Make Grammar Do: Grammar and Twentieth-Century American Literature

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PhD

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English and Related Literature
January 2020

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between grammar and twentieth-century American literature. The introduction attempts to map out the many connotations that grammar holds, examining its relationship to national identity, pedagogy, democracy, cultural and linguistic standardisation, and literary criticism. My first chapter explores the connections between Gertrude Stein's experimental work and the ideological paradoxes of the Harvard writing programme at the turn of the twentieth century, which was itself responding to social anxieties about immigration and national identity. In my second chapter I argue that Lydia Davis's idiosyncratic fiction reflects and responds to a tumultuous period in America's intellectual history, which, from Chomsky to Derrida, was dominated and defined by questions of language. In the midst of this ferment and the political upheaval of the 1960s liberation movements, Davis's work draws on these contexts while continuously reaffirming grammar's role in the 'everyday'. In my final chapter, I explore how grammar opens up new ways of understanding David Foster Wallace's aesthetic and political vision, viewing his key works in terms of the opposition between linguistic prescriptivism and descriptivism. By examining Wallace's response to developments in formal linguistics, I argue that these contexts offer a key to understanding his ultimate reversion to standard English as a means of recuperating a sense of community and consensus in American society, even at the cost of marginalizing the languages of sexual and racial difference.

List of Contents

Abstract 2

List of Contents 3

Acknowledgments 5

Declaration 6

Introduction: American Antecedents 7

Reading for Grammar 7

Collective Nouns 13

Setting the Standard 20

Past Progressives 25

Critical Formulations 31

Structural Problems 35

Make Grammar Do 42

Gertrude Stein: Authority and Indeterminacy 47

‘I am a grammarian’ 47

‘Style is the Man’: A.S Hill and Barrett Wendell 54

Writing After Radcliffe: *Q.E.D*. and *Three Lives* 62

The Remaking of Americans 77

Problems of Explanation 84

‘Grammar is in Our Power’ 90

‘An argument to be fought’: Writing against the programme 97

Coda: ‘Wouldn’t it Make a Good Daily’ 105

Lydia Davis: Breaking it Down 109

Grammar Questions 109

Genre Questions 115

'Plain Jane': Davis and Pedagogy 120

Exercises du Style: Davis and Theory 132

Lessons in 'French Theory' 137

'The name of what I am': Locating Feminine Identity 147

'But it does seem correct to say': Correctness and Norms 158

David Foster Wallace: A Grammar of Ethics 169

'English is all we've got' 169

Politics and the English Language 176

'Arrangements of Distance': *Girl with Curious Hair* 181

Emphasizing 'Entitlement' in *Signifying Rappers* 191

Grammatical Empathy and 'Wardine' 196

'Syntactic Integrity' in *Infinite Jest* 202

Generative Communities 211

'Technically Good or Bad': Technical Language vs. Non-Standard Dialects 220

From Technical to Technocratic: 'Authority and American Usage' and *The Pale King* .. 226

Conclusion: Tense Present 233

Bibliography 238

Acknowledgments

This thesis would have been impossible without the emotional and intellectual support of some formidable women. Thanks to my two immovable housemates, Nemmy Johnston and Alice Wilson, who have had to live with this project for the last three and a half years and without whom I never could have finished it. Endless thanks are due to my mother, Isabella, and my sister, Lili Mae, who worked tirelessly to copyedit my work 'word by word, sentence by sentence'. I am very grateful to them both for keeping me, and my commas, in line. I rely very much on the enduring support of Dr. Meera Nair and Lauren Watson: thank you for always being there.

I have been hugely grateful to the patient and kind support of so many friends, family, and colleagues, but special thanks to Dr. Daniel South who answered all of my questions and who cheered me on.

A huge thanks goes to my partner, Philip Penco, who always pushed me to work harder and be better and who is always there when I fall short.

Large portions of this thesis benefited from the discerning feedback of Prof. Hugh Haughton – my partner in Stein. He didn't always read the best drafts, but he made the whole lot better.

Finally, it is hard to express how grateful I am for the unwavering support and guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Adam Kelly. Without his incredible dedication, kindness, enthusiasm, and breadth of knowledge this work would have been impossible.

This thesis could not have been completed without the generous support of the Wolfson Foundation and the Irish Fulbright Commission.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction: American Antecedents

Think closely of how grammar is a folder.
To look back in the way they came. Now think.
Who stands.
To look back in the direction in which they came.
In the direction in which they came.
To look back in the direction in which they came.
A grammarian is so.
Afraid.
—Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (1931)

Reading for Grammar

In her 1984 novel *Democracy,* Joan Didion's auto-fictional narrator teaches a course in the English Department at Berkeley on 'the idea of democracy in the work of certain post-industrial writers', including Henry Adams, George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, and Norman Mailer.[1] The narrator moves the class forward, 'pointing out similarities in style, and presumably in ideas of democracy (the hypothesis being that the way a writer constructed a sentence reflected the way that writer thought)', urging her students to:

> Consider the role of the writer in post-industrial society.
> Consider the political implications of both the reliance on and the distrust of abstract words, consider the social organization implicit in the use of the autobiographical third person.[2]

Didion's method, here, seems to speak directly to the problem of connecting 'word' and 'world', of bridging the gaps between overarching structures like democracy, history, and politics, and decisions about lexical choices and the placement of commas. Yet studying 'democracy' by turning one's attention to the question of 'style' seems counterintuitive. After all, to read for 'style' in literary studies has traditionally been synonymous with a hermetic brand of formalism that actively eschews broader historical, social, and political structures.

[1] Joan Didion, *Democracy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 71.
[2] Ibid, 72.

Writing about this same passage from Didion in his essay 'Is Style Information?', an attempt to recuperate the study of 'style' in the contemporary critical field, Robert Chodat notes,

> To some, no doubt, my raising the issue of style — "the way a writer constructed a sentence," in Didion's phrase — will seem as quaint as the briar pipe of an Oxford don. But however outdated style may seem, literary critics have never stopped thinking about it. They hardly could. As long as their job consists of reading sentences, they will, with varying degrees of awareness, be assessing the sounds, structures, moods, rhetorical devices, and effects that these sentences exhibit.[3]

Chodat's categorisation of matters of style as 'quaint as an Oxford don's briar pipe' diagnoses how this kind of criticism is now viewed as not only trivial and conservative in its method, but also subtly reactionary in its politics. These attitudes are indicative of a widespread turn away from methods of 'close reading' (as both a form of criticism and a pedagogical mode) in the mid-twentieth century, and towards cultural studies and historicism in the 1980s.[4] As Samuel Otter notes in his discussion of recent calls for a return to 'formalism' in literary studies, this perceived shift away from 'style' went hand in hand with the view that 'form' and 'context' were fundamentally irreconcilable.[5] Chodat points out, however, that the notion of style has always been, and will always be, integral to the way we read literature and perform literary criticism, but the question remains whether we can still use loaded terms like 'style', 'form', and 'aesthetics' after they have been positioned as the antithesis of historical, political, and cultural issues.[6] What might it mean, then, to change the terms of engagement? What if,

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[3] Robert Chodat, 'Is Style Information?,' *Partial Answers* 11, no. 1 (2013): 134.

[4] See René Wellek's characterisation of New Criticism as 'esoteric aestheticism' and his claim that it functioned merely for pedagogical purposes (*explication du texte*). René Wellek, 'The New Criticism: Pro and Contra,' *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 4 (Summer, 1978): 611. See also Richard Ohmann's chapter 'Literature at the End of Ideology' in *English in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975).

[5] Samuel Otter, 'An Aesthetics of All Things,' *Representations* 104, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 116.

[6] Alex Woloch's appraisal of George Orwell's 'formalism' seeks to redress this imbalance in literary criticism. He argues that post-1980s critical appraisals of Orwell are rarely focused on his 'writerliness' because of widespread critical scepticism towards the affiliation of the 'plain style' with ideological clarity in the wake of the post-structuralist turn. Woloch's method, therefore, attempts to resituate the conversation about Orwell's politics within questions style, asking not (as other critics have) 'what would Orwell say?' about, for example, the fall of the Soviet Union, but, rather, 'what

instead of looking to style we instead turned our attention to the grammar that constitutes it — that generates its effects — not as serving a larger purpose but as a subject in and of itself? This shift, subtle as it may be, from style to grammar may seem to regress further into the formalist realm. What is the value in musing for pages about grammatical tense, syntactical order or an author's decision to use a passive construction? If Didion had guided her students towards a consideration of the grammatical features of George Orwell, what could they have found?

Didion's students could begin with close reading, identifying the grammatical features present in Orwell's writing and assessing what implications these have on the reader's assimilation of the text, what political effect they might convey. Taking Didion's imperative to read aspects of style as expressive of broader ideological positions rather than divorced from them, what if the students were to think about Orwell's own attitudes to grammar and writing, expressed in his well-known essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1945)? Here, Orwell argues that 'the present political chaos' caused by the rise of Fascism in Europe is intricately 'connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy.'[7] This assertion should only solidify the link between grammar and 'democracy' in Orwell's work, but what are we to make of the fact that Orwell's linguistic strategy for winning the fight against fascism depends on readers' adherence to a set of rules and standards that he outlines throughout the course of his essay?[8] Who devised these rules?

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form would Orwell use?' Alex Woloch, *Or Orwell: Writing and Democratic Socialism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2016), 6.

[7] George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language,' in *George Orwell: Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 966.

[8] Orwell's essay inspires very different responses from critics. Sanford Pinsker argues that Orwell's essay 'championed nothing more or less than writing committed to plain sense, a process he described as "picking words for their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer."' Pinsker, 'Musing about Orwell's "Politics and the English Language"—50 Years Later,' *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 73, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 58-59. Others identify in Orwell's commitment to plainness, the very same ideological danger that Orwell himself engendered in *1984's* tautological

On what authority did they construct them? A little more digging would reveal that Orwell's grammatical ideas are not radical ones, nor are they straightforwardly democratic, but instead derived from older eighteenth-century humanist ideas about morality and language, ideologies that were associated with the maintenance of political and social hierarchies very much at odds with the kinds of democratic socialism Orwell advocated.[9]

It is clear from this brief example that once we stop to think about grammar we begin to see its relevance and influence at every turn. Given this, it is remarkable that no comprehensive account of the interaction between grammar and literary history exists.[10] Indeed, grammar occupies a peculiar position in debates about literature, culture, and politics. It is both everywhere and nowhere, easy to ignore and yet inescapable and omnipresent. This partly derives from its multiform identities, how it can signify, at the same time, the logical structures of linguistic science, schoolroom rules rattled off from memory, or radical poetic experimentation. Grammar's political connotations, too, are muddy and difficult to parse. As the later sections of this introduction will show, this is evident not only in grammar's historical development — how it has been used for both liberal and conservative socio-political ends —

NEWSPEAK. Carl Freedman, 'Writing, Ideology, and Politics: Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and English Composition,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 43, no. 4 (April 1981): 332. For a fuller discussion of these paradoxes in Orwell's writing and his reception see Alex Woloch, *Or Orwell*.

[9] Freedman, 'Writing, Ideology, and Politics,' 328.

[10] There have been some admirable attempts to define the role of linguistics in the development of the humanities. For example, Rens Bod's *A New History of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013) offers an extensive history of how linguistics evolves alongside other disciplines but is more a historical guide than a work of critical analysis. As I outline later in this introduction, grammar is often swept up in disciplinary histories of other humanities subjects (rhetoric, composition, literature) or in historical studies of dialect. When structuralism came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s a number of works like Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) sought to underscore the connections between linguistic and literary criticism pursued by critics like Roman Jakobson, A.J. Greimas, Roland Barthes, Émile Benveniste, and Julia Kristeva. Literary stylistics, which enjoyed a brief period of prominence around the same time, moved closer towards using grammar as a key to reading literary texts, using the vocabulary of formal linguistics as a theoretical framework. The few anthologies that emerged from this movement remain the closest treatment of how grammar has impacted literary criticism and history. See Donald C. Freeman, ed., *Linguistics and Literary Style* (San Francisco: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1970) and Jean Jacques Weber, ed., *The Stylistics Reader: From Roman Jakobson to the Present* (London: Arnold, 1996).

but also in how it has acted as a tool and method for literary criticism. This thesis takes the ambiguous positioning of grammar as its starting point and asks what we can learn specifically about modern American literary texts when we read them grammatically.

The three American authors I address in this thesis — Gertrude Stein, Lydia Davis, and David Foster Wallace — may seem an unlikely grouping, but they are unified by their profound interest not only in what their grammar does on a local level in the relationship between writer and reader, but also in how grammar carries with it vast social and political weight. If both Orwell's grammar and his grammatical philosophy can tell us something about the complexities of fascism, communism, and liberal democracy in 1940s Britain, what can the grammar of Stein, Davis, and Wallace tell us about structures of power, authority, democracy, gender, race, and class in twentieth-century America, and about ways of reading literature? Of course, Orwell's writing offers itself up to this kind of grammatical analysis not least because, as Alex Woloch argues, Orwell's project centred upon the desire to 'make political writing into art', an objective that seeks explicitly to tie together the aesthetic and the political through the nut-and-bolts of writing.[11] Woloch concedes that reading the politics of Orwell's plain style is quite different from the way we interpret the 'political values' that arise from the demotic style of Ernest Hemingway or William Carlos Williams.[12] My readings of Stein, Davis, and Wallace lean more towards the latter approach. With the exception of Wallace's 'Authority and American Usage' (2001) — which is subtitled 'Or, "Politics and the English Language" is Redundant' — these authors rarely engage as explicitly as Orwell does in discussions about prescriptive language use and its political potential. This is not to say, however, that their work does not actively engage in and experiment with the 'political values' their grammar produces.

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[11] Orwell, qtd. in Woloch, *Or Orwell*, 1.
[12] Ibid, 9.

In fact, what is distinct about these three authors is not only that they use grammar in innovative and experimental ways but also, as I will argue, that their ideas about grammar reflect and illuminate their aesthetic, social, and political outlook. As such, Stein's *How to Write* (1931) returns to the grammatical principles she learned in her composition class at Harvard as a way of working through her own complex relationship to artistic and political authority; Davis's 'Grammar Questions' (2007), one of a number of grammatically-themed stories that feature across her *oeuvre,* reduces grand ontological concepts to quandaries about pronouns and verb tense; while Wallace's 'Authority and American Usage' (2001), responding to the culturally divisive environment of the Culture Wars, posits a model of grammatical unity as a remedy for political and cultural fracture. In this way, and as I argue in my subsequent chapters, these authors encounter their own wider political, historical, and cultural contexts not so much as writers but as grammarians.

This introduction will chart some of the ways in which grammar has come to be defined in its American context, as both a social and political tool and as an instrument of literary reading. This overview, although by no means complete, outlines the theoretical and historical background that will form the basis of each of my three chapters. What I hope to emphasize is the inseparability of grammar from the equally elusive notion of the 'standard', which emerges as both a linguistic and a social category. The first half of the introduction examines grammar's role in American projects of nation-building at three key historical stages in the modern period. In this way I chart the shift from a belief in a grammar of self-reliance in the late-eighteenth century, through pedagogical efforts to solidify a national American standard in the mid-nineteenth century, to the destabilization of the American language by rising immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. The second half of the introduction will explore how grammar has played a prominent role in literary criticism from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. In doing so, I will outline the ways in which grammar has been central to formalist

methods of reading, but also how questions of language remained crucial to the theoretical models that usurped literary formalism in the 1980s. I close by asking what it might mean to read grammatically today and how this kind of reading fits in with broader contemporary trends in literary criticism.

Collective Nouns

To begin to make sense of the myriad connotations grammar holds and what it has meant to these three American authors at various points across the twentieth century, it is necessary to first, as Stein says, 'look back in the direction in which they came' in order to parse the complex interactions between grammar and American identity.[13] As we shall see, grammar surfaces at crucial moments across American history as integral to debates about national language, the enforcement of normative values, the development of pedagogy, and as a key instrument in the tussle between progressive and conservative values in projects of national self-definition. In this way, grammar comes to mean very different things depending on how and where it is used; it is at once a conceptual system, a pedagogy, a philosophical theory, a rhetorical mandate, a national metaphor, a language science, a roadmap to social assimilation, and a means of cultural gatekeeping. Grammar's malleability makes it difficult to pin down, but also accounts for its ubiquity across American history. Stein portrays grammar as a 'folder', something that contains and categorizes a multitude of other, loosely associated, things. What has grammar meant, then, in American history and what particular iterations of it are important for understanding the ways Stein, Davis, and Wallace define both their writing and their Americanness?

After the American Revolution early calls for political self-definition were intertwined with calls for the solidification of a national language. In *Dissertations on the English*

[13] Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 98.

Language (1789) the radical grammarian Noah Webster urged his readers to, 'seize the present moment, and establish a national language as well as a national government.'[14] Webster's belief in the intertwining nature of political self-determination and linguistic independence was shared by a number of other key political figures of the period. In a letter to the President of Congress in 1780 John Adams called for the establishment of an American Academy for the cultivation and development of an American language:

> To this day there is no grammar nor dictionary extant of the English language which has the least public authority; and it is only very recently that a tolerable dictionary has been published, even by a private person, and there is not yet a passable grammar enterprised by any individual.[15]

As Kenneth Cmiel notes, grammatical definition became a nationalistic endeavour that was most visible in the explosion of grammar books published in the newly-formed American Republic from the 1770s to the turn of the nineteenth century. Throughout the 1770s only four grammars were published (American editions of British texts) but by the 1780s this number had increased to ten. By the 1790s demand had doubled, precipitating a 'truly phenomenal expansion in the early nineteenth century.'[16] Among this proliferation of writing on grammar were Webster's own significant contributions to the definition of the American language, including his widely popular *The American Spelling Book* (1786) — colloquially termed the 'Blue-backed Speller'.[17] Webster and other radical grammarians sought to democratically

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[14] Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (Boston: I. Thomas and Company, 1789), 406.

[15] John Adams, qtd. in Mitford Mathews, *Beginnings of American English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 42. Noah Webster reiterated this appeal: 'What, another Grammar of the English Language! Says the man of letters, upon the publication of this work. Have we not Grammars enough already? No, it may be answered […] we have not hitherto had any correct Grammar of our language'. Noah Webster, *A Philosophical and Practical Grammar of the English Language* (New Haven: Oliver Steele & Co., 1807), 3.

[16] Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 48.

[17] Although it is popularly known as a spelling book, the three-volume text was originally titled *The First Part of the Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1785). In 1786 the title was changed to *The American Spelling Book.* Webster published *An American Dictionary of the English Language*

resituate the true American language in the speech of the ordinary man rather than the educated ruling classes. While the slew of grammar books largely replicated the traditional grammatical attitudes inherited from eighteenth-century British language philosophers, they nonetheless framed themselves as an attack on older civic modes of rhetoric.[18] As Miriam Brody argues in *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition,* these early treatises on the American language employed a more populist outlook, seeking to free language use from the standards of 'great men' and instead return it to the 'body of the people'.[19]

Brody claims that these calls for a democratization of language along national political lines masked the contradictory ideology of new American grammar books. While Webster and other radical grammarians of this period sought to emphasize unadorned, plain speech free from class and geographical hierarchy as the true American language, Webster's ultimate aim was standardization. He believed that 'all persons, of every rank, would speak with some degree of precision and uniformity. Such uniformity in these states is very desirable; it would remove prejudice, and conciliate mutual affection and respect.'[20] Linguistic difference, Cmiel asserts, presented the possibility for political and cultural tension, while a uniform way of speaking would serve to erase possible conflicts and preserve the political stability of the republic.[21] The shifting metaphors of language learning are one key site upon which these complex attitudes towards grammar play out. Brody identifies a distinct move away from an eighteenth-century vocabulary of 'cultivation' and 'ornament' and towards more concrete metaphors of construction, labour, and production.[22] Lindley Murray's popular *English*

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in 1826 (having begun work on it in 1807). Webster's dictionary became the basis for the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* first published in 1864.

