrambled discourses and strange conjunctions.

As Babel adapts Gogolian grotesquery to the exigencies of the Polish-Soviet conflict, the latter figure also provides a precedent for the peripheral perspective that Babel's stories ventriloquize. In addition to his St. Petersburg stories (of which "The Overcoat" is one), Gogol was a well-known chronicler of the Ukrainian borderlands of the early- to mid-nineteenth century, incorporating Ukrainian folklore, regional dialects, and village customs in his representation of the western peripheries of the Russian empire. Himself of Ukrainian ethnicity, hailing from a Zaporozhian (Ukrainian Cossack) town in the central Poltava *oblast*, Gogol penned a series of tales and novellas exploring the multiethnic rural provinces, in which a sundry cast of characters—including urban Muscovites, Cossacks, Catholics, Poles, and Jews—mingle and clash in a blend of

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life independent from animality, and the faculties of reason and understanding cease to provide the capacities for concept formation and inference upon which judgments are formed.

[54] Eikhenbaum, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' is Made," from *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays,* ed. Robert A. Maguire (Princeton, 1974), 281; «У Гоголя нет средней речи», "Kak sdelana 'Shinel" Gogol'ia," *Manifesty OPOYAZA,* https://www.opojaz.ru/manifests/kaksdelana.html.

[55] Eikhenbaum, 284; «мимика смеха сменяется мимикой скорби».

[56] Eikhenbaum, 288-9. «…Гоголь может соединять несоединимое, преувеличивать малое и сокращать большое…».

farce, comedy, and melodrama. Best known of these chronicles is his 1831 collection of stories *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka (Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan'ki),* which offers a portrait of village life in the rural settlement of Dikanka. The tales are organized around elements of Ukrainian folklore, with characters modeled on stereotypes of Ukrainian puppet theater; their structure bears notable resemblance to Babel's in their association via a loose narrative frame (one that often incorporates multiple narrators) and heavy reliance on *skaz* to articulate the local rhythms of folk dialect. Enormously popular in the Russian literary circles of Petersburg and Moscow, this first collection was followed by a sequel, *Mirgorod* (1835)*,* and eventually by the historical novel *Taras Bulba* (1842), a romantic tale of a Zaporozhian Cossack leader rebelling against Polish rule set in early-seventeenth century Ukraine. These texts provide a robust historical model for Babel's representation of the shifting borderlands of the former Russian empire in the early Soviet period, territories whose boundaries have a centuries-long history of (often violent) fluctuations under various imperial and state configurations. For Gogol, one of the pioneers of *skaz* in Russian letters, the use of stylized speech provided a means of introducing socially or ethnically marginal narrators and characters into the literary field. Likewise, the discursive unevenness and dialectal registers that Babel adopts from Gogol reflect multiple historical and socio-cultural legacies—the practices of the Cossack cavalry, the Bolshevik commissariat, Polish nobility, Hasidic Jewry, and Ukrainian peasantry—that collide in the revolutionary present.

As Eikhenbaum makes clear, the performative nature of *skaz* is central to the contrastive power of Gogol's narrative technique in particular, and of the grotesque in general.[57] The deliberately crafted, "contrived" prose style that he identifies relies on patterns of oral recitation and hyperbolic descriptions of distorted proportions, which exaggerate characters' reactions and inflate seemingly minor details. From Gogol, Babel derives the loss of scale and proportion in the enumeration and accumulation of detail, and the incongruous juxtaposition of elevated (declamatory-pathetic) and low (comic-absurd) tonal registers. While Shklovsky claims that Babel writes of "high" and "low" matters in the same narrative voice, flattening both into a single discursive plane, the stories of *Red Cavalry* in fact display contrast both *within* a singular voice and *between* a multitude of registers, exhibiting a varied taxonomy of linguistic modes: so we see a fusion of sociolects, dialects, lexicons, and idioms that jumble class, ethnic, religious, and political affiliations, as well as official and vernacular registers. In addition to these linguistic variations, the stories also integrate disparate forms of textual media, joining written fragments (such as newspapers, letters, state proclamations, and agitational leaflets) with direct speech and first-person narrative descriptions. Indeed, the oral discourse of *skaz* is only one element of this grotesque taxonomy, alongside official Soviet language of state, revolutionary agitational discourse, lyrical narrative passages, and Jewish homilies (to name a few). Babel's prose privileges extremes as it combines these varied speech patterns, styles, and modalities of communication, subordinating a developmental or coherent sense of plot to a fractured and non-sequential series of vignettes.[58]

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[57] Throughout his essay, Eikhenbaum uses the word *igra*, which can mean either "game" or "performance," though performance captures the sense of active theatricality that he foregrounds in his understanding of the narrator's role. At one point he glosses "mimetic *skaz"* as "a special manner of acting things out"—«особый способ разыгрывания»—presenting a more explicit description of the narrator as actor. "Gogol's 'Overcoat'," 271.

[58] I take the term "language of state" from Michael Gorham, who focuses on the role of public discourse in establishing authority for the newly emergent Soviet state. Gorham understands Babel's narrative works (among other writers, including Dmitrii Furmanov) to participate in the state-building process by incorporating new, specifically Soviet forms of speech. "Language of state" refers to the Bolshevik-led reconstruction of linguistic patterns and turns of phrase, which was part

To take one story that is particularly illustrative of such wide taxonomic variation, "Berestechko" sees the Red Cavalry marching into a decaying shtetl in the shadow of an old Polish castle, an opportune setting for recording multilayered, polyvocal discursive modes. In rapid succession, Liutov's wistfully morbid descriptions of the town's atmosphere ("A song gurgled like a brook running dry. Monstrous corpses lay upon the thousand-year-old burial mounds") are interrupted by the brutal murder of a Jew suspected of espionage by the Cossack troops.[59] The taunt of a sword-wielding Cossack interjects the narrator's ruminations, which then swiftly continue apace, alighting upon the squalor of the shtetl's housing conditions and the townsfolk's observance of Hasidic customs: the children's dutiful attendance at "cheder" schools and the community's reliance on the wisdom of the "tsaddiks," or spiritual elders. The distinctive elements move from a discordance between scene and event, to that between ethno-religious communities, represented by a shift in lexicon. While Liutov wanders, he overhears the divisional commissar's lecture on the Second Congress of the Comintern to a motley crowd of "peasants, Jews, and tanners from the outskirts" gathered in the town square: an intrusion of official state language into the heterogeneous vernaculars (as well as different languages, including Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish, presumably) represented by the assorted gathering. At this point, he rather implausibly stumbles upon a fragment of an old letter from the previous century concerning the Napoleonic war.[60] An excerpt in French from the letter is immediately followed by commissar Vinogradov's agitational speech, the words of which—"You are in power. Everything that is here is yours … I will now proceed to the election of the Revkom (Revolutionary Committee)…"—fall upon a bewildered crowd, who give no indication of comprehension.[61] Notably, the commissar employs a Soviet stump compound, *Revkom,* while Liutov likewise parrots the official Sovietese in his identification of Vinogradov as a *voyenkomdiv* (short for *voyennyye komandir divizii,* or wartime divisional commissar), demonstrating a series of newly developed state lexical distinctions. And so this short, discursively hybrid vignette traces a rapid path from vividly descriptive reflections, to a Cossack's murderous cry, to a narration of Jewish customs, to French nineteenth-century wartime correspondence, to Soviet agitational discourse. In addition to the layering of heterogeneous lexicons, dialects, registers, and languages, the sketch incorporates disparate forms of media, including oral and written discourses. Here, then, is a vivid illustration of Babel's relocation of grotesque distortions from the absurdities and frustrations of Gogol's nineteenth-century imperial bureaucracy to those of revolutionary, multiethnic, multinational conflict.

As evidenced in "Berestechko's" numerous vacillations, discordance pertains not only to discursive elements, but to the contextual fluctuations that juxtapose quotidian activities with casual atrocities, set amidst the ongoing backdrop of revolutionary organizing. As the collection yokes together such disparities, no singular element or viewpoint is systematically prioritized; even Liutov's narration—the most consistent perspective offered throughout the collection—neglects to provide much by way of a stable orientation, as his own position shuttles between passive observer and

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of a mass effort to reimagine textual media in the spirit of political agitation: "The Russian language experienced an increase in both the influx and productivity of neologisms, acronyms, stump-compounds, foreign terms, old words subjected to semantic shifts, and an odd stylistic mix of substandard slang, bureaucratese, and high Marxist rhetoric." "Writers at the Front," 103.

[59] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* edited and translated by Val Vinokur (Evanston, Northwestern UP, 2018), 232; «Песня журчала, как пересыхающий ручей. Чудовищные трупы валялись на тысячелетних курганах», *Konarmiia,* 58.

[60] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 233; «крестьяне, евреи и кожевники», *Konarmiia,* 59.

[61] Babel, *The Essential Fictions* 234, translation modified; «Вы—власть. Все что здесь—ваше. Нет панов. Приступаю к выбором ревкома…», *Konarmiia*, 59.

active participant (not to mention the fact that he frequently contradicts himself, as we shall soon see). The effect of layering sociolects, lexicons, dialects, and disparate media, in addition to the "high" and "low" registers adapted from Gogol, is a multi-perspectivalism that disrupts singular narrative coherence. And with the abandonment of a primary narrative orientation comes a foregrounding of unreliability: incompatible discourses (such as *skaz* and language of state), jarring hyperboles, and competing impressions together resist the provision of a stable and progressive version of events. The added fact that the stories trace a jumbled chronology, with conflicting temporalities and flashbacks to before or shortly after the revolution, amplifies the mediated nature of the represented events and discourses.[62] Grotesque contrasts in language, style, and objects of narrative concern invite the warped sense of factuality that either provoked or animated contemporaneous readers: after all, how does one discern a singular set of facts with the availability of so many disparate perspectives and interpretive options? Even in the absence of explicit referential inaccuracy (for instance, patently erroneous dates, places, or names), representational and discursive emphases guide interpretive possibilities. This is, in part, due to the weight given to certain narrative elements and languages—for instance, burial mounds, Jewish rituals, and agitprop speech—which is necessarily exclusionary within the economy of the text. These narrative choices are never neutral, as they foreclose other forms of attention and emphasis: such is the implicit crux of Budyonny's complaint about the collection missing the main thrust of the action by focusing exclusively on "junk and underwear."[63] The exaggerated vacillations of *Red Cavalry* push this non-neutrality to an extreme, in a deliberate performance of the text's mediated construction.

In addition to illuminating textual fabrication, the narrative unevenness resulting from Babel's heteroglossic technique exacerbates the destabilizing atmosphere of disoriented pseudo-factuality. Consider another brief story, an interpolated tale found early in the collection. In "A Letter" (*Pis'mo),* Liutov includes a piece of correspondence that he has transcribed for Kurdyukov, a young soldier serving in his detachment. By way of preface, Liutov states that he has "copied it without embellishment and transmit[s] it here word for word for the sake of accuracy."[64] Yet immediately following this matter-of-fact introduction, a problem arises. Here is the first paragraph of the letter, addressed to the boy's mother:

> Dearest Mama, Evdokia Fyodorovna. In the first lines of this letter I hasten to inform you that, thank the Lord, I am alive and well and would wish to hear the same from you. And

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[62] The stories' tangled timeline roughly follows a relatively short period of time during the Polish-Soviet war, from about June to September 1920. In addition to the fact that the dates appended to the end of a majority of the stories are not strictly chronological (for instance, several stories from "July" come before those of "June"), some of the battles narrated occur in the cycle *after* stories that concern the outcome of the conflict. Recall as well that some of the tales comprise entirely descriptive vignettes or *skaz* flashbacks: so "The Life Story of Pavlichenko, Matvei Rodionynch" is a first-person account, narrated in dialect, that relates the titular character's abuse at the hands of his master, and his brutal revenge after revolutionary dispossession disrupts the estate in 1918. Such stories necessarily occupy a suspended temporality, outside the flow of whatever narrative momentum can be discerned from the rest of the collection.