[18] Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 12.

[19] Miriam Brody, *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993), 101.

[20] Webster, *Dissertations*, 396-97.

[21] Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 53.

[22] Brody, *Manly Writing*, 101.

Grammar Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners (1797, first American edition published in 1830) was one of the first grammar books to introduce and popularize grammatical exercises as part of its pedagogy, giving its students false or broken sentences that they had to repair.[23] Murray was an American-born Quaker and his emphasis on the necessity for dutiful labour in the construction of language constituted the same kind of civic yet entrepreneurial work ethic that Adams cited in his letter to Congress. Murray's privileging of grammatical exercises worked to dismantle traditional hierarchies of knowledge, emphasizing instead a self-reliant focus on work as a means of individual improvement. Students were cast as master builders of words, working away with tools in their attempts to craft language in a more democratic and self-assured mould. As Brody observes,

> Exercises were for everyone to do, acclaiming the virtues of useful work irrespective of class position. Such an ideology was congenial for the early stages of industrialism, in the service of a new, more meritocratic, liberal political philosophy [...] Yet in these sample sentences, he made his class and gender prejudices clear, providing a hidden curriculum to work beneath the apparently guileless and innocent exercise.[24]

The pedagogical subtext of the grammatical exercise was one of correction and standardization. Students were therefore not only labouring to improve their own grasp of language, but also, by virtue of the grammatical exercise being predicated on the idea of correction, they were engaging in a broader project of linguistic standardization advocated by Webster and others. The close approximation of linguistic improvement with cultural correctness in these early texts underscores the emergence of contradictory ideologies in attempts to cultivate national standards of language use, contradictions that persisted across the twentieth century and which form the basis of my discussions throughout this thesis.

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[23] Lindley Murray, *English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners* (New York: Hallowell, Goodale, Glazier & Co., 1823); Brody, *Manly Writing*,102.
[24] Brody, *Manly Writing*, 104.

The centrality of grammar to projects of national definition extended to the formation of America's literary tradition. Ralph Waldo Emerson's influential essay 'Nature' (1836) sought to draw direct parallels between an emerging American language and his spiritual conception of nature, which he rooted deeply in the American landscape. Emerson's belief that language expresses the 'radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts' is combined with the Romantic notion that language needs to be drawn back through its own history until 'all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols'.[25] His conceptualisation of language draws heavily on a Classical vocabulary that defined grammar as a 'art of inventing and combining symbols'.[26] This view of grammar remained central to eighteenth-century and Romantic ideas about language, the influence of which is clearly visible in 'Nature'. Emerson's description of '[p]arts of speech' as 'metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor for the human mind' chimes with eighteenth-century rhetorical philosophy that viewed grammar as a transparent medium between internal perception and the external, empirical world.[27] A pure and correct use of language, therefore, revealed a pure and moral self. Emerson's desire to reduce language to its 'savage' essentialism not only draws a direct parallel between the American landscape and this transcendental linguistic form but also incorporates Romantic ideas about grammar and its connection to individual and national 'spirit'.[28] As Gerald Graff has argued in *Professing Literature*, Alexander von Humboldt viewed the study of grammar as

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[25] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature,' in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*: *Volume B*, ed. Nina Baym, 7th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 1119.
[26] This terminology is derived from the classical liberal arts *trivium,* consisting of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. These three disciplines were conceived of in classical pedagogy as co-dependent arts 'of the mind' whereby logic pertained to the 'art of thinking' and rhetoric the 'art of communicating'. The fundamentals of this classical view of grammar were derived from Dionysus Thrax's *Technē grammatikē*, written in the first century BC, and which defined grammatical study as an overarching system pertaining to rhetoric, versification, the study of language (or etymology), the composition of poetry, and 'trained reading' or literary criticism. Miriam Joseph, *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2002), 3, 6. As Rens Bod notes, all European grammars continued to use Thrax's terminology until the end of the eighteenth century. Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 18.
[27] Emerson, 'Nature,' 1120-21.
[28] Ibid, 1119.

central to the concept of *Bildung* whereby grammar facilitated a way of learning the 'mother tongue', which not only led to transformative self-knowledge but also provided access to the 'essence' or 'spirit' of one's national culture.[29] As we shall see, these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas become prominent ones for Stein, Davis, and Wallace, albeit in remarkably different ways. All of them return, in their own peculiar ways, to these ideas of language as reflective of the self and mind. Stein and Wallace in particular work with very similar ideas about how a kind of essential national character can become visible in and through grammatical forms.

Emerson's vision of language as a transparent conduit between 'mind and matter' relies on a self-reliant 'simplicity of character' that is 'free to be known by all men'.[30] Emerson's desire to separate language from its 'corruption' and his emphasis on self-determination in the search for a distinctly American language is echoed in Walt Whitman's call for a radical reorientation of national language in his 'An American Primer', written in the 1850s and first published in 1904.[31] Whitman's grammar is constructed not through the imposition of grammatical rules but by their persistent transgression:

> The Real Grammar will be that which declares itself a nucleus of the spirit of the laws, with liberty to all to carry out the spirit of the laws, even by violating them, if necessary. The English Language is grandly lawless like the race who use it, — or, rather, breaks out of the little laws to enter truly the higher ones.[32]

Whitman's characterisation of American grammar as 'lawless', as a flexible system that both contains the essential 'spirit' of the American character but yet, by its very nature, proposes itself as a limit to be broken, is shared by H.L Mencken who, in *The American Language: An*

[29] Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 30.
[30] Emerson, 'Nature,' 1121, 1119, 1121.
[31] Ibid, 1119; Walt Whitman, 'An American Primer,' *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1904), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1904/04/an-american-primer/376193/.
[32] Whitman, 'An American Primer,' n.p.

Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States (1919), writes that American English:

> derives its principles, not from the subtle logic of learned and stupid men, but from the rough-and-ready logic of every day. It has a vocabulary of its own, a syntax of its own, even a grammar of its own. Its verbs are conjugated in a way that defies all the injunctions of the grammar books; it has contumacious rules of tense, number and case; it has boldly re-established the double negative, once sound in English; it admits double comparatives, confusions in person, clipped infinitives; it lays hands on the vowels, changing them to fit its obscure but powerful spirit; but repudiates all the finer distinctions between the parts of speech.[33]

Both Whitman and Mencken's conceptualisation of the American language as fundamentally deviant, a system which, rather than conforming to the 'injunctions of the grammar books', uses those same grammar books as a radical limit against which to define itself, has particular relevance for my later discussion of Gertrude Stein. While all three authors discussed in this thesis use the 'injunctions of the grammar books' as a crucial boundary for their aesthetic and linguistic experimentation, Stein does so in a specifically Whitmanian (if not Menckenian) way. In a number of essays and lectures Stein inserted herself into an American tradition flowing through Emerson, Whitman, and Henry James, a tradition she associated with both 'movement' and 'disembodiment'.[34] Never one for modesty, Stein saw this lineage of American writers as engaged in a long process of radically reconstructing the American language in the spirit of this kind of Whitmanian disobedience. In *Wars I Have Seen* (1945), Stein describes how Americans 'master' their language 'by choosing words which they liked better than other words, by putting words next to each other in a different way than the English way, by shoving the language until at last now the job is done'.[35] Yet as we shall see, this drive

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[33] H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States,* 2nd ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1922), 262-63.
[34] Gertrude Stein, *How Writing is Written,* ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), 72.
[35] Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (New York: Random House, 1945), 250.

for an autonomous American language was never a straightforward move away from conservative grammatical forms. On the contrary, all three authors show that working with the American language in the twentieth century involves a far more complex process than Stein's 'job is done' suggests.[36]

Emerson's romantic view of grammar as an instrument of radical self-making is indicative of wider trends of American exceptionalism in both political and literary discourse after the American Revolution. By the mid-nineteenth century these crucial questions over what linguistic values were fit to make the American 'standard' were still far from resolved. Facing a rapidly industrialising economy, an ever-increasing middle-class, and an unprecedented influx of non-English-speaking immigrants from Europe, the pressure to preserve and shape the civic potential of American English became all the more urgent. These cultural and political tensions were reflected in and influenced by the profound changes that were occurring in universities like Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Johns Hopkins as the classical curriculum gave way to the demands of mass education. Amidst these shifts, grammar remained a crucial sticking point in debates surrounding pedagogy, linguistic nationalism, the stratification of academic disciplines, and the preservation of national and ethnic identities.

Setting the Standard

Rollo Lyman identifies a fundamental shift in academic and pedagogical attitudes towards grammar in and around 1860, when he claims that grammar ceased to be treated in its classical sense as an 'art of expression' and was increasingly treated 'scientifically'.[37] While Lyman's account might encourage us to view this as a watershed moment for formal linguistics, his characterization of grammar instruction as 'scientific' would be better qualified as part of

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[36] Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 86.
[37] Rollo Lyman, *English Grammar in American Schools before 1850* (Washington: U.S. Bureau of Education, 1922), 105.

the broader 'empirical' or 'positivist' turn in pedagogy inspired by German research-based university models.[38] John Brereton also identifies 1860 as a significant milestone in American education, arguing that it marks the moment universities started to abandon oral recitations in favour of a focus on literacy and writing.[39] This distinctive shift, as highlighted by, among others, Brereton, James Berlin, Gerald Graff, led to the emergence of 'composition' as an ubiquitous pedagogical mode precipitating the establishment of English departments in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was intricately intertwined with how grammar was beginning to be characterised in this same period. A privileging of functional writing instruction over classical models of rhetoric and oratory necessitated a shift in how grammar was categorised and understood. Grammar was no longer solely an 'art of expression' or a Romantic entry point into the mother language and self-discovery; instead it became an instrument for 'composition', a set of hard rules and fixed principles that were to be mastered and deployed in the service of clear, effective writing.

While the rise of 'composition' in American universities towards the end of the nineteenth century has been well mapped, grammar's role in its rise has been largely overlooked or relegated to a minor aspect of this broader disciplinary shift. I want to propose that the broader debates surrounding writing pedagogy, which can be most clearly discerned in the opposing models offered at the time by Harvard and Yale, can be rooted in the fundamental rupture Lyman describes in how grammar was perceived as both an art and a science. More than this, the ideological tension at the heart of 'composition' — which I examine in my first chapter through the intricacies and contradictions of Harvard's writing programme — is derived from the complex pull between conservative and progressive ideals surrounding issues

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[38] This move away from the British university model, which placed the traditional liberal arts at the core of its curriculum, led to the establishment of Johns Hopkins University in 1876. Johns Hopkins was, at its outset, graduate only. Based on the German model, it emphasized scholarly research rather than pedagogy. John Brereton, *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh UP, 1995), 5.
[39] Ibid, 4.

of national identity. Grammar becomes both a site upon which these often opposing ideas play out and a means of disseminating a programme of linguistic and cultural standardization on a national scale.

Yale's pedagogical model largely maintained a more traditional focus on liberal arts curriculum and with it preserved the notion of grammar as an 'art of expression' — albeit in an inferior position to rhetoric.[40] Deriving its ideology from eighteenth-century views about language and literature, its practitioners believed in a reciprocal relationship between good writing and moral character. As Berlin states, 'the aim of [Yale's model] was self-cultivation and self-refinement'.[41] Its objectives were humanistic, believing that writing and rhetoric were an art and categorically not a scientific form of study, but they were also fundamentally elitist, aimed at fostering knowledge among 'few geniuses'.[42] This particular brand of instruction was concerned with the production of literature. If a student exhibited genius and originality, their literary faculties were to be encouraged while the rest of the students who were not as talented would be trained to become reasoned and literary thinkers.

In 1869 Charles Eliot was elected president of Harvard and rolled out a radical plan for educational reform at the university, then reflecting the demand for more nationalised institutions. This plan included, on the one hand, the development of a scientific school separate to traditional classical education and, on the other, the foregrounding of English rather than Latin as the primary language of instruction.[43] Eliot's reorientation of Harvard's pedagogy precipitated a vast integration of remedial 'composition' courses at every level of Harvard's undergraduate programme, as well installing an 'English' admissions examination as a

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[40] James Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1987), 35.
[41] Ibid*,* 38.
[42] Ibid, 39, 43.
[43] Charles Eliot, 'The New Education', *The Atlantic* (February 1896), n.p. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1869/02/the-new-education/309049/.

prerequisite for incoming students.[44] As Brereton notes, '[t]he Harvard program marks the only time a major university made such a total commitment to student writing.'[45] As I will discuss in greater detail in my first chapter, this pedagogy was meritocratic at heart, responsive to an influx of students and an emerging and rapidly changing economy. But the practical demands led to a more utilitarian focus in Harvard's composition course; Berlin states that Harvard's functional, rules-based model 'was designed to provide the new middle-class professionals with the tools to avoid embarrassing themselves in print'.[46] The core objectives of this pedagogy were largely democratic; while for centuries the ruling classes had acted as gatekeepers for 'correct' language and 'good' writing, the Harvard writing programme sought to condense rhetorical principles into a rules-based, how-to manual that allowed access to this exclusive skill. In practice, however, Harvard's pedagogical objectives lent heavily on issues of mechanical correctness and grammatical 'purity', casting its students, through a rigorous programme of daily writing exercises, in the mould of the American standard.

If 1860 proved to be a turning point in the relationship between grammar and writing pedagogy, it was also a significant period for the emergence of modern linguistics, which sought to study grammar not through the cultivated styles of literary writers but instead through the spontaneous spoken utterances of its language users. This movement was headed, in America, by William Dwight Whitney, a professor of comparative philology and founder of the American Philological Association in 1869, and it questioned the traditional assumption

[44] Analysing Harvard course catalogues from 1860 to 1900, Brereton identifies a distinct shift in the requirements of the admissions examination away from belletristic responses to set literary texts and towards mechanical aspects of language use. While in 1874-75 candidates were asked to 'write a short English Composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and expression, the subject to be taken from such works of standard authors as shall be announced from time to time', by 1880-81 grammatical exercises in false syntax were included as part of the assessment, and in 1893-94 the instructions state that the 'examiner will regard knowledge of the book as less important than the ability to write English'. Brereton, *The Origins of Composition*, 35.
[45] Ibid, 11.
[46] Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 35.

that written, literary language should comprise the overarching standard of 'correct' speech.[47] As Cmiel notes, '[r]hetoricians saw language as tied to literature, character, and civic life. Rhetoric was devoted to the production of public speech. Philologists, on the other hand, increasingly shifted attention from the noble and civic to the simple and everyday.'[48] Whitney's most influential theory was his view of language as a social convention that does not decay but merely changes in accordance with the people who speak it and the societies it is spoken within. As such Whitney claimed that language was 'instrumental', containing both 'conservative' and 'alternative' forces, allowing its meaning to continuously change as a reflection of social use rather than being governed by a rigid overarching system of rules.[49] In his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) Ferdinand de Saussure draws on Whitney's work when outlining his theory on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, arguing that, 'Whitney quite justly insisted upon the arbitrary nature of signs; and by so doing, he placed linguistics on its true axis. But he did not follow through and see that the arbitrariness of language radically separates it from all other institutions.'[50]

The rupture between speech and writing adds another dimension to the contradictory identity of grammar during this period. The opposition of grammar as the flexible, spontaneous utterance of its language users and its codification as a set of rules and principles for 'good' writing speaks to a broader contradiction in the ways in which grammar is frequently characterised as both rigid and fixed, and generative, creative, and fluid. These tensions, both in how grammar is perceived and in the ways in which American universities sought to influence national conversations on language use, are most visible and fraught in how

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[47] William Dwight Whitney, *The Life and Growth of Language* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1875), 2.
[48] Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 177.
[49] Whitney, *Life and Growth*, 32.
[50] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 76.

American institutions responded to emerging and imported dialects that threatened the unity, and tested the democracy, of the American language.

Past Progressives

Gavin Jones has detailed a vast increase in the production of dialect literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[51] Dialect writing was largely characterised by phonetic spelling which emphasized regional or ethnic differences and, as Jones argues, part of its popularity stemmed from the same strangeness that institutions like Harvard sought to eradicate through an enforcement of a linguistic 'standard'.[52] As I will demonstrate in my chapters on Gertrude Stein and David Foster Wallace, the alienation afforded by dialect writing allows writers to engage with grammatical difference as an overt surface structure that signifies more entrenched social divisions, which can be equally co-opted for both liberal and conservative ends. This is evident in Jones' characterisation of the varied ways dialect was being used in its late-nineteenth century context, ranging from an assertion of literary autonomy for minority writers — such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar — to a conservative mocking of 'broken English'.[53] While, by and large, dialect writing served to solidify American cultural hegemony, the ideological confusion inherent in these uses of dialect were, according to Jones, a product of the fundamental instability of the American 'standard'. Because America had 'never had a clear sense of its hegemonic, high-prestige speech', dialect writing posed a very real threat to proponents of so-called 'correct' English.[54]

Debates about standardization and linguistic diversity underpinned the significant political and culture changes in the Progressive Era. The institutional interest in grammar in the 1860s precipitated an explosion of writing on grammar in the 1880s and 1890s. As Michael

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[51] Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 4.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid, 6-7.
[54] Ibid, 9.

North argues, this plethora of grammar books and writing manuals coincided with an unprecedented influx of immigration at the turn of the century.[55] Despite the clear instability of notions of a unified national language, the turn of the twentieth century was characterised by attempts to standardize and simplify linguistic practice both in the academy and out: from the publication of the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) between 1880 and 1920; to the establishment of the Society for Pure English in 1913; to calls for debabelization and simplified, shared languages such as Esperanto and C.K. Ogden's Basic English.[56] Taking a more philological interest in the diversity of the language, H.L. Mencken's *The American Language* (1919) sought to explore the various linguistic influences on the development of the American tongue, taking as his linguistic sample American periodicals, poetry, political rhetoric, advertisements, and overheard everyday speech. Mencken devotes detailed sections to the various European influences on the American language (German, Italian, Irish, Dutch, etc.) but, significantly, he does not include a study of African American dialect. [57]

Amidst these debates, grammar became an 'indirect and intellectually respectable way of defending the borders, those outlying borders crossed by foreigners and those closer, less tangible, but even more sensitive borders crossed by a growing urban working class'.[58] Popular texts like Richard Grant White's *Words and Their Uses* (1871), which was reprinted numerous times through the twentieth century and was a staple in classrooms across the U.S., encouraged his readers to become 'linguistic detective police', drawing parallels between the rule of law

[55] Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 11.
[56] North notes that Robert Graves called the Society for Pure English the 'literary equivalent of political fascism'. Ibid, 11-12.
[57] On a number of occasions Mencken cites similar philological studies which rank 'negroisms' and 'Indian words' far below European languages (if at all) in terms of how they have affected American speech. Mencken is more open to the importation of Native American words into American lexicon than he is about how African American English develops alongside the 'standard' across American history. Mencken, *The American Language*, 39.
[58] North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 15.

and the enforcement of 'good' linguistic standards.[59] These efforts towards building national unity through linguistic assimilation were actualized both through political rhetoric and practical implementation. Mencken begins *The American Language* by citing President William Howard Taft's assertion that 'We all speak the same language and have the same ideas'.[60]

This drive for linguistic homogenization was also the ethos behind the Ford English School, established in 1914 to provide language instruction to Henry Ford's predominantly immigrant workforce. Describing the interaction between pedagogy and industry brought about by Ford's model, Joshua Miller observes that '[a]t a time when many educators spoke of schools as factories — to mass-produce new Americans — prominent industrialists sought to turn their factories into schools of what Francis Kellow and others called "industrial Americanization".'[61] While Ford's initiative seemed to be fulfilling a patriotic duty, ensuring the Americanization of his workers in line with governmental assimilation programmes, Miller suggests the English School also furthered the widespread adoption of English as a matter of practical concern: the quicker workers could understand the language of the factory floor the more efficient they would be in their production.[62] Disguised in these language lessons was corrective behavioural instruction on other aspects of cultural assimilation, such as 'conventions for hygiene, politeness, and obedience, including toothbrushing, fork holding, and hat doffing'.[63]

The underlying ideology of the American standard was largely linked to traditional eighteenth-century notions of 'good' usage as emulating Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and

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[59] Richard Grant White, *Words and Their Uses*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882), 423.
[60] William Howard Taft, qtd. in Mencken, *American Language*, 22.
[61] Joshua Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 53.
[62] Ibid, 56.
[63] Ibid, 57.

eschewing the influx of foreign vocabulary and 'weak' Latinate forms.[64] As Miller claims, linguistic authorities and institutions attempted to 'lin[k] whiteness and masculinity to a hypermodern, quicksilver language of efficiency that was described as embodying the optimistic, expansionist, industrial empire'.[65] Cmiel identifies a fundamental ideological split in how the standard was portrayed as simultaneously striving for a cultivated eloquence and appealing to a rough-and-ready, democratic logic of the everyday, which he characterises as America's 'middling rhetoric'.[66] This mixing of high and low also sought to incorporate emerging technical vocabularies that accompanied the growth of American industry.