[63] Budyonny, "The 'Babism' of Babel," in *Isaac Babel's Selected Writings,* ed. and trans. Gregory Freidin, 468. «в бабьем барахле-белье», "Babism Babel'ia," 136.

[64] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 172; «не приукрашивая, и передаю дословно, в согласии с истиной», *Konarmiia*, 11. Here Babel uses the less common word for truth, *istina,* connoting objective precision.

> likewise I bow low to you all, white face to wet ground … (Next there's a long list of relatives, godparents, kith, and kin. Let's leave that be and go to the second paragraph.)[65]

Despite Liutov's initial assurance of the fidelity of his transmission—specifically, of its literal word-for-word (*doslovno)* accuracy—he swiftly violates the narrative pact he has himself initiated. His omission of Kurdyukov's familial well-wishes, even if the list is implicitly understood to be superfluous, shifts the terms of authenticity, which are based now on editorial authority rather than representative fidelity. And so we "leave that be" (*opustim eto)* and move to the second paragraph, equipped with a heightened awareness of narratorial inconsistency.

Yet Liutov is not the only one to flout coherence with rapid contradictions: Kurdyukov himself cannot keep things straight. In the second paragraph of the letter, he proudly reports that he is serving in the Red Army alongside heroic fighters, assigned to the *Politotdel'* (an abbreviation for the Red Army's "political department," responsible for creating and distributing propaganda). Kurdyukov inflates the success and morale of the military campaign, enthusiastically reproducing the propagandistic language of his "ruthless" (*besposhchadnyi)* newspaper the *Red Cavalryman*, which apparently "every fighting man on the front line wants to read, and after that he gets heroic and cuts down the vile *szlachta* [Polish nobles]."[66] But immediately following his boast that he is living with the Red Hero Nikon Vasilyich "in grand style" (*ochen' velikolepno,* literally in a sumptuous or magnificent manner), Kurdyukov pleads with his mother for basic provisions. The about-face comes within a span of two sentences, absent acknowledgment:

> Dearest Mama Evdokia Fyodorovna, send me whatever may be in your power to send … Every day I lie down to rest without anything to eat and without spare clothing, so it's real cold … I can tell you also that the country around here is all poor, the muzhiks take their horses into the woods and hide from our Red eagles, you won't find much wheat and what's there is so short you have to laugh. They sow rye and oats, too. Hops grow on sticks here so that it comes out very even; they make moonshine with it.[67]

In addition to the flagrant self-contradiction, there are several crucial linguistic aspects to note here. Though not visible in the translation, Kurdyukov's prose is littered with non-standard Russian; specifically, he employs a Cossack dialect from the southern Ukrainian regions (evidenced by his use of *kazhnie* instead of *kazhdie,* and *zdesya* instead of *zdes').* The young soldier also lapses into notably casual speech, as he laments that "it's real cold" (*dyuzhe holodno)* and mocks the pathetic crops of

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[65] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 172; «Любезная мама Евдокия Федоровна. В первых строках сего письма спешу вас уведомить, что, благодаря господа, я есть жив и здоров, чего желаю от вас слыхать то же самое. А также нижающе вам кланяюсь от бела лица до сырой земли... (следует перечисление родственников, крестных, кумовьев. Опустим это. Перейдем ко второму абзацу)», *Konarmiia*, 11.

[66] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 172; «всякий боец на передовой позиции желает прочитать, и опосля этого он с геройским духом рубает подлую шляхту», *Konarmiia*, 11.

[67] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 172-3; «Любезная мама Евдокия Федоровна. Пришлите чего можете от вашей силы-возможности … Кажные сутки я ложуся отдыхать не евши и безо всякой одежи, так что дюже холодно … Могу вам писать также, что здеся страна совсем бедная, мужики со своими конями хоронятся от наших красных орлов по лесам, пшеницы видать мало и она ужасно мелкая, мы с нее смеемся. Хозяева сеют рожь и то же самое овес. На палках здеся растет хмель, так что выходит очень аккуратно; из него гонют самогон», *Konarmiia*, 11.

wheat unsuccessfully cultivated by the local peasant *muzhiks*. These moments of *skaz,* peppered with dialect and slang, contrast the reserved mode of address to his mother (the inclusion of her full name—given, patronymic, and family names—connotes a heightened formality) and the elevated register he sporadically employs elsewhere, evidenced by the various iterations of the phrase "I hasten to inform you" (*ya speshu vam uvedomit')* repeated throughout the letter. Further, in his descriptions of his wartime exploits, the young man vacillates between affectionate diminutives and formal names: so he calls his father variously "Papa" and "Timofey Rodionych," and his brother "Senka" or "Semyon Timofeyich." In addition to these rapid shifts in tone and address, alongside the marked use of *skaz,* the bureaucratic language of state punctuates the letter, discernible by Kurdyukov's parroting of Soviet official and propagandistic cliches: the "ruthless" newspaper, the figure of the "Red Hero," the brave "fighting men" galvanized by a rousing call to arms. As Gorham notes, such rhetoric enters the text apparently unconsciously, blending with the other forms of language to create a "narrative hybrid."[68] For Gorham, this hybridity is primarily parodic, reappropriating the language of state power through linguistic deformation. Yet when paired with the contradictory statements, these discursive contrasts also perform, in miniature, the perspectival shifts of the collection's central conceit: extremities that, while gesturing to a kind of referential truth, also undermine the very possibility of coherent representation. The jarring profusion of sociolects aims, on the one hand, at a kind of representational fidelity—indeed, it arguably achieves it, by virtue of its reproduction of actual speech patterns—but it lacks a framing system of representability to organize these heterogeneous elements.[69]

The main contents of Kurkyukov's letter, a tragic tale of familial atrocity, provide a more concrete example of this representational conflict. After the young Kurdyukov informs his mother of his wellbeing (or lack thereof), he "hastens" to tell her about two violent murders involving his father (her husband) and brothers (her sons); the latter served in the Red Army alongside Kurdyukov, while the patriarch formed part of the White counter-revolutionary resistance under General Denikin. As the brigades clash and one of the Red army divisions is captured, the father brutally attacks and murders one of the sons ("Papa began cutting him up (*rezat')* … and went on cutting until it grew dark and Fyodor was done for").[70] The father then seizes upon Kurdyukov, viciously beating him until the young boy manages to escape; later in Voronezh he meets his other brother, a commander of a different Red army regiment. The two eventually stumble upon the now-fugitive patriarch hiding in a neighboring town (camouflaged in "civvies" [*v vol'noy odezhe*], his beard dyed black), where he is captured by the Red troops. The ensuing scene is a jarring mixture of dialogic detail and glaring omissions: Kurdyukov apparently recalls the exact conversation between his brother and father and reproduces it verbatim, in a passage that bears more resemblance to narrative prose than a letter (which, after all, typically does not contain dialogue). Yet the culminating event, the execution of his father, is notably elided: "Semyon Timofeyich sent me out of the yard so I can't describe to you, dearest Mama Evdokia Fyodorovna, how they finished Papa, since I was sent out of the yard."[71] The letter ends abruptly and unceremoniously thereafter.

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[68] Gorham, "The Civil War Narratives of Babel and Furmanov," 114.

[69] Eikhenbaum notably insists that *skaz* is a method of imitation, a form of verbal mimicry: "*skaz* is not a narration, but instead a mimesis and a declamation," "Gogol's Overcoat," 283; «сказ—не повествовательный, а мимико-декламационный.»

[70] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 173; «И папаша начали Федю резать … и резали до темноты, пока брат Федор Тимофеич не кончился», *Konarmiia,* 12.

[71] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 174; «Семен Тимофеич услали меня со двора, так что я не могу, любезная мама Евдокия Федоровна, описать вам за то, как кончали папашу, потому я был усланный со двора», *Konarmiia*, 13.

It is worth lingering on the phrase "I cannot describe" (*ya ne mogu opisat'),* which provides something of a key for the oral narrative. Here is the true admission of Kurdyukov's perceptive abilities: of his limited, skewed, and uneven access to the events unfolding around him. It is a literal and embodied version of the restricted and fragmentary perspective performed over the course of the collection, a moment of clear sensory failure. He cannot describe, because he cannot see (or hear, or smell) his father's execution, having been forcibly removed from the scene. The empirical deprivation recounted by Kurdyukov in this moment recalls that of Babel himself, relegated to the "rear" of the action. Of course, Kurdyukov (like Babel) *can* describe certain things—and does—but the details he provides do not, it seems, align with the gravity of the objects or events portrayed. This disproportion leads Victor Terras to contend that in Babel's *skaz* stories, the narrative style (not Babel's "loftiest" or most artistically ambitious, he coolly adds) is characterized by "wrong accents." The emphasis is, quite simply, erroneous: "stylistically, structurally, and emotionally."[72] Yet when we take into account these sustained perspectival distortions, we can see that the problem Terras identifies as the incorrect narrative weight given to superfluous details—"a morass of irrelevant trivialities"—is precisely the point. Terras's aesthetic objection pinpoints a central tension between the erratic structure of *skaz* and the empirical grounds of factography.

To illustrate my point, let us return to the end of "A Letter," which concludes with a description of another document, this time a visual image. The final paragraph offers an ekphrastic rendering of a photograph depicting the Kurdyukov family, bookending the interpolated letter with Liutov's own narrative voice. And yet here as well, even with a technology of purported historical objectivity, perspectival embellishment clearly saturates the description. The "broken" (*slomannuiu)* photograph handed to Liutov shows the young Timofey Kurdyukov, a "broad-shouldered policeman sporting a uniform cap and a beard combed down the middle, an immovable figure with high cheekbones and a gleam in his colorless and senseless eyes." The mother, a "tiny peasant woman" with "clear, timid, and drawn" features, is stationed in a modest armchair, while up against the wall—"that sad provincial photographer's background of flowers and doves"—stand Timofey's two brothers, "monstrously tall, dull, broad-faced, goggle-eyed, ramrod ready for inspection."[73] The scene is one of latent violence, a portrait of an illiterate Cossack peasant family fated for tragedy. Liutov's description foregrounds the melancholic, pitiable nature of the tableau in no uncertain terms, evinced by his interpretation of the young men as "senseless" (*bessmyslennykh)* and "dull" (*tupye)* based entirely on their physiognomies; the adjective *zhalkii,* rendered here as "sad," but also translated as "pathetic" or "miserable," connotes a marked condescension. Against this unenviable

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[72] Terras, "Line and Color: The Structure of I. Babel's Short Stories in *Red Cavalry*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 3, no. 2 (1966), 149. Terras's full assessment runs: "The uneducated or semiliterate narrator finds it difficult to get to the point of his tale as he wades through a morass of irrelevant trivialities; and when he does get there finally, it is awkwardly off balance, and as if by accident. The murders in "Salt" and in "A Letter" seem just to happen, anticlimactically almost …the entire narrative in these stories is characterized by what one might call "wrong accents"—stylistically, structurally, and emotionally."

[73] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 175; «Он протянул мне сломанную фотографию. На ней был изображен Тимофей Курдюков, плечистый стражник в форменном картузе и с расчесанной бородой, недвижный, скуластый, с сверкающим взглядом бесцветных и бессмысленных глаз. Рядом с ним, в бамбуковом креслице, мерцала крохотная крестьянка в выпущенной кофте, с чахлыми светлыми и застенчивыми чертами лица. А у стены, у этого жалкого провинциального фотографического фона с цветами и голубями, высились два парня—чудовищно огромные, тупые, широколицые, лупоглазые, застывшие, как на ученье, два брата Курдюковых—Федор и Семен», *Konarmiia*, 13.

backdrop of ignorance and deprivation stand the "monstrously" (*chudovishchno*) large figures of the elder brothers, who here quite clearly occupy a grotesque status as proportionally absurd, glaringly out of place in their own familial context.