The political coding of American English as modern, assertive, and democratic culminated in the widespread valorisation of 'plainness', which continues to be asserted as a linguistic virtue.[67] Hugh Kenner argues that the 'plain style', which is perhaps better characterised as a lack of style, is inherently 'populist', a mode of address that rapidly replaced the cultivated rhetoric of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, becoming the lingua franca of both politicians and newspaper journalists.[68] The cultural turn towards plainness is perhaps best captured in the widespread and enduring popularity of William Strunk's *The Elements of Style,* which has, since it was first published in 1918, has been almost universally prescribed for undergraduates and journalists alike. Strunk's association of syntactical minimalism with hypermasculine notions of rigor, cleanliness, and precision is both the logical endpoint of the eighteenth-century belief in the co-dependence of writing and character and the most brazen manifestation of the authoritarian impulses latent in verbal criticism — the chapters of *The Elements of Style* are not organised under thematic headings but are instead comprised of a

[64] See Brody, *Manly Writing*, and Miller, *Accented America*.
[65] Miller, *Accented America*, 12.
[66] Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 13.
[67] Ibid, 19.
[68] Hugh Kenner, 'The Politics of the Plain', *New York Times,* September 15, 1985, 1, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/15/books/the-politics-of-the-plain.html. Cmiel celebrates the plain style as 'completely unadorned', noting that it is 'the idiom of the best school textbooks of our age. It has been said that the plain style is the official style of our time.' Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 260.

series of declarative commands.[69] Strunk's famous assertion that sentences 'should contain no unnecessary words' but that 'every word tell' is the ideological basis for the Creative Writing industry that dominated the second half of the twentieth century.[70] Strunk's final rule, 'Prefer the standard to the offbeat,' solidified the foreignization of all grammatical forms that contravened his vision of plainness and condensation.

It is this fraught and entangled version of the 'standard' that American modernists inherited, subscribed to, and rejected in the first half of the twentieth century. The politics of plainness was indeed a productive and galvanising idea for many writers who, like William Carlos Williams, sought to remake poetic language in 'the American grain'. Yet while some modernists (such as Ernest Hemingway) seem to map neatly onto this association between plainness and American writing, more often modernist literary experimentation sought to bring the 'offbeat' into the 'standard', playing with the vexed political boundaries their language both signified and constructed.[71] Marianne Moore's poem 'England' (1919) articulates the counterintuitive complexity at the heart of American plainness. The poem's title casts England as both a geographical location and a linguistic ancestor against which Moore defines her distinct poetic and grammatical style. Moore sets America against the univocal provinciality of England ('with voices — one voice perhaps, echoing through the transept'), the 'epicureanism' of Italy, Greece's 'nest of modified illusions', 'the Far East with its snails, its

[69] In 1959 E.B. White, ironically, enlarged and revised *The Elements of Style* for republication (although the book still came in at a minimal 71 pages) including his own chapter titled 'An Approach to Style'. Brody notes that White's language further masculinizes Strunk's rhetoric, noting that he uses imagery of weaponry and combat in his description of style's effects and portraying ornate language as inorganic and unnatural. In particular, White's assertion that words should be charged with potential, like a 'loaded gun', became an important tenet of strands of modernist poetry, literary minimalism, and was integrated into the vocabulary of the post-1945 creative writing industry. Brody, *Manly Writing*, 178.
[70] William Strunk and E.B White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975), 23.
[71] For a further discussion of modernism and 'simplicity' see Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2003).

emotional shorthand, and jade cockroaches'.[72] Moore's characterisation of America echoes a Whitmanian contradiction, celebrating that 'there are no proof readers, no silkworms, no digressions' in America:

> the wild man's land; grass-less, links-less, language-less country—in which
> letters are written
> not in Spanish, not in Greek, not in Latin, not in shorthand
> But in plain American which cats and dogs can read![73]

While Moore sets her plainness against the 'continents of misapprehension' that weigh upon other, more historically-laden languages, her valorisation of plainness as something 'which cats and dogs can read' alludes to a fundamental 'misapprehension' at the heart of this American mode.[74] Her poetic style, in this poem and elsewhere, is characterised by an elaborate resistance to simplicity achieved through a controlled cotorsion of grammatical and syntactical form that demonstrates the idea of the 'plain' to be merely a limit to transgress. Moore's interrogation of plainness here plays into what Peter Nicholls calls the 'lexicophilia' that characterises the work of many modernist writers.[75] Although not in quite the same ways as her contemporary Moore, Stein was also fascinated by the contradictions of these literary values, determined to portray a kind of American plainness and simplicity that is fundamentally contaminated by strangeness. Like both Davis and Wallace, Stein's work moves within these dual forces of linguistic homogeneity and diversity, seeking to demonstrate just how offbeat the standard really is.

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[72] Marianne Moore, 'England,' in *Others for 1919: An Anthology of the New Verse*, ed. Alfred Kreymbord (New York: Nicholas L. Brown, 1920), n.p. www.bartleby.com/152/.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] See Peter Nicholls, 'Mina Loy and Lexicophilia,' *Feminist Modernist Studies* 2, no. 3 (2019): pp. 263-273

Critical Formulations

The tensions between standardisation and linguistic diversity expressed by Moore, Stein, and other modernists return, once again, to the idea of 'style' with which I began this introduction. As Ben Hutchinson argues that 'what Roland Barthes and others have identified as the linguistic turn that started around the middle of the nineteenth century is a reduction of art purely to style, where "purely" is to be understood in both its senses, both as absolute style [...] and as *only* style'.[76] The modernist interest in style opened up the question of how and why literary language could have such radically different effects from ordinary speech. As I hope I have shown, however, these ideas about style are radically inseparable from questions of grammar and the complex political, institutional, and cultural connotations they hold. With a new appreciation of how 'style' might be viably considered a product of grammar, I want to consider the ways literary critics have read grammatically in the second half of the twentieth century, from the attention to 'verbal design' in New Criticism, to the influence of Saussure's structuralist paradigm, to Derrida's declaration of 'grammatology' in 1967, to more contemporary investigations of grammatical patterns in the Digital Humanities.

Grammar has always remained on the periphery of dominant critical trends across the twentieth century even if the critical vocabulary used to read texts often lends itself to a grammatical interpretation. Austrian philologist Leo Spitzer's concept of the 'philological circle', outlined in his *Linguistics and Literary History* (1948) advocates the same kind of attention to form espoused by the New Critics. He notes that the reader must 'work from the surface to the "inward life-centre" of the work of art'.[77] The relationship between the 'inward form' of the literary text and its superficial aspects (as Spitzer suggests, the 'ideas' of the poet are one of these superficial elements) reveals an intricate balance between the language and the

[76] Ben Hutchinson, *Modernism and Style* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.
[77] Leo Spitzer, 'Linguistics and Literary History,' in *Linguistics and Literary Style,* ed. Donald Freeman (San Francisco: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1970), 29.

psychology, or 'soul', of the text.[78] Spitzer's attention to how surface structures could reveal deep underlying meaning, as well as his philological metaphor, seems to place an attention to grammatical structure at the heart of his method, even if it is not named as such. While New Criticism, which came to dominate as a pedagogical method more than a critical one in the mid-twentieth century, attended ever more closely to the 'verbal structure' of the text through the practice of close reading, grammatical analysis remained in the background of their methodology, treating the functional components of grammar as inferior to literary techniques of paradox, irony, tone and setting. In this way, John Crowe Ransom notes, the New Critic could also eschew the connection between the text's 'inward life' and its outward 'action' and this 'freed' the critic from the 'domination' of authorial intention leaving them, instead, to 'attend to its texture'.[79]

At the heart of the New Critical enterprise was the belief in a fundamental difference between 'poetic' and 'ordinary language'. Derived from I.A. Richards' claim that there is a fundamental disjuncture between 'scientific' or 'symbolic' and 'emotive' language, New Criticism aimed to develop a rigorous methodology that could interpret these differences without succumbing to scientific methods of analysis.[80] The popularisation of Russian Formalism in the U.S. offered a more linguistic approach to the concerns expressed by the New Critics. This more linguistically-oriented approach put forward by Roman Jakobson and others was largely derived from Saussure's structuralist paradigm, which revealed an underlying linguistic structure (*langue*) governing the diverse 'utterances' (*parole*) in everyday speech. As Jean Jacques Weber notes, this kind of formalism called for an 'explicit, objective, scientific and structuralist stylistics, to be modelled on the scientific, structuralist linguistics of the

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[78] Ibid.
[79] John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941), 156.
[80] C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace &World, 1923), viii.

time'.[81] While some of the more well-known iterations of this structuralist critique apply to larger narrative structures — which I discuss in greater detail in my second chapter in relation to the work of Lydia Davis — a strand of formalist analysis put forward by Jakobson in his 1958 closing statement to the 'Style and Language' conference offered a vision of the 'poetic function' of language as having its own distinct grammatical structures and 'linguistic particularities.'[82] The formalist opposition between 'poetic' and 'standard' demonstrates the intricate entanglement of language, literature, and historical trends of linguistic homogenization, even if formalist critics never fully sought to interrogate exactly what the 'standard' might mean in a wider social and political sense.

In the 1960s and 1970s literary stylistics took the formalist commitment to integrating literary and linguistic study even further, making grammar the centrepiece of its methodology — although tellingly still under the sign of the more acceptable literary notion of 'style'. Donald Freeman enumerates three distinct definitions of style that concern stylistic criticism: firstly 'style as a deviation from the norm', which Freeman attributes to New Critical and Formalist schools of thought; secondly, 'style as a recurrence or convergence of textual pattern'; and thirdly, 'style as a particular exploitation of a grammar of possibility'.[83] Stylistics was heavily associated with Chomskyan linguistic theory, an allegiance that, as Roger Fowler notes, ultimately resulted in a crisis of utility when Noam Chomsky's methods fell out of fashion.[84] Nevertheless, stylistics offered an insightful way in which aspects of style could be reduced to and understood as distinct grammatical forms. The so-called Chomksyan revolution in linguistic study, ushered in with the publication of *Syntactic Structures* in 1957, overturned

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[81] Jean Jacques Weber, 'Towards Contextualized Stylistics: An Overview,' in *The Stylistics Reader: From Roman Jakobson to the Present*, ed. Jean Jacques Weber (London: Arnold, 1996), 1.
[82] Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' in Weber, *The Stylistics Reader,* 23.
[83] Donald C. Freeman, 'Linguistic Approaches to Literature,' in *Linguistics and Literary Style,* ed. Freeman (San Francisco: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1970), 3.
[84] Roger Fowler, *Literature as Social Discourse: The Practice of Linguistic Criticism* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd, 1981), 11.

the reigning model of American linguistics headed by Leonard Bloomfield (who was, in turn, heavily influenced by Roman Jakobson and the Prague Linguistic Circle).[85] Bloomfield's linguistic programme adopted a rigorous and systematic methodology for the descriptive study of linguistic utterances. In contrast, Chomskyan linguistics came to be defined by its reorientation of the field towards the search for 'linguistic universals' and expanded the scope of American linguistics from the study of phonology to the study of syntax.[86]

Chomsky's accompanying theory of 'transformational' or 'generative grammar' posited grammar as a set of 'finite' rules which would generate an 'infinite' number of syntactical combinations, therefore reorienting the study of linguistics away from a descriptive study of 'utterances' and towards the study of possible linguistic forms.[87] This categorisation of grammar had far-reaching implications for the conceptualization of literary style, freeing it from the notion that literary language is somehow deviant from 'standard' or 'ordinary' language. Literary language was instead expressive of the innate creativity of grammar itself, producing infinite new combinations within the limitations of the overarching grammatical system. Richard Ohmann's 'Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style' (1964) set out to study the 'literary structure' of an author's style based on a surface structure analysis of a writer's sentences. As such, the kind of stylistic critique that Ohmann was developing sought to address the question of literary style as a particular 'exploitation of a grammar of possibilities' outlined by Freeman above. In his analysis, Ohmann shows how an unwieldy Faulknerian sentence can be reduced to minimal 'kernels' of meaning; for example, 'the desk and the shelf above it on which rested the letters in which McCaslin recorded the slow outward

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[85]While Chomsky's work is often considered a radical break from the Bloomfieldian model, its early incarnations are heavily indebted to Bloomfield's methodologies. Indeed, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Chomsky's 'revolutionary' introduction of the study of syntax arose from natural gaps in the scope of Bloomfieldian study which focused solely on phonology. For a lengthy discussion on the 'revolutionariness' of Chomsky's work see Chapter 8 of E.F.K. Koerner, *Toward a History of American Linguistics* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002).

[86] Fowler, *Literature as Social Discourse*, 59.

[87] Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2015), 17.

trickle of food and supplies and equipment which returned each fall as cotton made' is reduced to 'the desk. The shelf was above it. The ledgers rested on the shelf. The ledgers were old. McCaslin recorded the trickle of food in the ledgers'.[88] By doing this, Ohmann reveals the kinds of grammatical 'transformations' (deletions, passivation, conjunction etc.) that Faulkner's prose undergoes in moving from these kernel sentences into his own distinct style.

While this kind of interpretative work reveals fascinating insights into the grammatical structure of an authors' style, this is merely an evolution of the formalist notion that poetic language is fundamentally different from the 'standard'. But Ohmann's more linguistic-oriented version also turns its attention to how the poetic — even within prose — tests the boundaries of the grammatical. Yet Ohmann's denaturing of Faulkner's language does little to venture a reading of what the use of these grammatical transformations might mean on a larger scale. Other stylistic endeavours sought to read deep psychological structures into these grammatical performances and manipulations. As Freeman concedes, this method could be considered a kind of 'inspired mind-reading'.[89] Jean Jacques Weber further describes the critical corner this kind of grammatical reading had backed itself into, noting that if stylistics descended into reading 'ideological structures off linguistic structures', it would mean 'falling back into the old form/content dichotomy that crippled the work of many functionalist stylisticians'.[90]

Structural Problems

In the 1970s and 1980s, stylistic criticism was being called into question by its own practitioners, who began to view it as too isolated in its formalism and wholly unresponsive to the significant societal and cultural shifts occurring both in America and on a global scale. In

[88] William Faulkner, 'The Bear,' qtd. in Ohmann, 'Generative Grammar,' 432.
[89] Ohmann qtd. in Freeman, *Linguistics and Literary Style*, 15.
[90] Weber, 'Towards a Contextualized Stylistics,' 4.

his reappraisal of Roman Jakobson's 1958 'Closing Statement' on linguistics and poetics, Derek Attridge notes that Jakobson's linguistic work is derived from 'a faith in the power of positivistic thinking which must have been particularly appealing in the late 1950s', but this context is very different form 'the situation we find ourselves in in 1986'.[91] Indeed, the sense that the concerns and objectives of literary criticism had irrevocably changed in the 1980s was pervasive not only in an increasing turn towards cultural and historicist reading that reflected the transformational shifts in racial, women's, and gay rights movements (and their subsequent backlash), but also in a fundamental reassessment of the terms of the kind of linguistic critique that these style-oriented critics had been performing.

As Jonathan Culler notes in *Structuralist Poetics*, Jacques Derrida's 'metaphysics of presence' radically deconstructed the humanist 'longing for a truth behind every sign' that formed the basis of the structuralist paradigm.[92] Derrida attested that if the structuralist 'sign' can no longer be considered a unified connection between referent and meaning then 'semiology' (the study of signs) must be replaced by 'grammatology', the study of writing, which, rather than holding any 'transcendental' meaning of its own, bears only the ghostly presence, or 'trace', of 'the structure of the sign'.[93] Using the idea of 'grammar' against the discipline that had developed to study it, Derrida proposes that 'grammatology' 'will liberate the semiological project itself from what, in spite of its greater theoretical extension, remained *under the command* of linguistics, ordered as if linguistics were at once its centre and its telos'.[94] Lydia Davis inherits and works within this complex juncture in American literary theory in which language was not only central but fundamentally unstable. While never fully

[91] Derek Attridge, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics in Retrospect,' in *The Stylistics Reader*, ed. Weber, 37.
[92] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 22.
[93] Gayatri Spivak, 'Translator's Preface,' in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2016), lix.
[94] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 55.

conforming to any single theoretical framework, her work plays off the indeterminate interactions between 'Theory', translation, and writing, but not, as I will later discuss, in the same ways as her postmodern contemporaries.

Derrida's deconstruction of language as 'transcendental' formed part of a more widespread shift away from notions of the 'standard', which literary criticism had, up until this point, held as a kind of universal benchmark against which to measure literary language. Increasingly, and as part of wider political movements, the notion of the 'standard' as both a linguistic and social construct began to be called into question as ideologically reductive and hegemonic. This played out in post-structuralist attacks on Western logocentrism, put into practice by post-colonial, feminist, and critical race theorists, who rejected the kinds of totalizing systems that previously formalist modes of literary criticism had explored. Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 semi-autobiographical text *Borderlands/*La Frontera: *The New Mestiza* put forward arguments for a hybrid cultural identity that is built upon a mastery of different linguistic codes.[95] In Anzaldúa's formulation language is the site where her various identities — chicana, queer, American, woman — interact with and signify upon each other, but language is also where these various identities are suppressed and made marginal by social structures of homogenization.

Despite the centrality of questions of language to these schools of post-structuralist thought, the question of 'grammar' is never fully explicated in any practical sense even though it provides the conceptual frame for Derrida's foundational theory. Developments in formal linguistics, however, were seeking to do similar work to decentralize the 'standard'. The sub-field of sociolinguistics associated with William Labov and others emerged in the 1960s and came to prominence amidst the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s. This field sought to study

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[95] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/*La Frontera*: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

the social hierarchies of American dialects and explicitly connected these hierarchies to political and institutional structures.[96] The growing awareness of different ethnic groups as linguistically distinct fed wider arguments for the cultural autonomy of African American art. In an interview in 1981 Toni Morrison described the linguistic complexity and creativity of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), as containing five distinct forms of the grammatical present tense. 'It's terrible to think', she notes,

> that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging […] This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the Standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca.[97]

These trends, evident in a novelist like Morrison as well as in the work of sociolinguists, sought to integrate an understanding of grammar and the linguistic 'standard' as a by-product of social and institutional conventions rather than being indicative of an innate and overarching Americanness. Sociolinguistics, which I discuss further in relation to David Foster Wallace's work in my third chapter, offers not only a way of reading complex cultural and ethnic identities into the grammar of a literary work but also is reflective of the fraught political connotations that that same grammar signifies and upholds.