In fact, we could take the first descriptive adjective as a kind of encapsulation of the entire scene, in addition to the letter that precedes it: recall that the photograph is "broken," rendering in physical form the fractured and violent sense of incongruity that pervades the entire story. Mark Schreurs understands this ekphrastic paragraph to be evidence of Liutov's "negative evaluative" position, which he states serves as a kind of interpretive guide for the collection: so Liutov's critical—if often quite subtle—relation to the people and events around him is revealed in the rather obviously subjective description of the photograph.[74] Following Schreurs, Val Vinokur extends Liutov's ethical orientation—evidenced through the latter's judgment of the Kurdyukov family as "brainless, brutish, terrifying, and pathetic"—to the rest of the *skaz* stories.[75] "A Letter" is chronologically the first of such tales, and Vinokur takes its privileged placement as an indication of how the other oral narratives ought to be read: as primarily ethical investigations. Yet if we consider the prevalence of Terras's "wrong accents" throughout the letter, alongside the "brokenness" of the photograph itself, Liutov's "ethical" sensibilities in fact highlight the centrality of disproportion: the monstrous size of the brothers, especially in contrast to the diminutive peasant mother, offers a physical representation of the story's emphasis on disruptive proportions. Here, that is, the photographic details of the object provide a more tangible key to the multiple layers of grotesque textual deformation performed in the rest of the story: linguistic hybridity, narrative contradictions, perspectival limitations, and sensory failures, all of which seem to undermine the purported desire for "accurate transmission."

Recall the hyperbolic and elevated relation to detail that characterizes the grotesque, according to Eikhenbaum. As he elaborates, *skaz* is a hallmark device of the grotesque, one that—in addition to constituting a comedic performance—creates an illusion of reality. The uneven provision of detail, recounted via a stylized manner of speech, amplifies the impression that the speaker is recounting a "real story." Naturally, not all elements or perspectives of a tale are known to its narrator, who embellishes, digresses, and tosses in incidental remarks. Via this "offhand and naïve chatter," as Eikhenbaum describes it, 'unnecessary details' pop up in the most natural-looking way."[76] It is precisely the speaker's incomplete performance of telling—this partiality of perspective—that lends the story credibility: after all, no individual, whether participant or observer, possesses the impossible intimacy and knowledge of an omniscient narrator. In this way, accessibility comes to signal fictionality, while conversely, opacity indicates epistemically truthful representation: only that which is knowable is rendered. Indeed, one of Eikhenbaum's central claims is that Gogol explicitly privileged the imbalance arising out of such partiality, and therein lies his craft: "the thing that Gogol found of value in ['The Overcoat'] was precisely this fantastically limited and self-enclosed complex of thoughts, feelings, and desires, within whose narrow confines the artist is at liberty to exaggerate details and violate the normal proportions of the world."[77] This violation—the exaggeration of the small and diminishment of the great—is the basis of the grotesque as a form, and it is enabled by *skaz*'s privileging of the partial and skewed. Even as the grotesque violates

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[74] Schreurs, *Procedures of Montage*, 41.

[75] Vinokur, "Morality and Orality," 685.

[76] Eikhenbaum, "Gogol's Overcoat," 283; «небрежную, наивную болтовню …Точно непроизвольно выскакивают „ненужные" детали.»

[77] Ibid., 288. «В анекдоте о чиновнике Гоголю был ценен именно этот фантастически-ограниченный, замкнутый состав дум, чувств и желаний, в узких пределах которого художник волен преувеличивать детали и нарушать обычные пропорции мира.»

presumably "normative" realities, its distorted perspective tethers the rhetorical mode to a kind of sincere representational status. In distancing its objects of representation, grotesque distortion can, in this way, remain epistemically honest. As a mode, it therefore is capable of distinguishing between "truth" and "fact," privileging the former at the expense of the latter.

Here we arrive at a more organized definition of the grotesque, in which a common perspectival point is missing, one that might be capable of framing a more consistent structure of visibility by determining what needs to be seen, and what can be passed over. This lack in fact figures a more general absence: the textual elements (dialects, sociolects, registers, different forms of media) clash because of a withdrawal of any consistently regulating medium that could array and frame them in the same text more coherently. What we are missing, then, is a strong theory of textual organization: without a hypothetical organizing principle, which might allow factography to establish the meaning of "fact" in the first place, there is merely a wild proliferation of elements. In the absence of a clear proportional hierarchy, then, the grotesque works by foregrounding the problem of organization or integration; yet it foregrounds this problem not by solving it, but by simply reiterating it—even intensifying it to "monstrous" proportions.

"Monstrous Russia," "Unspeakable Russia"

Red Cavalry's notable emphasis on the "monstrous" is a tangible means of illustrating this distorted sense of proportion, while simultaneously gesturing to the ubiquity of violence that deforms bodies and destroys landscapes. Indeed, the trope of monstrosity comes to occupy a crucial visual status in the collection: the Kurdyukov brothers are merely the first in a line of monstrous, misshapen, and distorted characters and objects. Take "Pan Apolek," a story that comes shortly after "A Letter," in which Liutov describes the uncanny, sacrilegious portraiture of a blasphemous icon painter who depicts well-known Biblical scenes using the likenesses of those who commission the work. The portraits generate controversy in the small Polish Catholic town where Pan Apolek sets up shop, pitting the "holy fool of a painter" (*yurodivyi khudozhnik)* against the Catholic vicars. Liutov's recounting of the story (which takes place at an unspecified time in the recent past) includes vivid descriptions of these "monstrous family portraits" hidden away in the "squalid and foul-smelling huts" of the town. So Apolek's oeuvre includes "Joseph with gray hair parted down the middle, pomaded Jesuses, ever-pregnant village Marys with knees spread—these images hung in icon corners, festooned with paper flowers"; in a particularly daring move, Apolek paints a grisly version of the decapitation of Saint John the Baptist by rendering the severed head as the visage of a local priest.[78] The macabre irreverence of the paintings—their quite literal mixing of the sacred and the profane—offers a clear visual index of the incongruity of the Babelian landscape. As the common faces of secular characters audaciously interrupt holy iconography, their respective visual idioms merge, disrupting each and estranging both. Notably, the events transpire amidst "the twisted ruins" (*sredi skryuchennyk razvalin)* of the "swiftly crushed town" (*v naspekh smyatom gorode*) of Novograd-Volynsk, where Liutov is billeted with the army, and where a number of other stories (including "A Letter") take place. The very setting, comprising the twisted remains of a largely destroyed town, is itself a grotesquely transformed version of its former state.