As this overview shows, the possibility of reading grammatically often gets swept up in broader criticisms of formalist ways of reading, which, as Weber argues, are seen to be 'mechanical, lifeless, sterile exercises, and largely irrelevant to the interpretation of the literary work that they are describing. And if the critics try to ascribe some function or meaning to the formal patterns that they have uncovered, then a huge leap of faith is required to move from

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[96] William Labov's *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), originally published in 1966, is a foundational text for contemporary sociolinguistics and a cornerstone of later linguistic work on African American Vernacular English.

[97] Toni Morrison, qtd. in Thomas LeClair, 'The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,' *The New Republic,* March 21, 1985, https://newrepublic.com/article/130043/language-must-not-sweat.

description to interpretation'.[98] Charles Altieri suggested in 2009 that no one 'in the heyday of modernism could have imagined how little style matters now as a topic in academic discourse in the arts and in philosophy'.[99] As I mentioned in the opening of this introduction, this division between 'form' and 'content' remains a sticking point for literary criticism. The recent interest and development in Digital Humanities appears to be an exception to this trend. The Digital Humanities commitment to 'quantitative stylistics' and 'distant reading', espoused by Franco Moretti, seems to be the logical conclusion of the stylistic turn of the 1960s and 1970s. It is also one of the only dominant contemporary critical methods that has mostly turned its attention away from 'style' and, instead, has focused on 'grammar' as one of its primary objects of study.[100] As John Burrows argues in *Computation into Criticism* (1987) the critic should 'take those units of language that are so frequent we hardly notice them, and show how powerfully they contribute to the construction of meaning'.[101] There is a peculiar harmony involved in DH's core method, which uses computational grammars to identify literary ones and completes the originary 'positivistic' project of linguistic criticism by fully automating its method of analysis. Contrary to early formalist iterations, the innovations in Digital Humanities free literary critics from the need to read closely, and instead allow them to read at a 'distance' in increasingly greater scales. [102] Yet while its original method invariably codes for grammatical features in a given text, or set of texts, the Digital Humanities often treats its grammatical analysis as mere data, which is put to work in the explication of literary style, form, or genre, reinforcing the same critical hierarchies I have attempted to chart in this introduction.

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[98] Weber, 'Towards a Contextualized Stylistics,' 2.
[99] Charles Altieri, 'Style,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Richard Eldridge (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 420.
[100] See for example the Stanford Literary Lab's pamphlets 'Style at the Scale of the Sentence', *Stanford Literary Lab* 5, June, 2013. https://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet5.pdf.
[101] John Burrows, qtd. in Franco, Moretti, 'Style, Inc.: Reflections on Seven Thousand Titles (British Novels, 1740–1850),' *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2009): 156. See also, John Burrows, *Computation Into Criticism: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels and an Experiment in Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).
[102] See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).

At the opposite end of the scale, linguist Mary Shapiro's recent study of linguistic features in David Foster Wallace's work explores the benefits and pitfalls of using linguistic tools to analyse literary texts. First tracing the tendency in Wallace criticism to read his linguistic interest closely but from the perspective of broader philosophical ideas about language, Shapiro asks whether it is 'time to turn critical and "very close" attention to his actual linguistic production'.[103] Taking a sentence fragment from Wallace's short story collection *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (1999), 'blank, slack, gagged mask's mindless stare', Shapiro picks apart the phonological structure of the phrase to reveal that the words are not only onomatopoeic but also that, because its phonological structures contravene the speech patterns of 'standard' American English, '[r]eaders are forced not just to imagine gagging, but literally to re-enact it in the repeated velar stop consonants.'[104] Shapiro then notes that 'Wallace begins the phrase with two monomorphemic words (bare roots), the simplest possible word forms in English. Then he beings to challenge readers' processing powers, switching to bi-morphemic words, not just once or twice, but three times before he returns to the simple bare noun root stare: AABBBA.'[105] Moving from this to a semantic interpretation of the phrase, Shapiro points to the oxymoronic quality of Wallace's nouns and adjectives: what does it mean for a mask to be blank? How and why is it gagged? The discordance among noun and adjective within the confines of a grammatically 'correct' sentence challenge the reader's ability to process the sentence fully, sending them back to each individual word.

Shapiro acknowledges a considerable 'scalability problem' in her reorientation of 'close reading' to 'linguistic reading'.[106] Focusing on just one sentence in the oeuvre of a maximalist novelist, Shapiro demonstrates a host of fascinating insights not only regarding the effects

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[103] Mary Shapiro, 'The Poetic Language of David Foster Wallace,' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 1 (2019): 31.
[104] Ibid, 25.
[105] Ibid, 26.
[106] Ibid, 31

Wallace's grammatical manipulation produces in the act of reading but also points to places where it seems likely that Wallace would have been directly engaging with specific linguistic knowledge in order to do so. Yet as she rightly points out:

> Unfortunately, this exercise in linguistic analysis of one small phrase also illustrates why linguistic criticism largely has fallen out of favor. While a close reading may illuminate one or two linguistic features that a reader might otherwise not consciously notice, a linguistic reading must look at language on every level, to find congruence between the linguistic devices. If it takes more than a dozen pages to adequately plumb a six-word phrase, how can this approach possibly apply to a novel of over a thousand pages?[107]

While the Digital Humanities possesses the tools to identify these linguistic features *en masse*, it does not remove the labour of analysing them in the close and focused way Shapiro proposes. The question of scale here is a common one levelled against grammatical ways of reading. Another is the difficulty of getting from these linguistic features to wider claims about the political, historical, or social dynamics of a literary text. Speaking favourably of attempts to reconcile stylistics with a more socially-oriented 'pragmatics' that views the language of texts as socially and ideologically constructed, Mary Louise Pratt has called for

> a theory of linguistic representation which acknowledges that representative discourse is always engaged in both fitting words to world and fitting world to words; that language and linguistic institutions in part construct or constitute the world for people in speech communities, rather than merely depicting it.[108]

If, as I hope this introduction has shown, the idea of grammar is irrevocably tied up with political paradoxes, questions of national and cultural identity, and the construction of community models, then surely a mode of grammatical reading would be perfectly suited to

[107] Ibid.
[108] Weber, 'Towards a Contextualized Stylistics,' 4; Mary Louise Pratt, 'Ideology and Speech-Act Theory,' in *The Stylistics Reader*, ed. Weber, 191.

making the connections between 'word' and 'world' that Pratt describes. Is there a way, then, to make grammar do this kind of literary work?

Make Grammar Do

'Grammar. I made it do.'
—Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (1931)

These questions about how to recover our commitment to close reading and the new ways we can 'do' it have the effect, however, of overemphasizing the absence of this kind of reading in contemporary criticism. As Samuel Otter notes, 'The "return" to "form" raises the perplexing question of where we have been and what we have been doing while we have not been attending to form—especially since formal issues have been prominent in the New Historicism that, along with Cultural Studies, serves as the foil in the narratives of divergence.'[109] My method in this thesis seeks to address some of these issues of connecting 'word' to 'world' through literary texts. Focusing, as Shapiro suggests, on grammar rather than the ideologically loaded terms 'form', 'style', or 'aesthetics', invites us to read texts at the level of the sentence with even closer attention. However, it is not enough to simply look closely at how an author uses or misuses grammar. My historical overview has shown that grammar, in its various forms and definitions, is far from stable and monolithic in its U.S. context: it has played a crucial role in debates surrounding national identity, pedagogy, and political self-determination, and it can be and has been used equally and interchangeably for both liberal and conservative ends. It is in this sense that Gertrude Stein commands, in her 1931 mock-primer *How to Write,* that we 'Think closely of how grammar is a folder':

> To look back in the way they came. Now think.
> Who stands.
> To look back in the direction in which they came.
> In the direction in which they came.

[109] Samuel Otter, 'An Aesthetics of All Things,' *Representations* 104, no. 1 (2008): 117.

> To look back in the direction in which they came.
> A grammarian is so.
> Afraid.[110]

Stein's grammarian, who in this text is analogous to the modernist artist (i.e. herself), is positioned as a medium between past and present, between progression and tradition, between individual and collective. Grammar is not a hard-bound, immutable set of laws but a discordant collection of principles, mythologies, assumptions, predilections, debunked rules, and failed experiments. Stein's grammarian must embody these contradictory forces, to 'think closely' about what language means, even if this produces, in Stein's case, a rather frightening kind of grammar. To consider how an author manipulates a particular grammatical feature is therefore not just to notice how it deviates from some transcendental aesthetic 'standard' but to think what the 'standard' means at that specific historical moment, and what kinds of latent political, ideological, or cultural tensions are contained in and inherited by these grammatical forms. While my methods resonate with the methodology of Didion's Berkeley class quoted in the beginning of this introduction, they are not limited to reading a writer's use of language as indicative of 'the way the writer thought' but also of what it means to use language in certain ways in their specific cultural context and within specific literary traditions.

Many of the formalist or linguistic approaches to reading I have outlined above concentrate on the internal aspects of the text — recall Leo Spitzer's notion that the critic should 'work from the surface to the "inward life-centre" of the work of art'.[111] These ways of reading presume an attention to grammar and form to be a way into literary texts. In an essay for the *New York Times* in 1976 entitled 'Why I Write' Didion inverts this sense, considering grammar to be specifically a means of pointing outward:

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110 Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 110.
111 Spitzer, 'Linguistics and Literary History,' 29.

> All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture.[112]

In Didion's characterisation of grammar as 'infinite power' she is not only referring to the control the writer exercises over their reader (the act of writing, she says earlier, is the 'tactic of a secret bully, an invasion'), but also to the complex cultural and political structures grammar reflects, upholds, and has the power to shift.[113] In her metaphor of the camera Didion characterizes grammar not only as a medium of the writer's mind but, crucially, as the means by which the writer is pointed outward. In the stumble between whether the 'words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture', Didion shows that grammar both connects the internal and external and problematizes this relationship, generating a Steinian blurring between 'inside' and 'outside'.

As I hope to show, Gertrude Stein, Lydia Davis, and David Foster Wallace are all profoundly interested in how their grammar mediates the relationship between inside and outside, but also the ways in which their writing connects 'word' to 'world' through various theoretical, political, and aesthetic frames. Each chapter of this thesis examines an author in relation to a specific institutional interpretation of grammar. For Gertrude Stein, this is an examination of the ideologies behind the Harvard writing programme that I outlined briefly earlier in this introduction. Teasing out the political contradictions inherent in this writing

[112] Joan Didion, 'Why I Write,' *The New York Times,* December 5, 1976, 270. https://www.nytimes.com/1976/12/05/archives/why-i-write-why-i-write.html.
[113] Ibid.

pedagogy, in the first chapter I argue that Stein inherits a complex set of assumptions about grammar and its relationship to questions of artistic genius and American identity, which she explicitly diverges from in her early work and returns to in her later experimental writing. In particular, the opposing conservative and liberal forces inherent in Harvard's attitude to writing and education provides a new way of examining these same contradictory forces in Stein's radical writing and political outlook.

In my second chapter I argue that Lydia Davis's idiosyncratic fiction reflects and responds to a tumultuous period in recent U.S. intellectual history, which, from Chomsky to Derrida, was dominated and defined by questions of language. In the midst of this ferment and the political upheaval of the 1960s liberation movements, Davis's work draws from these contexts while continuously reaffirming grammar's role in the 'everyday'. My final chapter on David Foster Wallace explores how the author inherits a fractured intellectual and political landscape in the 1990s. Probing how Wallace interacts with and responds to linguistic theories of difference (in particular, to sociolinguistic research on African American Vernacular English) and universality, I posit Wallace's complex political and aesthetic oscillation between a commitment to diversity and plurality, on the one hand, and consensus and communality, on the other, as a problem that is both caused by and resolved through grammar.

Throughout this introduction a number of issues have arisen that it is important to clarify. Firstly, the question of whether the study of grammar should refer to speech or writing is still a prominent debate among academic disciplines, and I trace some of these debates in my chapters. For the purposes of my analysis, here, I am primarily concerned with written grammar but also with the ways that these three authors absorb and assimilate speech patterns into their writing, viewed in relation to how dialect is theorized linguistically across the twentieth century. Secondly, as my critical overview on formalist and linguistic reading has shown, considerably more has been written about how we can use grammar to read poetry than prose

(with the exception of stylicians like Ohmann). Indeed, Formalism and New Criticism bases its methodology on the belief that there is a fundamental disjuncture between poetry and ordinary prose. Although it can be argued that both Lydia Davis and Gertrude Stein can, at times, verge into the poetic in their prose writing (and each has also been published as a poet), one of the original goals of this thesis was to consider what it might mean to do this same kind of grammatical reading for prose.

By exploring these authors alongside the institutional and intellectual histories that inform them, I demonstrate the inseparability of grammar from larger questions of democracy, identity, authority, community, and difference in their work. Each of my chapters, then, investigates these intersections between writing and public life, between institutional forces and creative autonomy, between writerly and political authority. In exploring how these writers 'make grammar do' I hope to shed new light on how these authors reconcile 'word' to 'world' amidst the ever-changing tumult of the twentieth century.[114]

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[114] Stein, *How to Write*, 106.

Gertrude Stein: Authority and Indeterminacy

'I am a grammarian.
We will or we will not cry together.'
— Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (1931)

'I am a grammarian'

In his autobiography, W.E.B. DuBois recalls his first years at Harvard University in the late 1880s as being dominated by the study of language and grammar:

> I had unwittingly arrived at Harvard in the midst of a violent controversy about poor English among students. A number of fastidious Englishmen like Barrett Wendell had come to Harvard about this time; moreover New England itself was getting sensitive over Western slang and Southern drawls and general ignorance of grammar. Freshmen at this time could elect nearly all their courses except English; that was compulsory, with theses, daily themes and tough examinations.[1]

The 'daily theme', invented and popularised by the fastidious Barrett Wendell when he joined the Harvard English department in 1880, had become the dominant form of pedagogy for the extensive system of writing instruction implemented at Harvard and its ancillary women's college, Radcliffe. The Harvard curriculum was developed largely in response to a rapidly increasing student body. Indeed, at the end of the nineteenth century the university was, despite its more conservative forces, admitting more diverse students like DuBois and Gertrude Stein. The form of the daily theme had been devised with the belief that students required daily practice in the art of writing and also as a practical solution to the rising class sizes that made more traditional methods of teaching — such as oral recitations — impossible. Students were required to write short daily themes (some of Stein's range from between two sentences to two paragraphs) to be submitted in class each day and corrected by their instructor, alongside longer

[1] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 90.

submissions every fortnight.[2] Wendell intended these themes to be a means of self-development and self-discovery, encouraging students to ground their writing in their lived experience.[3] In reality, however, the daily drudgery of writing themes and, from the perspective of the faculty, correcting them, produced only functional training in theme-writing rather than effective composition. In this way, the 'daily theme' became a homogenizing instrument designed to train all of its students in the use of 'good' English. While its function appears purely pedagogical, the ideologies that lay behind notions of 'good' and 'bad' writing established by the Harvard writing programme fell in line with a broader national project of linguistic standardization, that placed grammar at the heart of the problem of national self-definition.

While both Stein and DuBois cite their interactions with the philosopher William James as the focal point of their Harvard careers, much of their time was undoubtedly spent in the painstaking composition of these daily themes.[4] Indeed, while Stein retained none of her work from James' psychology labs, 47 of her daily themes from Wendell's advanced module, English 22, were included in her archive after her death.[5] The following theme, titled 'An Annex Girl', written in 1894, paints a picture of a young writer frustrated with the constraints and expectations of her Harvard education:

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[2] James Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1987), 38.

[3] Sue Carter Simmons, 'Constructing Writers: Barrett Wendell's Pedagogy at Harvard,' *College Composition and Communication* 46, no. 3 (October 1995), 336.

[4] Radcliffe, the women's division of Harvard University, was originally called the 'Harvard Annex' before being renamed Radcliffe college in 1894. Michelle Brazier shows that because Stein had failed her Latin admissions examination, she was not a fully matriculated student; instead she joined the ranks of a small subsect of 'special students' who were permitted to take classes without gaining a degree. Brazier argues that it was Stein's status as a 'special student' that allowed her to bypass introductory writing courses compulsory for other students, such as English A, and move straight to the more advanced classes like English 22 and Forensics. When Stein was encouraged by William James to pursue a medical degree at Johns Hopkins, Stein retroactively sat and passed her admissions exams in order to gain her degree. Michelle Brazier, 'The Making of Gertrude Stein: Reading, Writing, and Radcliffe,' PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2010, 131-39.

[5] Ibid, 13.

> There she stood a little body with a very large head. She was loaded down with books and was evidently very dismal. Suddenly there broke forth a torment, 'I don't want to be superior' she wailed despairingly, 'I am tired to death of standing with my head craned constantly looking upward. I am just longing to meet one simple soul that don't want to know everything, one weak happy naive consciousness that thinks higher education is either rot or has never heard of it.' She gave a long-drawn out Oh! and then collapsed the books on top of the miserable little heap.[6]

The conventional language of this theme makes it almost unrecognizable to readers of Stein's published work. Despite this, it would be wrong to assume that Stein's theme is exemplary of the Harvard writing programme; Stein was an average student of English 22, gaining a middling 'C' grade overall, and often receiving quite cutting commentary from her instructors.[7] Closer examination of this theme, however, reveals how Stein's distinctive voice was beginning to push against the stylistic (and social) propriety that the Harvard programme sought to instil. Although subtle, the opening sentence is the most 'Steinian', both in the image it conveys and in its grammatical construction. The lack of punctuation facilitates a slipperiness of grammatical subjects challenging how the reader perceives the opening description of the protagonist in which it is unclear whether 'a little body with a large head' describes the 'she' or, in a more surreal and literal sense, is the 'she' herself.[8] This grammatical (and physical) dismemberment of the subject presents a cartoonish image, while the basic, almost childlike contrast between 'little' and 'very large' accentuate the theme's humour. While the subsequent prose reverts back to the conventional language sanctioned by the writing programme, Stein's

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[6] Gertrude Stein, 'An Annex Girl (December 12, 1894),' in Rosalind Miller, *Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility* (New York: Exposition Press, 1949), 120. All of Stein's Radcliffe themes are reproduced in Miller's text.

[7] Brazier, 'The Making of Gertrude Stein,' 145.

[8] One is reminded of Christopher Pearse Cranch's illustration of Emerson's essay 'Nature' in which he interprets the phrase 'I became a transparent eyeball' as a man with a large eyeball in place of his head. Christopher Pearse Cranch, 'Standing on the Base Ground...I Become a Transparent Eyeball (Illustration for Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature")', 1830-92, Pen and Ink (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/389144.

instructor was nevertheless dissatisfied with Stein's construction of sentences, commenting 'Your vehemence runs away with your syntax'.[9] The instructor marks the lines 'higher education is either rot or has never heard of it' and 'collapsed the books on top of the miserable little heap' but does not query the unusual composition of Stein's opening line. Through the manipulation of minute grammatical points within the rigid boundaries of 'good usage', Stein smuggles her sentence past her discerning examiner.

The theme's content, too, seems to obliquely assail the values the writing programme sought to instil. As outlined in my introduction, the road towards linguistic standardization in nineteenth-century America was bound up in the shaping of an emerging middle class. At the heart of the Harvard writing programme was the traditional belief that good writing would lead to good moral character. This ethos promotoed not merely a mastery of style and mechanical correctness but — as we shall later see in my appraisal of the architect of English 22, Barrett Wendell — the construction of an authentic and exemplary self. The Annex girl's lament that she does not 'want to be superior' seems to resist this moral exceptionalism. Stein's imagined rejection of Harvard's superiority speaks also to the added pressure placed on the students at Radcliffe to justify their position at the university. Stein's renunciation carries the specific weight of having to be superior both intellectually and within her gender while considered inferior among her male counterparts. This added dynamic speaks to the specifically gendered experience of female students who, despite receiving a Harvard education, could never be fully accepted among the ranks of 'Harvard men'. The annex girl's reaction to her frustrations is significant not just in demonstrating Stein's resistance to the Harvard system (a recurring subject in a number of her themes from English 22) but also in characterising a return to the 'simple' as both an aesthetic choice and a means of social commentary that is central to Stein's later work. The protagonist's desire to meet a 'simple soul' who thinks that higher education is

[9] Instructor's comments on 'An Annex Girl', in Miller, *Form and Intelligibility*, 103.

'either rot or has never heard of it' marks Stein's fascination with the 'uneducated' working classes, a subject she explores in her descriptions of African American life in Baltimore in some of her other daily themes, and later in her acclaimed *Three Lives* (1909). The desire not to crane her neck 'upward' but instead look down is indicative of the conflicting way in which Stein negotiates her own middle-class identity and complex affiliation with those of a lower social stratum. Stein's characterisation of these extra-institutional figures as 'weak' and 'naive' can be read as moral flaws, here fetishized by Stein as devoid of any of the intellectual and moral pomp of her university education — a favourite subject of her daily themes. But these characteristics might also be read as negative descriptors of style in the vocabulary of the Harvard programme and other writing manuals.[10] This wilful affiliation suffuses itself into Stein's language as she parrots the slangy, incorrect speech of a 'simple soul that don't want to know everything'. In her use of 'don't' it is clear that Stein is attempting to achieve some kind of identification through the appropriation of non-standard grammatical features as a way of actively rejecting the formal tone of the daily theme, risking the inevitable mark of disapproval from her instructor.

If the daily theme offered Harvard students both daily practice in writing and an outlet for the expression of their own authentic experience, then Stein's 'An Annex Girl', and her themes more generally, demonstrate Stein's 'daily' tension with the institution borne out in a nexus of complex relations between gender, class, and language. This chapter will argue that Stein's contradictory relationship to these institutional connections also form the basis of her later, more experimental, works, exploring how Stein revised and incorporated some of her themes and early writing into her published work. Stein's daily themes show an antagonistic

[10] See Miriam Brody, *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993).

relationship to the rigorous writing programme. These are among her most witty and sharply rendered pieces. One reads,

> Avaunt thou valeful [*sic*] spectre! What! Shall I submit to losing all my joy in living? Can I endure having all pleasure blasted by that eternal refrain 'Wouldn't it make a good Daily?' Never.[11]

It is in these rebellious themes that Stein is at her most humorous, but it is also when she is at her most formally playful. In 'A Modern Sonnet to his Mistress' Eyebrows', Stein delivers not a sonnet but short prose piece which mixes poetic apostrophe with jolting scientific jargon derived from the James's psychology lab:

> She was certainly a charming bit of womanhood as she sat carefully imitating rhythms with the electric hammer. The youth gazing at her so earnestly was evidently of one mind. Poor Cupid almost at his last gasp in his home of psychological analysis seeing the tableau plucked up heart and stole a sly peep at the youth's rhapsody. He saw 'Noticeable winking of the eye at every beat. A trembling of the lips before the repetition of the rhythm. A contraction of the neck muscles distinctly noticeable.'[12]

What emerges from the themes as a whole is Stein's ability to mimic and parody a number of styles and discourses, moving easily between imitations of George Eliot, Gothic romanticism, witty satires of university life, detailed character sketches, the discourse of forensic argumentation, and the technical jargon of the lab. This is not only the flexing of muscles of a writer who would later become a masterful humourist and imitator of styles, but it also suggests Stein was pressing against the boundaries of the theme as a form. Her writing for English 22 stretches the theme's possibilities, exploring one-liners alongside longer, more traditional short story forms. Her engagement with the theme, whose purpose was to allow students practice — a meaningless dry run at 'real' writing which would serve a social and moral role — became

[11] Stein, 'Untitled Theme (November 16, 1894),' in Miller, *Form and Intelligibility*, 115.
[12] Stein, 'A Modern Sonnet to his Mistress' Eyebrows (November 15, 1894),' in ibid, 114.

more about exploration of language within this fragmentary, isolated form than about its content and consequences. It is this tension between writing as a means to an end and writing as an end in itself that crystallizes in Stein's early development of style.

As I will discuss over the course of this chapter, Stein repeatedly returned to these themes and to the principles of English 22 in shaping her experimental works. I will also show that in engaging with these institutional forms of grammar Stein is inheriting and revising the ways in which the Harvard programme conceived of class, race, gender, and Americanness as inherently bound up with the practice of setting linguistic standards. It is in her work in the 1930s — a period that included the publication of *How to Write* (1931), *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), *The Geographical History of America, or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1936), and *Lectures in America* (1936) — that Stein's singular, grammatically deviant prose style reached its pinnacle. This was also the period in which she reflected publicly on her own linguistic philosophy. Through these texts, she attempted to clarify not only her own thoughts on issues of language, but also her own Americanness. To do so, she looked back to the origins of her writing, engaging not just with her early modernist texts but with the nineteenth-century values of the Harvard writing programme. In the final sections of this chapter, I argue that Stein returns to and recapitulates the idea of the daily theme in her notion of 'daily living', a concept she adopts at a time when she is preoccupied with defining and describing her own contradictory politics. As such, I seek to show that while Stein's relationship to the ideology of the writing programme is by no means straightforward, the evolutions in her style throughout her career suggest a continuous engagement with the principles and methods she learned during her time at Harvard.

The next section of this chapter will examine the institutional context of the Harvard writing programme and its inherent contradictions through its two main architects: A.S. Hill and Barrett Wendell. By examining the complex relationship between the Harvard writing

programme and national ideologies of linguistic and political standardization, I will demonstrate the ways in which institutions like Harvard taught writing was encoded by fraught national debates on race, class, and gender. I will then read two of Stein's most famous early works, *Three Lives* (1909) and *The Making of Americans* (completed in 1911 but not published until 1925), as engaged in a process of revision of earlier, more conventional versions of her writing and, consequently, in conversation with the cultural and political values of the writing programme. In allying herself not with 'superior' Harvard English but instead with more 'simple' linguistic models, Stein began to construct her own vision of language. The second half of the chapter will begin with a reading of Stein's lecture 'Composition as Explanation' not only as a statement of Stein's own brand of modernism but as a conscious return to ideas of 'composition' encountered in English 22. 'Composition as Explanation' provides an avenue into Stein's more challenging experimental works, in particular *How to Write* (1931), which I will read in the final section of this chapter as Stein's return to the contradictory values of the Harvard programme as a way of thinking through her relationship to literary modernism and the complex political scene in the 1930s and 1940s.

'Style is the Man': A.S Hill and Barrett Wendell

The institutional shift from rhetoric to 'composition' at Harvard in the 1880s was part of widespread move away from eighteenth-century models of classical education.[13] Rhetoric, the classical and largely aristocratic discipline focusing on persuasion, oratory, and elocution, began to bend under the increasing pressure of a developing American society. Universities were no longer geared solely toward the production of ministers, lawyers, and politicians but now had to respond to an influx of students from an ever-increasing middle class.[14] Harvard

[13] For a more extensive view of the shift from this classical focus in American education see chapters 2 and 3 of Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
[14] Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 21.

viewed the study of writing as a skill essential to developing an educated class of professionals; as one Harvard functionary put it, the object of the programme was to 'train a class of Philistines [to be] prepared for the everyday needs of democracy.'[15] But this move, from exclusive to inclusive, aristocratic to democratic, was far from straightforward. College composition remained a controversial subject from its advent in the 1870s until well into the 1950s. In nineteenth-century America this debate was bound up in the discussions about national identity in the face of increased immigration, a rising middle class, a modernising American economy, rapidly advancing media technology, and a nation still divided after the Civil War. In response to the influx of students from more relatively diverse backgrounds in the second half of the nineteenth century American universities gradually began to integrate composition into their curricula. Harvard, whose programme James Berlin calls 'the rhetoric of the meritocracy', was at the forefront of this pedagogical restructuring.[16]

The orchestrator of Harvard's programme was Adams Sherman Hill. A Harvard graduate and ex-newspaper man brought onto the faculty in 1872, Hill was responsible for designing a comprehensive course of writing instruction in response to poor standards of writing among incoming students.[17] In 1880 Hill hired his former student Barrett Wendell, a novelist and literary scholar, to help him run the programme. As composition became more and more entrenched in the Harvard curriculum, Hill's rules-based writing manual *Principles of Rhetoric* (1878) formed the blueprint for the introductory classes compulsory for freshmen students, while Wendell was entrusted with two advanced writing courses: English 12 and English 22. In 1891 Wendell compiled and published his lectures in *English Composition,* its very title signalling the irreversible institutional shift from rhetoric to the study of writing.

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[15] Glen E. Palmer, qtd. in ibid, 43.
[16] Ibid, 35.
[17] John Brereton, *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 9.

In their extensive histories of this period John Berlin, John Brereton, Robert Connors, Charles Paine and others have presented an analysis of the Harvard programme as a rigid utilitarian model bent on producing functionaries who could participate in an emerging system of 'managerial capitalism'.[18] But a number of critics have broken from this predominantly functional view of the Harvard system and have highlighted the inherent contradictions in its ideology, focusing in particular on the divergence in pedagogy between its two most prominent figures, Hill and Wendell.[19] Indeed, both figures are contradictory in their theory and practice, but their own pedagogical paradoxes are emblematic of the ideology of the writing programme as a whole, a programme that created a very specific and very conflicted cultural context in which its students came to practice writing. Hill's functional pedagogy was preoccupied with the mastery of hard linguistic rules. In his collection of essays *Our English* (1889), Hill diagnoses the prevalence of 'bad English' in American culture as caused by 'the fact that we have no universally acknowledged tribunal—no academy, no court, no upper class—to settle disputed questions. Where every man is as good as every other man, every man's English is accounted as good as every other man's. Hence, the ubiquity of bad English'.[20] Hill's answer to this threat was rigid instruction in 'good usage'. His *Principles of Rhetoric* begins with a discussion of 'Good Use', 'Barbarisms', 'Solecisms', and 'Improprieties', instructing his students firstly in how to identify linguistic error before they are taught the nuts-and-bolts of composition. In his introduction he asserts that 'correctness (or Purity) is the first requisite of discourse'.[21] The second half of Hill's *Rhetoric* is devoted to the 'modes of discourse' (Narration, Description, Argument, and Elucidation) common to most writing manuals of the

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[18] Charles Paine, *The Resistant Writer: Rhetoric as Immunity, 1850 to the Present* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 128. See also Berlin, op. cit.; Brereton, op. cit.; Robert Connors, 'Mechanical Correctness as a Focus in Composition Instruction,' *College Composition and Communication* 36, no. 1 (February 1985), pp. 61-72.
[19] Paine, op. cit.; Sue Carter Simmons, op. cit.
[20] A.S. Hill, *Our English* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), x.
[21] A.S. Hill, *The Principles of Rhetoric and their Application* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1881), 2.

period — with the exception of Wendell's. The 'modes of discourse' would become important for Stein's work in the 1930s as she begins to experiment with narration, description, and explanation, returning to and interrogating these set forms as a way of working through her own avant-garde aesthetic.

This disciplinary transition from rhetoric to composition and towards more functional strategies for the teaching of writing, was fuelled by a fundamentally meritocratic ideology: for centuries language and good writing had been the domain of the ruling classes but, in an American democracy, this reality was no longer acceptable. The condensation of rhetorical principles into a rules-based, how-to manual for writing allowed greater access to this exclusive skill. As long as you followed the general principles laid out in your composition textbook, read the best writers, and led a moral, well-cultivated life, there would be nothing standing in the way of your becoming a good writer. In practice, however, the emphasis on set modes of writing and the strict attitude towards linguistic error enhanced the formulaic nature of Hill's writing programme, in which students merely attempted to fit themselves into a set form, making them experts in the writing of themes but little else. Similarly the emphasis on linguistic 'Purity' and the demands of larger class sizes meant that student themes were largely appraised on issues of mechanical correctness alone. This culture has led critic Robert Connors to characterise the Harvard programme as no more than a 'stultifying error-hunt'.[22]

Unlike Hill's primarily rules-based system, Wendell's pedagogy took a more holistic instructional method predicated on 'common sense' rather than strict adherence to hard linguistic rules; Wendell believed that the way to have a lasting effect on your student 'is not to load your member with bewilderingly innumerable rules, but firmly to grasp a few simple, elastic general principles'.[23] Diverging from Hill, Wendell viewed 'good usage' not as a

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[22] Connors, 'Mechanical Correctness,' 61.
[23] Barrett Wendell, *English Composition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), 2.

'system of rules but as a constantly shifting state of fact', rooting his ideology of language instead in linguistic habits of the educated, self-knowing writer.[24] Both Hill and Wendell divide their instruction into two facets of composition, the 'Elements of Style' (grammatical 'purity', word use, sentences, paragraphs) and the 'Qualities of Style', which are comprised of 'clarity', 'force', and 'elegance'. In Wendell's view, whole compositions should be organized under the trinity of 'Unity', 'Mass' and 'Coherence'. This method of moving from smaller linguistic units (words, sentences, and paragraphs) up to larger, whole compositions will become crucial to my reading of Stein's later work. Wendell devotes lengthy chapters of *English Composition* to each of the three 'Qualities': 'clarity' which speaks to the intellect, 'force' to the emotion, and 'elegance' to the aesthetic.[25] His conception of usage was not that of correctness, of abiding by a series of rules, but of a 'genuine' engagement with language predicated on a 'true' understanding of one's individual thought. Wendell's valorisation of 'clarity' and 'force' is inherently tied up in the interplay between the internal self (the mind) and the expression of the self to one's audience (the composition).[26] Wendell's principle of clarity necessitates that one should write for 'the average man, and not a little company of the elect'.[27] In a passage that seems to reverberate in 'An Annex Girl', Wendell grounds forceful language in the identification of a universal understanding, which he locates in the 'uncultivated' speech of 'untutored savages, peasants, children — people whose knowledge of life and command of language is as elementary as possible'.[28]

Despite this democratic proclamation at the heart of Wendell's view of writing and the liberal inflection of his pedagogy in general, his attitudes towards social mobility, race, and immigration were far from progressive; as Michael North argues, '[b]etween the 1880s and the

[24] Ibid, 26.
[25] Ibid, 4.
[26] Ibid, 261.
[27] Ibid, 200.
[28] Ibid, 255.

1920s, linguistic criticism became a way of checking social mobility and racial progress without overt illiberalism'.[29] Alongside Hill's project of rigid standardization, the Harvard programme saw itself as addressing an urgent national crisis of cultural identity in their enforcement of linguistic standards. Hill and Wendell upheld the traditional relationship between rhetorical education and civic responsibility, with both publishing books on the negative effects of modernisation on the moral health of American culture in the face of rapid social change. Hill had erected his ideology around a fear of the newspaper, popular novels, and the telegram, outlined in his collection of essays *Our English* (1889), as threats not only to language, but to intellectualism and social order. In *The Privileged Classes* (1908), Wendell laments the increase in the rights and 'privilege' of the working classes who he says demand 'representation without taxation'.[30] This social conservatism underpins many of the more progressive objectives of the Harvard programme. For example, Hill's goal was to instil in his students the appropriate 'moral stamina' with which to resist the destructive force of popular culture, a threat that included the vast influx of immigration that brought with it foreign dialects. Wendell, too, was known for his staunch defence of 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'English' identity in the face of a rapidly transforming racial demographic. In his review of Mary Antin's popular 1912 memoir *A Promised Land,* Wendell wrote disdainfully of her 'irritating habit of describing herself and her people as Americans, in distinction from such folks as Edith [Wendell's wife] and me, who have been here for three hundred years'.[31]

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[29] Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 18.
[30] Barrett Wendell, *The Privileged Classes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 21.
[31] Wendell, qtd. in Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 78. The project of simultaneous standardization across cultural and racial groups and their enforced segregation forms the basis of Horace Kallen's (a favourite student of Wendell's) theory of cultural pluralism outlined in his essay 'Democracy versus The Melting Pot', the ideas of which Kallen had discussed with Wendell at length. See Horace Kallen, 'Democracy versus The Melting Pot: A Study of American Nationality", *The Nation,* February 25, 1915, pp. 190-94. https://archive.org/details/1915DemocracyVersusTheMeltingPot/page/n4.

In line with these undercurrents of racial and class elitism the pedagogy of the Harvard programme championed a distinctly American brand of individualism that aimed to guide the student towards revealing their 'genuine self' through writing. As Paine suggests, Hill was 'obsessed' with the idea that the 'writing teacher must allow writers to offer forth their *true* selves, not some imposter self that serves merely as the "beast of burden of other men's thoughts."'[32] Like many of Hill's principles, however, the cultivation of the self in writing was not entirely upheld in his pedagogical practice. Berlin and other contemporary critics of the Harvard programme argue that the systematic nature of the composition programme with its mundane daily themes meant that by and large the students' writing conformed to the programmatic values laid out in Hill's textbook. For Hill, the pursuit of good writing is aligned with the moulding of the self to a model of refined, moral culture, which allows one to better serve society. Simmons argues that, in contrast to Hill, Wendell's model was designed to foster 'a writerly objective' in his students, emphasising the act of writing as a process of 'self culture'.[33] Wendell's students were given free rein over the subjects and styles of their themes — unlike in Hill's more functional courses where students were assigned topics — which were read and peer reviewed each day in class. Wendell encouraged an introspective, sometimes autobiographical, mode of writing, believing, like the rhetoricians of the eighteenth century, that style could uncover a writer's character.[34] At the same time he fostered a belief in individual experience and perception as the basis of all good writing: 'When they use figures, I advise them, let them be sure, whatever they write about, that these figures be drawn from their actual experience.'[35] These aspects of Wendell's pedagogy situate him, in Mark McGurl's account, as a precursor to the post-war creative writing programme, drawing parallels between

[32] Paine, and Hill qtd. in Paine, *The Resistant Writer*, 135.
[33] Simmons, 'Constructing Writers,' 342; Wendell, *English Composition*, 261.
[34] Wendell, *English Composition*, 261.
[35] Ibid, 266.

Wendell's emphasis on institutional self-cultivation and what McGurl later calls the 'programmatic self-expression' of the creative writing industry.[36]

However, Wendell's pedagogy, while advocating a journey of self-made individualism, simultaneously enforces a subtle exceptionalism, clearly delineating between the honest labour of the ordinary writer and a reverence for 'men of genius'.[37] This emphasis on 'genius' is echoed in Stein's famous construction of genius in her descriptions of herself and Picasso in her early work and in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Like the Harvard programme, Stein's view of artistic genius is paradoxically coded male. Miriam Brody's *Manly Writing* examines the prevalent metaphors of masculinity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetorical writing, which presented good language as 'manly', 'vigorous', and 'healthy' and upheld these qualities as a means of staving off the effeminate, destructive forces of mass communication and non-Anglo-Saxon dialects.[38] Indeed, Wendell and Hill's characterisation of writing as a journey towards the construction of 'vigorous' moral character was conceived as an unashamedly masculine quest for self-knowledge and expression. This patriarchal reinforcement of masculinity through the discourse of the writing programme is emblematic in Wendell's use of the eighteenth-century maxim, 'Style is the Man'. In this explicit linking of writing with the Anglo-Saxon male self in the face of a student body that was rapidly admitting female and African American students, the Harvard programme subtly yet forcefully advanced a message of assimilation that was inherently bound up in both academic and cultural success. It is significant, therefore, that the pedagogy of the composition programme, in all its variations, expresses an anxiety about an expansive and inclusive American democracy which it simultaneously tried to perpetuate. It is clear that for the rhetoricians of the latter half of the

[36] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009), 11.
[37] Wendell, *English Composition*, 255.
[38] Brody, *Manly Writing*, 19.

nineteenth century, the struggle to define the new American society was to be fought in the composition classroom with grammar books and writing manuals.