As evidenced by this layered rendering of misshapen forms, it is not only the physical deformations of human figures to which the recurring narrative emphasis on the "monstrous"

[78] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 179, 181; «в самых захудалых и зловонных хатах эти чудовищные семейные портреты»; «Иосифы с расчесанной надвое сивой головой, напомаженные Исусы, многорожавшие деревенские Марии с поставленными врозь коленями—эти иконы висели в красных углах, окруженные венцами из бумажных цветов», *Konarmiia*, 19.

points. Even as a litany of such characters appears throughout the story cycle—including the Cossack Afonka Bida, whose "charred" (*obuglivshemsya)* face is marked by "a monstrous pink swelling … where his left eye had been" or the feminine perversion of nurse Sashka's own "monstrous bosom" (*chudovishchnaya grud')*—Liutov also leverages this evocative term in the service of depicting the contradictions of national identity.[79] The concluding story of the collection, "The Rebbe's Son," sees Liutov relating the last moments in the life of Red Army soldier Ilya Bratslavsky to the regiment's cook, Vasily. His narration characteristically interrupts a serenely lyrical description of a Sabbath evening with a passing reference to the "wasteland of war" (*pustynia voiny)* visible beyond the window. As he recounts the journey of the Politsection train across the "dead spine of the fields," the idea of monstrosity again arises, this time taking shape as a collective, national affliction: "And monstrous Russia, inconceivable, like a swarm of clothes lice, tramped in on bast shoes on either side of the train cars."[80] "Monstrous Russia" (*chudovishchnaya Rossiya)* refers, in this case, to a mass of emaciated and diseased *muzhiks* rushing to board the train cars, as the regiment attempts to repel them with the butts of rifles, projectile potatoes, and—in a last, desperate effort—piles of Trotsky's leaflets. The collapsed empire and nascent Soviet state are figured as a teeming, undifferentiated, and sickly collective, one that rather paradoxically embodies both a hostile antagonist and the exploited masses for whom the revolution is carried out. No less symbolically weighted is the soldiers' means of defense against the horde: an incongruous mélange of weaponry, precious crops, and agitprop—tools of aggression, means of sustenance, and the animating language of revolutionary conflict. As Liutov repulses the frantic crowd, he recognizes a familiar face: Ilya, rebbe Motale's son, the "last prince of the dynasty" turned Red Army soldier.[81] Now a withered and limp figure, barely half alive and scarcely clothed, his body is hauled onto the train platform, where Liutov begins to gather his scattered belongings. Here the remnants of Ilya's Hasidic past mix indiscriminately with the revolutionary symbols of the ongoing Soviet conflict:

> Everything was dumped together here—the directives of an agitator and the notes of a Jewish poet. Portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side. The knotted iron of Lenin's skull and the faded silk of Maimonides' portraits. A lock of woman's hair lay in a booklet of the resolutions of the Party's Sixth Congress, and the margins of Communist leaflets were crowded with crooked lines of ancient Hebrew verse. They fell upon me in a mean and dreary rain—pages of the Song of Songs and revolver cartridges.[82]

Such are the last effects of the dying revolutionary, a concluding scene in which ancient Jewish philosophy and spiritual wisdom collide with the new, secular values of the revolution. It is a

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[79] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 245, 283; «Вместо левого глаза на его обуглившемся лице отвратительно сияла чудовищная розовая опухоль», *Konarmiia,* 69; «чудовищная грудь», *Konarmiia,* 95.

[80] Babel, 291; «Поезд политотдела стал уползать по мертвой спине полей. И чудовищная Россия, неправдоподобная, как стадо платяных вшей, затопала лаптями по обе стороны вагонов», *Konarmiia,* 101.

[81] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 291; «последнего принца в династии», *Konarmiia*, 101.

[82] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 29; «Здесь все было свалено вместе—мандаты агитатора и памятки еврейского поэта. Портреты Ленина и Маймонида лежали рядом. Узловатое железо ленинского черепа и тусклый шелк портретов Маймонида. Прядь женских волос была заложена в книжку постановлений шестого съезда партии, и на полях коммунистических листовок теснились кривые строки древнееврейских стихов. Печальным и скупым дождем падали они на меня - страницы Песни песней и револьверные патроны», *Konarmiia*, 102.

culminating instance of the clash of languages, values, and iconographies, where the details and ephemera (leaflets, portraits, pages, cartridges, verses, party directives) in circulation over the course of the entire collection merge in a final, incongruous, and sad (*pechal'nyi)* shower of personal oddments.

If such an eclectic assortment of material artifacts is all that remains at the end, it is a catalogue that provides a tangible record of the incommensurate ideologies simmering underneath revolutionary activity, as well as the historical legacies that blend chaotically into a palimpsest of ruins. The items "dumped together" (*svaleno vmeste)* resist integration into a holistic, comprehensible chronicle: indeed, the fact that Hebrew verses are scribbled *upon* the Bolshevik leaflets is a detail that complicates the linear teleology of a simple revolutionary conversion narrative. Liutov admittedly struggles to assimilate these heterogenous articles, which—as realia of revolutionary experience—resonate with the object-oriented representations of factographic documentation. To be sure, this is a struggle carried out, in varying guises, over the course of the story cycle. Even when such experiential fragments are represented as oral bits of discourse, they remain non-integrated pieces of empirical data. To wit, an earlier story, "Evening" (*Vecher),* sees Liutov absorbing the ambient, disjointed dialogue of fellow members of the regiment one night on the train; as he sits listening to the conversation between a washerwoman, the cook, and fellow *Red Cavalryman* propagandists, he "digest[s] the class struggle in my vague poetical brain."[83] His vague *(smutnyi)* and exhausted mind works to synthesize these disparate perspectives, ideas, and languages, attempting to reconcile his abject physical state (boils on his neck, sores on his legs) with what army propagandist Galin calls the "curving road of the Revolution."[84] It is a recursive endeavor that meets no clear success or conclusive finality, and it is one shared by the numerous other ventriloquized voices across the story cycle. Liutov is by no means alone in his frustrated attempts to "digest" (*perevarivat';* the Russian prefix *pere* tellingly connotes, among other things, repetition and extremity), synthesize, and articulate.