Writing After Radcliffe: *Q.E.D.* and *Three Lives*

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* Stein proclaims that in her writing of the central novella, 'Melanctha', from her collection *Three Lives* (1909), she had taken 'the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature'.[39] It is significant that Stein mythologizes 'Melanctha' in this way, because in doing so she emphasizes not only how she sees *Three Lives* as leading the charge towards literary modernism but also as signalling a conscious break from the nineteenth-century values that dominated her Harvard education. It is telling that 'Melanctha', the only of the three novellas to feature an African American protagonist ('The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena' both centre on the lives of working-class German immigrants) is singled out as the harbinger of this epochal and aesthetic change. Marianne DeKoven characterises Stein's work as a triumph of 'surface', or signifier, over 'signified', promoting unintelligibility as 'oppositional' to the dominant order of 'coherent meaning' in such a way that her writing becomes both 'antipatriarchal and antilogocentric'.[40] But Stein's aesthetic shift in these early decades of the 1900s is more complex than the radical renunciation mapped out in DeKoven's narrative. I will argue here that the style that emerges in *Three Lives* and, later, in *The Making of Americans,* represents the meeting point between Stein's consideration of the values of the Harvard programme and her exploration of racial otherness — which, as we shall see, itself interacts with notions of sexual and gender difference. In this way, I agree with DeKoven that Stein's writing takes on a more radical, anti-patriarchal bent, but I want to suggest that it is specifically

[39] Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 61.
[40] Marianne, DeKoven, 'Gertrude Stein and Modern Painting: Beyond Literary Cubism,' *Contemporary Literature* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1981), 83.

through a shift in subject matter, from her own middle-class experience to the racial and class otherness portrayed in *Three Lives* that produced the necessary linguistic conditions that would inform and shape her later work. In her exploration of linguistic ambivalence in 'Melanctha' specifically, Stein generates — to appropriate Marjorie Perloff's phrase — a 'grammar of indeterminacy' that allows her to embody and represent the tensions between the radical and the conservative in her work.[41] This realignment of her prose style manifests itself in the rejection of correct, institutional English and a turn towards, as Juliana Spahr and Michael North have argued, non-standard linguistic systems.[42] Moreover, it is Stein's revision and incorporation of two earlier novellas, *Q.E.D.* (1903) and *Fernhurst* (1904), into *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* (1925) that allows her to both linguistically and thematically work through her relationship to the Harvard way of writing and the constructions of identity it encoded. While Stein often represents her idiosyncratic modernist style as originating *sui generis, Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* show her linguistic experimentalism to be the rewriting of these earlier, more programmatic texts, a tactic that I will show recurs in Stein's most experimental works in the 1930s. Stein's continuous re-engagement with these earlier forms of writing, in particular her interest in their conventionality, suggests a reading of Stein's fiction not as a radical break with conventional literary modes, but as a process of endless and lifelong revision of earlier models.

Stein's largely autobiographical novella, *Q.E.D.,* has been widely acknowledged as a precursor to 'Melanctha'. The story fictionalizes Stein's unsuccessful and drawn out affair with fellow student May Bookstaver while they were at Johns Hopkins Medical School.[43] The

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[41] Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1981), 98.
[42] Juliana Spahr, *Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (London: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 20; North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 72.
[43] As part of her brief medical training Stein worked on a maternity ward serving predominantly African American patients in central Baltimore, a fact which many critics cite as giving her material for 'Melanctha'. While Stein showed great aptitude for medicine, she quickly grew bored of her coursework and dropped out to join her brother, Leo, in London. It was here that Stein wrote *Q.E.D.,*

narrative portrays a love triangle between three women: Adele, Helen, and Mabel Neath. Helen, who is the fictional stand-in for Brookstaver, was involved with Mabel romantically and financially at the time of the affair with Adele. The narrative is predominantly concerned with Adele and Helen's fundamental inability to communicate with each other due to their distinct characteristics — Adele is overly analytical and Helen overly emotional. As Richard Bridgman suggests, each of the three women, despite their similarities in education, class, and upbringing, is designed to represent a different 'civilization' and a different 'ethical attitude'.[44] Adele's character is analytical and rational and filters these qualities through a rigid rhetoric that is tightly bound to a structured, correct, and patriarchal order of language. Jamie Hovey argues that Adele in fact 'ventriloquizes a subject position which is simultaneously masculine-identified and "respectably" bourgeoise'.[45] Indeed, Adele's preoccupations throughout *Q.E.D.* are with the 'respectabl[e] and decen[t]' middle classes and the 'Calvinistic influence which dominates my American training'.[46] The narrative voice continuously associates Adele with adjectives such as 'anglo-saxon', 'clean', 'clear' — qualities which evoke Hill and Wendell's descriptions of 'strong Saxon English'.[47] Unlike Adele, who thinks 'in definite words' (64), Helen avoids 'making any explicit statement of conditions' (94); much of the narrative's conflict is derived from Helen's careless actions and her simultaneous reticence to express how she feels. Adele associates Helen's inability to express herself with her femininity; as such the couple's failure to communicate linguistically is cast as a problem of gender difference, Adele finally exclaiming, 'I always did thank God I wasn't born a woman' (94). Adele's eschewal of

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Fernhurst, and the early drafts of *The Making of Americans* during a period of significant depression. Leon Katz, 'Introduction,' in Gertrude Stein, *Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other Early Writing* (New York: Liveright, 1996), xvii.

[44] Richard Bridgman, *The Colloquial Style in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968), 169.

[45] Jaime Hovey. 'Sapphic Primitivism in Gertrude Stein's *Q.E.D.*,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 42, no. 3 (1996): 560.

[46] Stein, *Fernhurst, Q.E.D. and Other Early Writing,* 56, 103. Hereafter all references to this edition will be in-text.

[47] Significantly for my later discussion of 'Melanctha,' Stein places 'cleanliness' in opposition to complexity,' Ibid, 101; Wendell, *English Composition,* 52.

feminine identity recalls one of Stein's themes for English 22 in which Stein mocks the 'hysterical' female temperament:

> Never again will I try to reason with a woman. She immediately gets hysterical and thinks she is calm. She acknowledges that you are right half a-dozen times and then deliberately repeats the statement thinking she has gotten hold of a new point of view. At last in despair you either smile or frown according to your temperament and she goes home convinced of remarkable argumentative powers. The eternal feminine is nice to be sure but it's painfully illogical.[48]

Stein was commended for her execution of 'point of view' in this piece, which her instructor deemed 'nobly remote'.[49] Her ability to detach from her feminine 'temperament' allows her to embody the necessary masculine qualities that produce good writing in the Harvard rubric. The association of these writerly qualities with moral fortitude is underscored by Stein's instructor who deems her moral objection to female hysteria as 'noble'. *Q.E.D.* destabilizes these gendered perceptions of language by pitting Harvard's cultivated rhetoric against the unspeakability of queer awakening. Bridgman shows that Adele's speech follows a formulaic rhetorical structure, her phrases taking the repetitive argumentative forms of 'either...or', 'if the first… then', 'if you do… then'.[50] Adele's linguistic system is so tightly bound in a particular conceptual process — one of abstract nouns like the 'middle class', 'virtue', 'morality', 'logic', etc. — that she cannot conceive of concepts and emotions outside of what she can express.

The intersections between Adele's linguistic expression and her middle-class values converge in her valorisation of her American identity. When Adele returns to New York after a stint in Europe she observes an English girl on the boat as it enters the harbour:

> A government ship passed flying the flag. The little girl looked deeply at it and then with slow intensity said quite to herself, 'There is the American flag, it looks good.' Adele echoed it, there

[48] Stein 'Woman (November 20, 1894),' in Miller, 115.
[49] Comments on 'Woman,' qtd. in ibid.
[50] Bridgman, *The Colloquial Style*, 171.

> was all America and it looked good; the clean sky and the white snow and the straight plain ungainly buildings all in a cold and brilliant air without spot or stain. (100)

On hearing the phrase 'there is the American flag, it looks good', Adele projects this formulation onto her patriotic description of the landscape. The language invites Adele to form her own individual associations with the word 'good': 'clean', 'white', 'straight', 'without spot or stain', all words which simultaneously express a homogenized racial and sexual vision. Adele views the American landscape in the graphic structure of the American flag: the cleanness of the sky, evoking at the same time the blue of the flag and the stars which mark it, highlighted by the 'brilliant', 'white' colour, accentuated by the 'straight' buildings which mirror the stripes of the flag. 'It was just plain America' (100), Adele remarks, the linguistic concept of 'plain American', which Michael North describes as a *lingua franca* for the American modernist avant-garde.[51] This drive for plainness arose from a desire to assert a distinctly American art, but when this project moved in the direction of primitivism and collided with the American 'problem' of African Americans, 'plain American' came more and more to represent whiteness. As North claims, 'the Americanist avant-garde demonstrated instead a persistent inability to understand how race fit into its conception of modern America, or how the language of African America fit into its conception of "plain American".'[52]

William Gass describes the linguistic exchange between the characters of *Q.E.D.* as 'protective speech', which he defines as a

> neutralizing middle tongue, one that is neither abstractly and impersonally scientific nor directly confronting and dramatic, but one that lies in the gray limbo in between, [...] whose effect is flat sterilizing because its words are held to the simplest naming nouns and verbs, connectives, prepositions, articles, and pronouns.[53]

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[51] North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 128.
[52] Ibid, 129.
[53] William Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 88.

In many ways, this 'middle tongue' is both the medium and subject of *Q.E.D.* whose narrative of lesbian desire is obscured and deflected by conventional prose. Adele is both linguistically and sexually confused, her situation made impossible by her subscription to a middle class, American individualism that precludes her identity as both a woman and a lesbian not least by denying her the language with which to express this viewpoint.[54] In the translation of *Q.E.D.* into the less conventional language of 'Melanctha', Stein substitutes her plot of sexual difference for one of heterosexual racial otherness. In doing so, Stein's use of non-standard language strategies, as I will discuss in greater detail later, becomes a way to explore racial and sexual ambivalence, a kind of language that is, as Melanctha is described, 'complex with desire'.[55]

This translation of her story from the discourse of sexual to racial marginality is accompanied, also, by a turn away from a Henry James-inspired novel of manners towards the very different American social milieu of the working classes.[56] As Stein wrote in a letter to Mabel Weekes upon abandoning her early draft of *The Making of Americans:*

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[54] To this list we might also add Adele's explicit mention of the 'Calvinistic influence that dominates [her] American training' cited earlier. As Barbara Will and others have noted, while *Q.E.D.* explicitly addresses Stein's lesbian identity, her Jewishness is doubly displaced: firstly in Adele's appeal to her protestant ethic and, secondly in the 'Melanctha' revision. Will suggests, however, that 'Melanctha' appeals more clearly to Jewish tropes than *Q.E.D.*, pointing out that Melanctha is repeatedly referred to as a 'wanderer'. As Will argues, 'As with *The Making of Americans*, Jewishness, here, becomes one of the key points of origin for modernism and what needs to be abandoned or obscured in order for the modernist text to be written.' Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Bernard Fay, and the Vichy Dilemma* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011), 22

[55] Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives & Tender Buttons* (New York: Signet Classic, 2003), 73. Hereafter references this edition will be given in-text.

[56] Merve Emre has perceptively shown the complexities of Stein's Jamesian imitation. Through an analysis of the opening of Stein's early work *Fernhurst* (which I will discuss in my later section on *The Making of Americans*) Emre argues that the novella is in direct dialogue with James's widely known lecture 'The Question of Our Speech' given at Bryn Mawr in 1905. The lecture, which at times mimics the speech of American 'young ladies', urges them to 'imitate': 'Don't be afraid to imitate!', meaning to affect more masculinised models of speech. Emre argues that *Fernhurst* reads as a kind of Jamesian burlesque, its opening section comprised of a 'parodic guide' for publicly addressing young women. As Emre suggests, 'on the level of the sentence, then, Stein's style formally reconfigures the male subject as a female impersonator, much like how, on the level of the lecture, James enacts his own linguistic metamorphosis into a female speaker through his literary/speech aesthetic.' Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2017), 34.

> I am afraid that I can never write the Great American novel. I dn't [*sic*] know how to sell on a margin or to do anything with shorts and longs, so I have to content myself with niggers and servant girls and the foreign population generally.[57]

Stein's failure to write the 'Great American Novel' is therefore not only bound up in her entrepreneurial failures (her inability to 'sell on a margin'), but also in the marginality of her own position as a woman, lesbian, and Jew. But Stein undoubtedly saw something marketable and more aesthetically freeing in the three lives she chose to describe in her novellas. Following an unprecedented influx of immigration at the turn of the twentieth century the notion of the 'pure' American came under direct threat, while at the same time an aspiration to such purity was demanded from the ever increasing population. Industries and private companies led by magnates such as Henry Ford provided compulsory 'assimilation' classes for their largely immigrant workforce. As Joshua Miller argues, language skills became a central element for the measurement of assimilated American identity with manuals such as '*English for Foreigners* (1909), *English for New Americans* (1911), *Essentials of Americanisation* (1919), *Lessons in Democracy* (1919), *Our Language Our Country* (1924)' in popular circulation until the Second World War.[58] In a paradoxical analogy Barrett Wendell, quoted in Horace Kallen's 'Democracy versus the Melting Pot', conceives of his race as '[b]eneath a conquest so complete that the very name of us means something not ourselves [...] I feel as I should think an Indian might feel, in the face of ourselves that were'.[59] The complex and contradictory overlaying of identity in Wendell's statement reflects the vexed ideology of the movement for linguistic standardisation of which he was so much a part. Indeed, the push toward 'Official English' — which Miller notes means 'English-only American' — was a way of exporting a unified

[57] Stein, qtd. in Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (London: Duke UP, 1999), 239-40.
[58] Joshua Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 52.
[59] Wendell, qtd. in Wald, *Constituting Americans*, 241.

American identity 'by linking whiteness and masculinity to a hypermodern, quicksilver language of efficiency that was described as embodying the optimistic, expansionist, industrial empire'.[60] As we have seen, this version of patriotic American English was perpetuated and aspired to on a national level, but with the rapid assimilation of immigrant populations as they learned both the language and the culture of their new home, 'pure' Americans like Wendell felt under siege by the rapid way in which the other was quickly becoming 'ourselves'.

Both 'The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena', the opening and closing novellas of *Three Lives,* address the complex pressures placed on the immigrant working classes during this period of anxious national self-definition. The desire for simplicity and cleanliness expressed in *Q.E.D.* (and in the vocabulary of the writing programme) is allegorised in *Three Lives.* Rather than these qualities being natural conditions of a virtuous middle-class character, Stein conceives of her heroines as aspiring to and securing the goals of middle-class propriety but succeeding in achieving it only for others rather than themselves. Anna, a 'thrifty german' (54) housekeeper, finds her sole purpose in maintaining order and cleanliness for middle class ladies.[61] Anna's identity, therefore, is defined entirely by the construction and protection of the propriety of her employer, Miss Mathilda, although, crucially, her tireless labour never translates into any kind of real social mobility of her own. Anna's subservience is accompanied by an inability to clearly express herself. She appeals to Miss Mathilda to scold her scullery maids when she feels her words do not get through and when leaving the household of her former employer, she requires the help of Mrs. Lehntman (a more assimilated German friend) as a translator for both Anna's imperfect English and her mixed emotions:

> "Miss Mary, Mrs. Lehntman has come here with me, so I can tell you about not staying with you there in Curden. Of course I go help you to get settled and then I think I come back and stay right here in Bridgepoint". (27)

[60] Miller, *Accented American*, 12-13.
[61] Stein almost always refrains from capitalising countries or nationalities.

Anna's English is rigid, propelled forward through a confused triangulation of geographical markers ('there', 'here') and blunt present tense assertions of self. When Miss Mary does not understand Anna's resignation, Mrs. Lehntman steps in using a more elegant tone: 'Miss Wadsmith does not understand just what you mean Anna' (27-28). Anna's inability to assimilate despite her devotion to American middle-class values finds a counterpoint in the heroine of 'The Gentle Lena', whose almost Bartlebyan refusal to assimilate leads her firstly to become mute and, ultimately, to her death. Lena, like Anna, comes to America from Germany and finds work as a servant, much to the embarrassment of her wealthier, more assimilated cousins who repeatedly call her 'little better than a nigger' (212). Lena is described, tellingly, as 'brown' (207) in the opening of the story and her rejection by her family suggests a heightened marginalization as though her ability to assimilate is precluded by an association with racial difference. After entering a loveless marriage and giving birth to four children, the once 'clean and decent' (232) Lena begins to 'look careless and a little dirty' (233). As Werner Sollors notes, marriage and childbearing was a crucial way for immigrants to actively dilute and erase their past and solidify their claim to Americanness.[62] Rather than aiding in her assimilation, Lena's marriage isolates her and she withdraws from society entirely. As Lena's body becomes an instrument for the making of Americans, she ultimately resists her role in the process of cultural assimilation. Like Anna, who succumbs to illness when Miss Mathilda moves abroad and she is rid of her purpose, Lena delivers her fourth child stillborn and dies shortly after, simultaneously completing and resisting the act of American assimilation.

These two stories foreground the complicated trappings of cultural and linguistic assimilation, whereby exploitative female domestic labour forms the foundation of middle-class propriety. Despite this fact, the disposability of Stein's heroines and their inability to

[62] Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism*, 59.

make their linguistic mark on American society works against the grain of traditionally celebratory narratives of immigrant assimilation. Kasia Boddy observes that in Stein's abandonment of the masculinized 'Great American Novel' in favour of these parables of female labour she instead allied herself with the feminized realm of the short story.[63] As Eric Schocket notes, the appropriation of working-class narratives and speech rhythms was a common tactic adopted by high modernists as a way of using the 'linguistic otherness of idiomatic speech to divest itself from the strictures of genteel English and to propel itself toward more complex, self-referential linguistic systems'.[64] Juliana Spahr reads Stein's linguistic appropriation as a democratic act of inclusion in her privileging of 'non-standard' language and marginal lives.[65] It is possible to read Stein's interest in these social issues in both ways. Indeed, Stein's incorporation of marginal lives was an act of democratic inclusion, as Spahr suggests, but it was one that was ultimately positioned as a bid for her own acceptance in the literary sphere rather than containing a clear political statement. Having failed to write under the sign of Harvard elegance, might she have better luck pursuing its exact opposite? But Stein's exploration of non-standard English also comes as a literal interpretation of Wendell's principle of clear writing as pitched to the 'average man', understandable to the 'untutored savages, peasants, children — people whose knowledge of life and command of language is as elementary as possible'.[66] Rather than writing to this demographic through the guise of 'proper English', Stein's *Three Lives* attempted to write from this position, an experiment which required her to inhabit the viewpoints of these marginal subjectivities in order to access their

[63] Kasia Boddy 'Making it long: men, women, and the great American novel now,' *Textual Practice* 33, no. 2 (2019): 321.
[64] Eric Schocket, *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 152.
[65] Spahr, *Connective Reading*, 26.
[66] Wendell, *English Composition*, 255.

language. In doing so, the grammar Stein adopts is naturally in tension with the forces of cultural assimilation, race, class, and gender that linguistic standardisation represents.[67]

Stein's appropriation of marginal identity is at its most complex is in her presentation of blackness in the collection's centrepiece, 'Melanctha'. Stein's relationship to race is by no means a straightforward one. In 'Melanctha', critics have noted the troubling presence of a racial hierarchy, which privileges whiteness in its mixed race characters.[68] Michael North has shown that in her private letters Stein would often use the racialized dialect of the minstrel tradition, as well as frequently using the word 'nigger'.[69] But 'Melanctha' does not employ the kind of dialect seen in more traditional examples of dialect writing, which tended to mimic aural speech patterns in order to create a kind of 'verbal verisimilitude'.[70] Instead, Stein's story functions through an incorporation of African American speech rhythms into the syntax of her prose, presenting cultural difference as grammatical artifice.[71] As North argues, 'the real attraction of the black voice to writers like Stein and Eliot was its technical distinction, its insurrectionary opposition to the known and familiar in language [...] Modernism [...] mimicked the strategies of dialect and aspired to become a dialect itself.'[72] Indeed, black dialect offered Stein's writing something that the broken English of her immigrant heroines could not. What was intriguing for Stein about black dialect was its contradictory or illicit Americanness; black English stemmed from the same importation of English onto American soil but, unlike its standard counterpart, which had been triumphantly Americanised, black English was made

[67] Stein's rendering of non-standard English in *Three Lives* was so successful that after sending the manuscript to the publisher, an editor was sent to help Stein improve her English, as they had assumed that either she did not speak English as a first language, or she had not been properly educated. Stein, *Autobiography*, 76.
[68] See Sollors' discussion of Stein's problematic treatment of African Americans in *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008). See also Milton Cohen, 'Black Brutes and Mulatto Saints: The Racial Hierarchy of Stein's "Melanctha",' *Black American Literature Forum* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1984): pp. 119-121.
[69] North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 73.
[70] Ibid, 73.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid, x.

simultaneously exotic, pejorative, and alien. As North suggests, black dialect was considered the perfect inverse of the 'proper' English that Wendell, Hill, and many others attempted to enforce at Harvard and on a national scale. He notes that 'black English had long been considered not just corrupt in itself but also the cause of corruption in others'.[73]

In 'Melanctha' Stein constructs her African American heroine as presenting a complex relationship to American indigeneity, a move that not only overlaps with the troubling primitivism North reads in the story, but also speaks to a similar paradoxical conception of indigeneity expressed in Wendell's comparison of himself to Native Americans. Even though Anna and Lena are immigrants they are characterised as static and immobile, a quality that is achieved through the flat, monosyllabic vocabulary and recycled words and phrases that make up their narrative. Despite Melanctha's Americanness, she is portrayed as decidedly more transitory and unsettled than her immigrant counterparts. Stein's use of the 'continuous present' enhances this sense of mobility and unrootedness, presenting, as Marianne DeKoven argues, a 'succession of steadily shifting present moments'.[74] Melanchta is not tethered to a job (all work she performs is casual and temporary), a family, or a marriage (she 'had not yet been really married' [73]). She is described as a 'wander[er]' (85), spending her time around the railways or the shipping docks at night. Yet while she gravitates towards these transitional spaces, she seems inexplicably rooted in her location. Melanctha is associated with an earthly, primitive quality; in an inversion of the theme of cleanliness found in the other two novellas*,* while Melanctha is described as 'neat' she revels in the 'dark and smelly places' (86) of her native Bridgepoint and ultimately dies of consumption. It is not just Melanctha's Americanness that is called into question but also her blackness; contrasted with Rose Johnson 'who is a real black negress' (72), the reader is told that Melanctha 'had been half made with real white blood' (72).

[73] Ibid, 21.
[74] Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 27.

Here, both whiteness and blackness contain their own authentic valances, but this fact of Melanctha's heritage does little to authenticate her in the world of her narrative; in fact, inhabiting this binary position only makes her more ambivalent to those around her.

These contradictory impulses in the characterisation of Melanctha permeate and define the novella. Unlike Anna, Lena, and Rose Johnson, Melanctha does not aspire to 'make her life simple' (75). Instead she is 'still too complex with desire' (73), a quality which makes her actions ambiguous and contradictory. This conflict is rendered through the characters' use of language as a translation of their confused thought process, what Jayne Walker calls 'antieloquence'.[75] Continuing her exploration of the rhetorical yoking of thought and speech which dominated *Q.E.D.,* Stein conveys the linguistic, emotional, and intellectual disorder of Melanctha and her lover Jeff Campbell (a recapitulation of the relationship between Helen and Adele) through the destabilisation of qualifiers such as 'really', 'certainly', and 'always', which appears 745 times throughout the story.[76] Adverbs that usually promote rhetorical certainty lose their power as fixers of meaning with each repetition:

> I certainly don't think you got it all just right in the letter, I just been reading, that you just wrote me. I certainly don't think you are just fair or very understanding to all I have to suffer to keep straight on to really always to believe in you and trust you [...] I find it very hard, and I never said it any different, it is hard to me to be understanding, and to know really what it is you wanted, and what it is you are meaning by what you are always saying to me [...]. (126)

The digressive, baggy phrases and confused run-on sentences, interrupted by the constant reassertion of 'I' that repeatedly restart the sentence, mirror the characters' confused and inconclusive minds. Another distinctive quality of the passage is the prevalence of progressive aspect. The use of the past tense in conjunction with adverbs such as 'always' and present tense time markers such as 'now' create an unsettled notion of time.

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[75] Jayne Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from* Three Lives *to* Tender Buttons (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 27.
[76] North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 19.

'Melanctha' investigates the possibilities that language reflects the process rather than the conclusions of thought, as William James suggests, the transitive rather than substantive parts of language.[77] North argues that Stein's use of dialect operates as a 'verbal mask' against linguistic correctness precisely because it 'bring[s] into the open the dialectical relationship between the mask as raw nature and the mask as culture convention'.[78] This is precisely the experience a young Richard Wright felt in reading the story, which he repeatedly praised in his journals and subsequent essays as capturing 'English as Negroes spoke it'.[79] He claimed that '"Melanctha" was written in such a manner that I could actually stand outside of the English language and hear it'.[80]

Wright's praise of 'Melanctha' as simultaneously alien and familiar to black experience might shine light on the particular linguistic strategies Stein is employing in the story. In this freeing relationship between nature and convention afforded by the assumption of her 'verbal mask' Stein addresses the boundaries of 'good English' and the cultural assimilation that that kind of grammar requires. As such, Stein is not directly mimicking the patterns of black speech but presents instead a culturally marginalized heroine who struggles to make language express her direct experience. Unlike Anna and Lena who are silenced by their exclusion from the dominant cultural and linguistic system, Melanctha's speech makes visible a tension between assimilation to a 'simple life' — in other words, heteronormative and culturally conformist — and the exploration of her own singular, 'complex [...] desire' (73). Significantly this is enacted in an abortive marriage plot, in which Melanctha must decide whether to accept Jeff Campbell,

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[77] This is derived from James's theorization of 'stream of consciousness' which has particular relevance for Stein's early style: 'We ought to say a feeling of *and,* a feeling of *if,* a feeling of *but,* and a feeling of *by,* quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold.* Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use.' William James, *Psychology* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1906), 160.
[78] North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 71.
[79] Richard Wright, qtd. in Lynn Weiss, *Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright: the Poetics and Politics of Modernism* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 16.
[80] Wright, qtd. in ibid, 16.

a well-educated, self-improving, protestant doctor, who Lisa Ruddick describes as the Steinian 'type' of the 'respectful "son" of bourgeois culture'.[81]

The inexpressible romantic and sexual confusion driving the plot of *Q.E.D.* moves into the syntax of 'Melanctha': 'Oh dear, Jeff, sure, why you look so solemn now to me. Sure Jeff I never am meaning anything real by what I just been saying. What was I just been saying Jeff to you. I only certainly was just thinking how everything always was just happening to me' (143). Here not only is Melanctha's syntax fragmented and disjointed by the difficult string of present participles and temporal verbs, but it undermines the ability of her speech to ever make meaning at all. In stating that 'I never am meaning anything real', her language shatters the Wendellian notion of style as an expression of the self. Instead, in Stein's text, style represents only the author's struggle to construct a linguistic system that can connect 'meaning' with 'saying'. The assertion of 'real' in this passage echoes the 'real black' and 'real white' of Stein's racial categorizations, subtly allying her vision of linguistic authenticity with the problems of ethnic, national, and sexual self-definition. The absence of the 'real' in Melanctha's speech seems also to erase her language in real time as she asks Jeff, 'What was I just been saying Jeff to you' (143). Melanctha's speech becomes, as Priscilla Wald argues, a 'struggling with sentences, with the compulsory regulations of conventional grammatical units and the culture they reflect. Stein shows how disruptions of those conventions precipitate an incomprehensibility symbolically tantamount to nonexistence, a "horrid losing-self sense".'[82] The repetitious cadences of Melanctha's language operate as a kind of trial and error, a crossing out and a redrafting of sentences, trying to find the right syntax that will connect 'meaning' with 'saying'. 'Melanctha' is an inscription of Stein's own grapple with her ambivalent cultural identity by moving it into the syntax of her prose. In doing so, she generates a 'grammar of

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[81] Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 56.
[82] Wald, *Constituting Americans*, 242.

indeterminacy' that neither wholly rejects nor subscribes to any one way of being or mode of expression. It is this elastic grammar that gives Stein the necessary linguistic currency to return to her 'Great American Novel' of the American middle classes.

The Remaking of Americans

The 'grammar of indeterminacy' achieved in 'Melanctha' gave Stein the necessary linguistic tools to attempt her 'Great American Novel' of middle class life without appealing to the formulaic linguistic structures dictated by the Harvard programme. The lessons learned in *Three Lives* allowed Stein to write a narrative of American social mobility without allowing her language to fully assimilate to the dominant cultural position. Stein had begun to write *The Making of Americans* as early as 1903 in much the same conventional style as her Harvard themes and *Q.E.D.* but ultimately abandoned it until after she had written *Three Lives*. She finally completed it in 1911, but it wasn't published until 1925.[83] When Stein returned to *The Making of Americans* following the publication of *Three Lives,* she barely revised these early conventional sections, but instead placed them alongside the indeterminate, protracted syntax she had painstakingly constructed in 'Melanctha'. Hannah Sullivan's *The Work of Revision* charts the changing attitudes to the revision of literary texts in the modernist period. She claims that revising, rewriting, and editing were considered to add depth and value to literary texts and became an integral process for the high modernists — many of whom, like Stein, had come out of the writing programmes like Harvard's that taught these dutiful textual practices. For these modernists, Sullivan argues, revision is 'an action that implies retrospection, not for stylistic tidying-up but to make it new through large-scale transformations of length, structure, perspective, and genre'.[84] In contrast to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922)*,* which was reviewed

[83] Katz, 'Introduction,' xxii-xxiii.

[84] Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013), 2. Sullivan argues that modernist artists often used mechanical metaphors for their writing processes in contrast to the Romantic conception of the work of art as organic and spontaneous. Stein's relationship to this binary is complex; she famously likens the composition of her writing to mechanical work, in particular

and revised to the point of error even as it was being sent to the printer, Stein's great modernist novel operates through an undiscerning incorporation of material, a gluttonous accumulation and an overlaying of different modes of writing that Walker calls a 'palimpsestic recapitulation of Stein's early narrative styles'.[85] Sullivan deems this kind of textual reworking 'additive revision', which tries to include everything within the space of the work of art, even, as Ezra Pound claimed, to 'contain history'.[86] For Stein, finding the language to tell the story of her 'Great American Novel' was as much a part of her narrative as were the lives of her characters. While *The Making of Americans* retains and progresses the non-standard language lessons learned in *Three Lives,* it abandons her working class subjects and instead returns her attention to a study of 'ordinary middle class existence'.[87]

In the opening sections of the novel, Stein describes her fascination with, and reverence for, the middle classes as decidedly against the grain of the dominant artistic movements of the time, a counterpoint to both Dreiserian social realism and the emerging modernist interest in the working classes of which *Three Lives* was a part. Stein is unapologetic about the value she places on the middle classes:

> Middle-class, middle-class, I know no one of my friends who admit it, one can find no one among you all to belong to it, I know that here we are to be democratic and aristocratic and not have it, for middle class is sordid and material unillusioned unaspiring and always monotonous for it is always there and to be always repeated, and yet I am strong, and I am right, and I know it, and I say it to you, and you to listen to it, yes here in the heart of a people who despise it, that a material middle class know they are it, with their straightened bond of family to control it, is the one thing always human, vital, and worthy it [*sic*] — worthy that all monotonously

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drawing analogies with her beloved Ford, as part of her theory of American literature as being structurally interested in seeing the 'whole' as composed of 'parts'. Her account of how she composed *The Making of Americans*, as I discuss in more detail in my next section on 'Composition as Explanation', carries considerably natural or organic connotations, evoking a birthing process: 'I began'. See Gertrude Stein 'What is English Literature' in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), and Stein, *Autobiography*, 252.

[85] Walker, *The Making of a Modernist*, 45.

[86] Sullivan, and Pound, qtd. in Sullivan, *The Work of Revision*, 101

[87] Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006), 34. Hereafter references to this edition will be given in-text.

> shall repeat it, — and from which has always and from which has always sprung, and all who really look can see it, the very best the world can ever know, and everywhere we always need it. (34)

Stein's polemic seems to begin from a place of affected shame escalating quickly towards a rapturous description of the middle class as an exemplary moral force. Her appeal to the 'democratic' is quickly undermined by her invocation of the 'aristocratic'. There is a sense of permanence, resilience, and necessity to the middle-classes, generated by the repetition of 'always' in the rhythmic final lines. Following her enumeration of the criticism against the middle classes, Stein's narrative voice takes on a more authoritative tone as she directly personalizes her rebuke, allying the anonymous middle class with the authorial 'I'. Stein also stalls her fluid, escalatory prose through a series of commas which halt the flow of the sentence: 'I am strong, I am right, and I know it'. Indeed, in her characterisation of the middle-class as 'human, vital, and worthy', vocabulary which might have been taken directly from one of Hill or Wendell's writing manuals, she employs commas both as marks of emphasis and as a means of displaying authority. In her essay 'Poetry and Grammar' (1935), Stein famously claimed that commas are 'servile', that their role is 'helping you along and holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it'.[88] Stein's wielding of the comma in her enforcement of middle-class superiority intersects with her assertion of her own narrative authority, demonstrating her ability to revert to conventional grammatical forms as a means of foregrounding her own literary prowess.

It is passages such as these that underscore Stein's ambivalent relationship to these dominant cultural values. Indeed, the novel also celebrates the implicit foreignness of

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[88] Gertrude Stein, *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1902-1932* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 320. Stein's criticism of the comma as enforcing a servility in the reader but also a kind of infantilization has parallels with her later criticisms of The New Deal, which she saw as a violent intrusion of the state into the 'daily living' of ordinary Americans. See Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (London: Duke UP, 2000), 89-93.

American identity: ‘It has always seemed to me a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real American, one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create’ (3). Yet if *Three Lives* was about its heroine’s inability to fit into the American mould, *The Making of Americans* documents the process (and progress) of cultural assimilation; the Dehning children are described in order of their attachment to the ‘old world’ with their authentic Americanness correlating to images of cleanliness and purity. For example, Julia Dehning’s affiliations with the old world prevent her from emulating ‘that crude virginity’ (15) of the American girl, while her brother, George, is presented as more clearly assimilated through his daily habits: ‘[h]e was not foreign in his washing. Oh no, he was really an american’ (15).

It is not only on issues of class and nationality but also notions of gender where Stein’s contradictory politics begin to emerge. The opening of *The Making of Americans* appears to foreground the centrality of women in the process of nation building and self-making, beginning the story with an account of the four grandmothers of the two families that converge throughout the course of the novel. But what seems like the beginning of a matrilineal schema of American identity is quickly undermined by the assertion of the patriarch, Henry Dehning, as the central force in the early part of the narrative.[89] Indeed, as Boddy suggests, Stein surmounted her relegation to the feminized world of ‘niggers, servant girls and the foreign population’ precisely because of her reassertion of her ‘masculine type’:

> In the notebooks for *The Making of Americans*, [Stein] wrote of Picasso, Matisse, and the ‘maleness that belongs to genius’, adding ‘moi aussi, perhaps’. What better way to demonstrate

[89] Lisa Ruddick claims that *The Making of Americans* is enacted as a direct patricide of Stein’s father. Ruddick suggests that the novel works on both an autobiographical and a stylistic level that also ‘unleashes erotic processes in language that deal a blow to the ideological universe of the nineteenth-century fathers’. Stein’s relationship to the idea of the ‘father’ is complex, particularly in her work in the 1930s. On a political level, Stein rejects what she sees as the infantilization of the American public in F.D.R.’s interventionist government policies, while also eschewing patriarchal literary authority in works like ‘Patriarchal Poetry’. At the same time, *Four in America* reasserts the importance of more traditional authority figures such as George Washington and Ulysses S. Grant, and her essays in response to the New Deal recommend a reassertion of the father’s stern control over each individual household rather than what she perceives as the government control of private wealth. Lisa Ruddick, ‘Stein and Cultural Criticism in the Nineties,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1996), 57.

> that affinity than by writing a 925-page novel? It's true that *The Making of Americans* offers a 'satirical view' of the [Great American Novel], but its 'antidote to patriarchy', its 'patricide', is nonetheless enacted in masculine terms.[90]

The contradictory pull that Boddy describes between Stein's critique and emulation of patriarchal values summarizes a tension between radicalism and tradition, which is ubiquitous in her work. As Wald argues, '*The Making of Americans* grapples with the writer's sense of her complicity in the irresistible pull of the cultural narrative'.[91] As we began to see in 'Melanctha', Stein's cultivation of indeterminacy in her language begins to encode her grammar with this political ambivalence. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* Stein describes the composition of *The Making of Americans* as characterised by 'struggling with her sentences, those long sentences that had to be so exactly carried out. Sentences not only words but sentences and always sentences have been Gertrude Stein's lifelong passion.'[92] It is in her struggle with grammar that Stein was continuously constructing and reconstructing not only her own authority as a writer but her own identity as an American, two crucial values that the Harvard programme had irrevocably bound together.

A year after Stein finished *Q.E.D.* she wrote a novella titled *Fernhurst* based on an acquaintance who, after taking up a teaching position at a women's college, begins an extramarital affair with one of his female colleagues. Stein incorporated *Fernhurst* into *The Making of Americans,* recasting the story as the unfortunate marriage of Martha Hersland who discovers her husband Phillip Redfern's infidelity and is forced to move back to her family home. But Stein does not translate *Fernhurst* into her trademark repetitious, 'continuous present' mode as she does in 'Melanctha'. Instead, Stein includes the full, original text of *Fernhurst* in her narrative, rendered in the conventional narrative voice that dominated *Q.E.D.*:

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[90] Boddy, 'Making it Long,' 321.
[91] Wald, *Constituting Americans*, 242.
[92] Stein, *Autobiography*, 47.

‘It was of such a sober minded, earnest, moral, democratic community that Redfern was now become a part. His moral aspirations found full satisfaction in the serious life of the place and his interest in emotional enthusiasm found a new and delightful exercise in the problem of woman that presented itself so strangely there’ (432). Not only is the passage rendered in what might be called the Harvard style, but its characterisation of the earnest Redfern seems to be a parody of the ‘Harvard man’, whose moral attributes are fused with an ‘elaborate chivalry’ which nonetheless views women as a ‘problem’ (434).