As a final example, let us turn to another interpolated tale in the form of a letter. Unlike "A Letter," "Salt" (*Sol')* bears no framed introduction, instead immediately jumping into an indignant missive addressed to "Comrade Editor," penned by one Nikita Balmashev, a Cossack "soldier of the Revolution" (*soldat revoliutsii).* Balmashev's complaint, articulated once again in a mixture of *skaz* and official Soviet language, regards "the class unconsciousness of certain women who are harmful to our cause."[85] He proceeds to relate an incident involving a peasant woman's deceitful behavior, wherein she disguises a bag of salt as an infant in order to hitch a ride on the cavalry transport train, and—a detail that speaks to the atmosphere of casual violence—so as to avoid the soldiers' sexual harassment. In a familiar refrain that echoes Liutov's preface to Kurdyukov's letter, Balmashev insists that he will only "write about what my own eyes saw firsthand."[86] And, as in the former epistolary tale, this promise of empirical accuracy invites some skepticism, as the author rather implausibly reproduces full scenes of dialogue verbatim, disrupting the standard generic conventions of epistles. More revealing, however, is a detail included in his description of the woman's violent expulsion from the train after her fraudulent "child" is discovered: as Balmashev throws her from the moving train car onto the desolate fields beyond, he pointedly declares that she is surrounded by

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[83] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 240, translation modified; «Смутными поэтическими мозгами переваривал я борьбу классов», *Konarmiia*, 64.
[84] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 240; «кривая революции», *Konarmiia*, 64.
[85] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 235; «за несознательных женщин, которые нам вредные», *Konarmiia*, 60.
[86] Babel, *The Essential Fictions,* 235; «Поэтому опишу вам только за то, что мои глаза собственноручно видели», *Konarmiia,* 60.

"ineffable Russia."[87] Notably, he employs an archaic, non-standard form of "Russia": *Raseya,* a vulgar and dialectal term connoting use by a provincial, uneducated speaker. The utterance gestures to his own semi-literacy and class status, a position shared with the peasant woman, who likewise employs the variation in her conversation. The fact that he specifically notes that he "*saw* … ineffable Russia" (emphasis mine) indicates the unevenness of his cognitive faculties, which allow visual access but not verbal enunciation. Put simply, he is here unable to describe the phenomena he witnesses, a limitation he attributes to the national body in its entirety. So Russia *itself* becomes ineffable, an entity impossible to portray by virtue of its own narrative recalcitrance.

Akin to the abrupt ending of "A Letter," Balmashev quickly wraps up his tale after this expression of verbal limitation, unceremoniously recounting his murder of the woman in a brief sentence before signing off: grasping a rifle, he "wash[es] that disgrace from the face of the working land and the republic."[88] It is a euphemistic retelling, one that emphasizes the new post-revolutionary state paradigm as it elides the violence endemic to its existence. In place of Kurdyukov's experience of literal limitation, wherein he cannot describe the murder of his father because of his physical absence, Balmashev's letter displays the seemingly dislocated emphases (the "wrong accents," in Terras's estimation) that contribute to the cycle's environment of distorted proportionality. Even as he is ostensibly unable to verbally grasp the phenomenon of "Russia," his description of the dramatic events, characters, and surroundings—including a telling reference to "peasant fields without an ear of wheat" immediately following his declaration that Russia is "ineffable"—belies this apparent narrative impossibility.[89] It is, instead, a matter of scale: "Russia" may be ineffable, as an entity that is (strictly speaking) imperceptible, but its conditions and characters definitively submit to Balmashev's perceptive abilities. His curious and quietly brutal epistle foregrounds, then, the experiential fact of ostensibly skewed perceptions and cognitive abilities, which are revealed to be the inherent limitations of individual, subjective impressions. This restrained (in)accessibility requires an epistemic shift in our orientation to the pseudo-factual, pseudo-fictional discourse of the collection, a distinction that Babel's factographic grotesque is at pains to complicate.

Considering the epistemic limitations staged by the polyvocal narrative registers and the eclectic realia of the collection's sketches, grotesque distortions become, rather ironically, a marker of truthful perception. By replicating the very structure of contingent empirical access, these uneven and strange emphases illuminate the necessarily partial and skewed nature of perceptual data. The resulting effect is to highlight the conditionality and marginality of capacities of perception. The sights, sounds, and smells of the post-revolutionary landscape comprise not a coherent or even causally consistent narrative, but a litany of atomized impressions: the scorched scent of villages, the cacophony of animals being slaughtered in a yard, the sight of the earth wet with blood. The sense of disproportion that such data elicits, by focusing on ostensibly marginal details, urges a recalibration of the epistemic assumptions buttressing the concept of a "fact." That is, the textual emphasis on perceptual fallibility exposes the non-neutrality of evidence from the senses, subsequently limiting its potential factual value. Rather than signifying verifiable and stable referents, distorted details and jarring contrasts come to indicate instead what Lorraine Daston and Peter

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[87] Babel, «увидев … несказанную Расею», *Konarmiia*, 62. Vinokur's translation—"all Russia around her suffering untold"—falls short here, as he fails to capture the clearly unspeakable quality Balmashev attributes to Russia itself. *The Essential Fictions,* 237.

[88] Babel, *The Essential Fictions*, 237; «я смыл этот позор с лица трудовой земли и Республики», *Konarmiia*, 62.

[89] Babel, *The Essential Fictions*, 237; «крестьянские поля без колоса», *Konarmiia*, 62.

Galison call the "trace[s] of the knower," those markings of subjective interference, judgment, and interpretation.[90]

To return to my earlier formulation, Babel provocatively offers an "arrière-garde" perspective in order to render the multiethnic geography and nonsynchronous historical legacies of the Ukrainian-Polish hinterlands in the post-revolutionary period. The sketches' fragmented and unreliable polyvocality, which destabilizes the possibility of factual singularity as it privileges the perspectives of marginal characters and "rear guard" disorder, provides a literary form specific to the former imperial borderlands as they are violently reorganized in the wake of total collapse. If the Gogolian grotesque is recognizable by its partiality of perspective, by which scale and proportion are skewed via hypertrophied details and over-extended metaphors, then Babel extends this orientation to the margins of war. He privileges peripherality as the very basis of his version of the grotesque. This particular style offers a formal correlative of a sociohistorical chronotope, that of the contested post-revolutionary borderlands, one that is nonsynchronous in its temporal effects and peripheral in its spatial orientation. *Red Cavalry,* in its warped proportionality and factual recalcitrance, articulates the multiple geopolitical, historical, and literary legacies that collide in the revolutionary present. These include Gogol's Ukraine and the descriptive tradition of the *ocherk*, alongside burgeoning Soviet documentary practices and "factographic" interests, and more broadly the cultural practices of the Cossack cavalry, the Bolshevik commissariat, the Russian intelligentsia, the Polish nobility, Catholic ritual and iconography, Hasidic Jewry, and so forth. The Babelian chronotope of the factographic grotesque thus registers in literary form the spatial peripherality and temporal stratification of the western borderlands of the former Russian—and nascent Soviet—empire.

This arrière-garde orientation also necessarily scrambles the epistemic borders between fact and fiction. As it leverages the narrative discourse of *skaz* (amongst other discursive elements) against factographic assumptions about the purchase of documentary representation, *Red Cavalry* reveals a crucial and implicit distinction between notions of "truth" and "fact." The difference lies in their divergent relation to the utility, even possibility, of objective and referential truth claims. As we have seen, *skaz* performs a kind of experiential veracity (in addition to the ethnographic "truth" of popular speech) absent consistent and verifiable empirical data ("fact"), while factography offers virtually the opposite, providing referential truth claims ("facts") absent a more sensory attunement to the "truth" of lived experience.[91] Babel's recurrent emphasis on perspectival limitation reimagines the aims of factographic discourse by offering a distorted version of facts in the service of perceptual truth. This particular form of truth remains interested the verisimilitude of perceptual capacities, which ultimately determine what is knowable, and describable, with regard to the unwieldy, indefinite landscape of revolutionary reconfiguration.

If, as we saw in the first chapter, Shklovsky strips down revolutionary experience to his own empirical data, absent Humean habit, Babel then takes the opposite approach. His cycle offers an explosion of sensory data articulated and experienced by those on the periphery, including semiliterate peasants, soldiers, Cossacks, and Jewish communities caught in the middle of the melee. While Babel's text offers the voices of many to Shklovsky's voice of one, their approaches notably cultivate an intimacy with the perspectival affordances of earlier literary modes: the sentimental and

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[90] Daston and Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 17. The authors, in tracing the development of "scientific objectivity" as an epistemic virtue over the nineteenth century, affirm that the paradigm of objectivity is distinct from "truth or certainty," and "preserves the artifact or variation that would have been erased in the name of truth," 17.

[91] Recall that Soviet practitioners of montage, such as Vertov, were in fact interested in transcending human sensory capacities, providing access to new forms of perception enabled by novel forms of media and editing techniques. Human perception was a limitation to be overcome, not thematized.

the grotesque. The traditions of sentimental reflexivity and grotesque contrast provide a set of relational conventions that mediate between levels of detail and clashing narrative tendencies, which shuttle between the desire to record and a conviction in the impossibility of such an endeavor. The sentimental and the grotesque, in other words, comprise literary mechanisms that grapple with incommensurability, contradiction, and perceptual reconfiguration. These modes leverage techniques, including self-reflexivity and a heteroglossic layering of voices, alongside a tacit narrative acceptance of integrative impossibility.

For Babel, however, the factographic grotesque remains quite deliberately non-integrative. Indeed, what *Red Cavalry's* latent distinction between truth and fact reveals is its crucial divergence from the *faktoviki* and documentarians: specifically, it is characterized by a distinctive *lack* of a theory of perception, which the latter possess (even if implicitly). That is, Soviet factography, montage, and autobiography all proceed from an understanding of how perception organizes facts, or how facts organize perception. Montage in fact pushes this organizational schema of perception even further, developing a more prescriptive theory, one strong enough to dictate perception by way of editing (as we see with the Kuleshov effect and Vertov's theory of the *kinoglaz*). Yet in Babel, no universal structuring principles emerge, no theoretical model or overarching narrative paradigm surfaces to command the significance or establish a hierarchy of the given impressions. Without an organizing theory of perception, then, the presumptive facts of the conflict remain raw, unassimilated, and—in their resistance to clear proportionality, that grotesque capacity to "join together what cannot be joined, to exaggerate what is small and diminish what is great"—distorted.[92] As such, *Red Cavalry* offers a different sense of truth, one generated from empirical experience, foregrounding its necessary limitations and contingencies. Yet in doing so, Babel's factographic grotesque also reveals the surprising affinities between the method of factography—its interest in eyewitness accounts and commitment to external representation—and the warped sensibilities of grotesque deformations, by which inaccuracy is recalibrated as a reflection of immediate experience. In place of contemporaneous documentarian tendencies to enlist integrative theories of perception, Babel's prose provides something rather different: a theory of experience, proffering the empirical data of the revolutionary rearguard, while necessarily rejecting any paradigm of perceptual organization.

[92] Eikhenbaum, "Gogol's Overcoat," 288-9. «Гоголь может соединять несоединимое, преувеличивать малое и сокращать большое.»

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