Just as the reader begins to settle into the uncharacteristically plot-driven section of the novel, the narrative breaks off into a metafictional commentary on the writing process: ‘Categories that once to some one had real meaning can later to that same one be all empty. It is queer that words that meant something in our thinking and feeling can later come to have in them in us not at all any meaning [...]’ (440). Here Stein invalidates her earlier style of writing, staging a scene of a mature writer looking back on her juvenilia as ‘all empty’. Stein casts this act of re-reading as a revelation of a deep, psychological change in her ‘thinking and feeling’ and therefore in the ‘meaning’ her language conveys. In a Wendellian way, Stein views this development of her personality to be legible through her style, having undergone such a complete transformation that she can barely understand what her earlier draft means. This vocabulary recalls Melanctha’s claim that ‘I never am meaning anything real by what I just been saying’, suggesting an affinity between Melanctha’s linguistic entrapment and Stein’s early attempts to write. While Sullivan claims that the modernist text gains authenticity from the labour spent on painstaking revision, Stein, in a decidedly postmodern fashion, refuses to erase the ‘queer’ failures of her early work. Stein describes ‘copying an old piece of writing’, hoping that it might pass as usable, an evasion of writing. But she is dismayed to find that the ‘words that sometime had real meaning for them and now have not any real meaning’ (441). Instead of erasing her unsuccessful attempt Stein stages a writing workshop of her own:

> Often this is in me in my feeling, often then I have to lose words I have once been using, now I commence again with words that have meaning, a little perhaps I had forgotten when it came to copying the meaning in some of the words I have just been writing. Now to begin again with what I know of the being in Phillip Redfern, now to begin again a description of Phillip Redfern and always now I will be using words having in my feeling, thinking, imagining very real meaning. (440-41)

While the passage, as a whole, seems to follow the logical process of revision, Stein does not assimilate the necessary changes into the text, which would generate the 'depth' that Sullivan identifies as the labour-intensive enchantment of the modernist work of art. Instead, Stein flattens and geometricizes this process, a kind of literalizing of genetic criticism, that places her two drafts in conversation with each other. Her proclamation of rewriting is structured and focused, its repetitive iteration acts as a kind of list of feedback that she has assimilated: 'I commence again with words that have meaning', 'Now to begin again with what I know', 'now to begin again a description of Phillip Redfern'. After this mediation on her earlier style Stein rewrites the *Fernhurst* episode in the repetitious, run-on syntax that characterises the dense language of *The Making of Americans*:

> As I was saying Phillip Redfern was the kind of men and women and there are always many men of this kind of them and some women of this kind of them, who have in their living a good deal of reputation from the living and the being in them and then they are not successful in living successful in the whole of their living and to many knowing them they are romantic in their living, or beautiful, or dramatic in their living and to some, saints in living, and Redfern was such a one and to most every one he was a man always failing in living [...]. (444)

Notably the revised section abandons the direct action of the story, instead focusing on a linguistic portrait, the 'being in', of Philip Redfern, a prototype to the 'portraits in grammar' that Stein would later compose of her close circle of friends. But it also extrapolates the individualized story of Redfern and applies it to a broader 'type', a 'bottom nature' of personality (442). As Ulla Dydo describes, Stein 'invites the reader into a writer's workshop

as she struggles for exact perception and exact expression'.[93] If Stein is inviting the reader into a writer's workshop it is one, like Wendell's, forcefully and singularly led by Stein in her own vision of language. The reader begins to realise that they are not only witnessing Stein's writing process but being required to learn and re-learn Stein's language in line with her shifting notions of 'meaning'. The prose that follows demands a new way of understanding which eschews the surface smoothness of correct prose and, by extension, of uncomplicated thought.

Stein's experimentation in *Three Lives* allowed her to free her writing from the grammatical constraints of the Harvard style. In this section of *The Making of Americans* she uses the strategies of writing pedagogy (writing, re-reading, revision, resubmission) to write about the middle classes using a language that actively decentres the white, male subject, a linguistic feat playfully enacted in the parody of the misguided, academic Phillip Redfern. The openly revisionary mode — which is, in turn, a refusal to revise — signals Stein's move towards a pedagogical mode of her own kind. It is this instructional and self-theorizing mode that Stein pursues in her writing in the late 1920s and 1930s, a project which takes her back, once again, to the linguistic philosophy of the Harvard writing programme. Viewing Stein as composing through this rubric of old and new, therefore, shines new light on her distinct linguistic vision in *Three Lives, The Making of Americans*, and Stein's later fiction, a 'finally forward and back' which generates this unique and perplexing language.[94]

Problems of Explanation

Amidst the many declarations of the coming of modernism — from Virginia Woolf's assertion that 'in or about December, 1910, human character changed' to William Carlos Williams' pronouncement that 'THE WORLD IS NEW' — Stein entered the fray a little

[93] Ulla Dydo, ed., *A Stein Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), 21.
[94] Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 133.

belatedly with her own theory of the modernist avant-garde.[95] In June 1926 Stein delivered a lecture to the literary societies of Oxford and Cambridge entitled 'Composition as Explanation'. In Dydo's view, 'Composition as Explanation' marks the 'first piece [Stein] wrote as a mature writer' and signals a retrospective turn in her career in which she reflects on the nature of her writing and her place in the emerging aesthetic movements of the period.[96] While it can hardly be called an expository work, the lecture ushered in a stage in Stein's career characterised by both the explanation of her writing style and some of her most challenging and non-communicative pieces. As the title of her lecture suggests, Stein began to reconsider the nature of composition, and her own distinct brand of modernism, not only by looking back at her early work, but by revisiting the ideas and vocabulary of the Harvard writing programme as a way of teaching her own readers how to read and how to write. As such, 'Composition as Explanation' seems to draw directly on the authority of both the modernist manifesto and the writing manual (or the Wendellian composition lecture), placing her contemporary situation in direct conversation with the origins of her writing. This straddling of public and private, clear and opaque, language as communication and language as artifice, reaches its culmination with her studies of remedial grammar in the late 1920s and 1930s, collected in *How to Write* (1931). What does it mean, then, for Stein, over thirty years after her time at Harvard, to return to the term 'composition' as a key to her aesthetic?

Wendell's definition of composition is as follows:

> In any modern piece of writing, these groups of black marks to which we give the name 'words' are themselves grouped, by means of spaces and of other black marks, which we call punctuation, in masses which even to the most untrained eye are more or less independent […] We need a name for the visible groups in which the words that make up style are arranged. The best and simplest word I know is compositions.[97]

[95] Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays,* Vol. I (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 320; William Carlos Williams, qtd. in Jed Rasula, 'Make it New,' *Modernism/Modernity* 17, no. 4 (2010), 724.
[96] Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises, 1923-1934* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003), 5.
[97] Wendell, *English Composition*, 27.

The process Wendell describes is one of almost mystical incarnation, as meaningless 'black marks' are incorporated into incrementally larger systems of meaning which finally accrue some kind of transcendent significance visible even to 'the most untrained eye'. Indeed, Wendell's philosophy is predicated on the culmination of parts into a harmonious whole, governed by his trinity of 'unity', 'mass', and 'coherence'. Wendell's formalism is of note; his definition reduces words to 'black marks' which only gain meaning when shaped into a cohesive text. This emphasis on the visual aspects of the composition alludes also to its definition as an 'artistic manner of style', an 'arrangement' which bears the mark of the writer.[98] As such, the arrangement of the composition bears a direct relation not only to guiding the mind of the reader, but also to the clarity of the thoughts of the writer. Composition is an expression of the self as much as it is a tool to communicate. Learning the principles of good composition, for Wendell, is an act of democratic self-improvement.

Stein's version of composition is, inevitably, more fraught. While Wendell's definition is literal to the point of being a visual description of words on a page, Stein takes a more conceptual route, placing her notion of 'composition' in line with ideas of epochal and generational change:

> There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it.[99]

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[98] The correspondence between the visual and aural aspects of the composition and Wendell's emphasis on 'black marks' share similarities with Jerome McGann's characterisation of 'composition' in his study of modernism and punctuation: '"Composition" is an activity of musicians, and the printed page may equally be produced as a kind of musical score, or set of direction for the audition of verse and voice'. Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993), 83.
[99] Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation,' in *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1993), 495. Hereafter references to this edition will be in-text.

While the reader is invited to read 'composition' as the practice of writing, its meaning from the outset of the lecture seems to evade this connotation. The vocabulary she uses to describe 'composition' centres on 'looking' and therefore seems more engaged with the principles and aesthetics of painting than writing. Despite this very clear visual dynamic, the abounding aurality of Stein's work more generally, coupled with her lifelong interest in opera — in 1928 she wrote *Four Saints in Three Acts*, an operatic collaboration with Thornton Wilder — suggests musical composition, while the form of the lecture evokes the process of composition for oral delivery. Yet none of these parts quite seem to fit Stein's use of the word, which appears to allude to a broader cultural phenomenon rather than any one work of art. Her formulation, like Wendell's, combines a reverence for the process of composition with a deflationary treatment of its stark, literal simplicity. Much of this ambiguity in generated by the opaque nature of Stein's 'explanations', which always elude straightforward clarification. In 'Composition as Explanation' Stein's definitions of 'composition' are generated through negation ('composition is the difference' [495]) and circularity ('The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing' [497]), suggesting a tendency toward destabilisation rather than fixed meaning. This fallacious approach serves only to turn the reader back to their starting position, forcing them to 'begi[n] again' each time with Stein in an attempt to discover exactly what she means. In this way, Stein's explanations do not offer genuine moments of illumination from a difficult writer about her work, but, rather, operate as exercises in authority, wielding her power as both writer and rhetorician.

To venture a reading, then, of what Stein might mean by 'composition' it is helpful to examine the lecture's 'beginnings' in one of Stein's themes from 1894:

> Was there ever an age which those living in and writing about it did not characterize it as an age of transition. They always announce the fact as if it were something new, and peculiar to their own time.

> The position is eminently illogical. From the very nature of progress, all ages must be transitional. If they were not, the world would be at a stand still and death would speedily ensue. It is one of the tamest of platitudes but it is always introduced with a flourish of trumpets.[100]

It is significant that Stein here is resistant to the notion of 'newness' even if she does not wholly reject nineteenth-century ideas of progress. Instead she views progress as inevitable and mundane rather than revolutionary.

In 'Composition as Explanation', Stein transforms the sentiment of her Radcliffe theme to encompass not only the notion of epochal change but also a critique of Aristotelian form ('in beginning and in the middle and in ending'). In her updated view, Stein's replacement of 'something new' in the Radcliffe theme with 'something different' is significant in that it suggests a transformation of perception rather than genuine novelty. Slightly later in the essay Stein qualifies this definition of composition: 'The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing […] Each period of living differs from any other period of living not in the way life is but in the way life is conducted and that authentically speaking is composition' (497-98). The inextricability of composition from the notion of 'living' foregrounds the connection between art and self that is inherent in Wendell's pedagogy, but reorientates it towards a more social outlook.[101]

In the opening of the lecture Stein cites the First World War as instrumental to the solidification of this contemporary way of living and, subsequently, the contemporary composition. Significantly, Stein conceives of the War as an imbalance of two epochs; she refers to British Foreign Secretary Lord Grey's assertion that the War was 'a nineteenth century

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[100] Stein, 'Untitled Theme (December 21, 1894),' in Miller, *Form and Intelligibility*, 122.

[101] The use of the word 'everyone' in Stein's work, however, can be quite slippery. While it does connote and advance ideas of collectivity, it is a model of community that is intensely driven by Stein's own individuality. This is more clearly expressed in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) in which, in keeping with the displacement of the autobiographical 'I' in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein substitutes her own authorial individuality for the pronoun 'everyone'. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1993).

war although to be fought with twentieth century weapons. That is because war is a thing that decides how it is to be when it is to be done' (495). Unlike previous epochs where 'those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead' (496), the twentieth-century composition works concurrently, in Stein's view, with its contemporary moment:

> This then the contemporary recognition, because of the academic thing known as war having been forced to become contemporary made every one not only contemporary in act not only contemporary in thought but contemporary in self-consciousness made every one contemporary with the modern composition. (501)

The onset of war is seen, here, as a kind of homogenizing force, bringing everyone into alignment. This sense is underscored in Stein's peculiar designation of war as 'academic', an association which again recalls the educational context of the word 'composition', which, as a mass-educational tool of the Harvard programme, was an instrument for standardisation. Both wars and 'academies' take an active role in 'decid[ing] how it is to be when it is to be done', a role which is associated with Stein's notion of the 'prepared' (495). Stein's use of 'prepared' also shares connotations with Harvard's notion of 'composition', which involved training students in the art of planning, constructing, and arranging a piece of writing.

In her introductory notes to the lecture Dydo suggests that Stein's wartime analogy is a self-conscious reference to the military connotations of the term *avant-garde* (the group of soldiers that attacked in advance of the rest of the army).[102] Notably, however, Stein omits this particular term and rejects the notion of an artist or composition being 'ahead of [their] time' (495). Instead she notes that this kind of art is 'refused' until it is 'accepted' and 'becomes a classic' (496). In a literal inversion of the notion of the *avant-garde*, Stein instead describes

[102] Dydo, ed., *Stein Reader*, 494.

this process as a '*volte-face*' (496) ('the act of turning so as to face the opposite direction').[103] Stein's conception of 'newness', therefore, is inextricably bound up in this appeal to, and recapitulation of, older models. In this way 'Composition as Explanation' may be read as a kind of a counter-history to Pound's 'Make it New', a narrative not of regeneration and originality but of recycling and circuity, of 'something different'. Moreover, Stein's lecture demonstrates the indivisibility of the historical, social, and political from issues of language. Most notably, she characterises the age of 'peace' as one of 'equilibration' and 'distribution' (502). These oddly economic terms do not refer to external, societal matters but instead to the nature of linguistic reference, to the unstable relationship between the 'inside' and 'outside' of language: 'an equilibration, that of course means words as well as things and distribution as well as between themselves between the words and themselves and the things and themselves' (501-502). The concept of balance in the relationship between words and things implied by these two terms signals Stein's move towards a consideration of the minutiae of grammar and language as at the root of societal, generational, and historical change, a belief which would form a central part of Stein's writing over the next decade.

'Grammar is in Our Power'

In the period following 'Composition as Explanation' Stein devoted herself to the study of grammar, writing in a letter to Sherwood Anderson in 1929,

> I am writing fairly steadily on the sentence. I am making a desperate effort to find out what is and what isn't a sentence, having been brought up in a good old public school grammar and sentences are fascinating to me. I struggled all last year with grammar, vocabulary is easier, and now I think before more grammar I must find out what is the essence of a sentence. Sometimes I almost know but not quite yet.[104]

[103] *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019), s.v. 'volte-face, n.' https://www-oed-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/224511?redirectedFrom=volte-face s.

[104] Gertrude Stein's letter to Sherwood Anderson, qtd. in Jacques Roubaud, 'Gertrude Stein Grammaticus,' trans. Jean-Jacques Poucel, in *Gertrude Stein in Europe: Reconfigurations across Media, Disciplines, and Traditions*, eds. Sarah Posman and Laura Louise Schultz (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 276.

Whereas 'Composition as Explanation' had acted as an assertion of Stein's position as one of modernism's great geniuses, it is telling that she would choose to represent herself here not as a writer but, instead, casts herself in the functional role of the grammarian. As Dydo claims, Stein's studies in language during this period, which were collected and self-published as *How to Write* in 1931, were 'undertaken as exercises in daily writing, which began with an idea or a problem but not with a structure of a plan of organization. Never systematic treatises, they were exercises in ideas, in methods, in the possibilities of language'.[105] These exercises in 'daily writing', often transcribed in *cahiers* or school copybooks, represent a return to the compositional format of Harvard's daily theme and, indeed, to the earnest role of the student learning 'how to write'. In reproducing the pedagogical mode of the daily theme, Stein looks back to the beginnings of her own writing, a process which invariably involves the breaking down of language from 'compositions' to parts of grammar.

It is significant that, despite Stein's radical eschewal of linguistic norms, her reference point for these 'language studies' is the institutional notion of a 'good old public school grammar'. The ideological paradox between the democratic 'public school' and her nostalgic traditionalism ('good old') encapsulates the tension at the heart of the Harvard programme and the emerging contradictions in Stein's politics. Stein's use of the word 'good' is highly charged in this context, unmistakably evoking the fraught debates over what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' English and, more crucially how these linguistic values map onto models of 'good' citizenship. In Barbara Will's view, *How to Write* answers the question at the heart of Harvard's ideology: 'Why and how should an educated, perhaps well-to-do, American citizen learn to write?', through a 'parod[y] of the Harvard fundamentals (grammar, syntax, rhetoric, argumentation)

[105] Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises, 1923-1934* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2005), 106.

by deploying them in the service of a radically anti-authoritarian screed, an exemplary account of textual engagement "without the help of a master."'[106] As I have shown, the original principles of the Harvard programme had sought to democratize the act of writing, cultivating in its students an autonomous mastery of language that would, in turn, fortify the health of the nation. But, in practice, the programme became an instrument of homogeneity, its desirable, institutional grammar deeply encoded with conservative cultural values. In turning her focus to the seemingly hermetic realm of grammar and, with it, the charged terminology of the Harvard programme, Stein performs not an elimination but a complex interrogation of the notion of mastery on both a linguistic and political level.

We can see this interrogation of mastery at play in Stein's transition from an enthusiastic student of grammar in her letter to Anderson, to authoritative pedagogue in *How to Write.* The collection's instructional title alludes to the politics of writing instruction, promising to define, explain, elucidate and demonstrate even if, in the end, it (deliberately) fails to teach its reader how to write. Throughout the collection Stein wavers between a radical rejection of the polite grammar of the Harvard style ('Arthur unlearned grammar') and a reverence for its authority and stability ('Grammar in continuity'), becoming, as Dydo describes, a 'show-and-tell book of "grammatical phrases"' rather than a clear linguistic or aesthetic programme.[107]

It is fitting that Stein's most challenging and unreadable text also claims to be her most demonstrable. Her chapter titles — 'Arthur a Grammar', 'A Grammarian', 'Saving the Sentence', 'Sentences and Paragraphs' — promise the kind of playful statements about language that Stein later conveys in her essay 'Poetry and Grammar', which Dydo notes

[106] Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein and the Problem of Genius* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), 100.
[107] Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 57, 61. Hereafter references to this edition will be given in-text; Ulla Dydo, *The Language that Rises*, 240.

'pick[s] up some of [the] conclusions' of *How to Write,* 'but leave[s] out the steps'.[108] The heady string of aphoristic phrases that make up her language studies invite the reader into the act of interpretation, indeed, often soliciting it with her schoolmarm tone, only to dissolve her own definitions, making this kind of reading impossible: 'What is the difference between resemblance and grammar. Think. What is the difference between resemblance and grammar. Resemblance is not a thing to feel. Nor is grammar' (59). The rhetorical messiness of the language lessons Stein imparts means that any attempt to read into her playful phrases is doomed for failure, but their fundamental illegibility also means that they open themselves up to a plethora of diverse thematic readings. Grammar might be read as a celebration of domestic labour, a kind of counterpoint to the exploitation in *Three Lives,* or as a playfully coded exploration of queer eroticism:

> Grammar a noun grammar a resemblance grammar agreeableness grammar going to be sweetly circumscribed in a division of cake made of button. There should be no butter with flower no milk with cups no mining with have a day. There is a sound fertile. Fertility. (59)

Grammar might be a stifling formula, '[b]ecause it is a diagram' (75), or an instrument of middle class conformity ('Grammar repeats how do you do' [98]). In the same way, a sentence might become means of protecting national borders: 'The use of the sentence in immigration' (117). Through a process of over-definition, therefore, Stein's *How to Write* generates a picture of grammar that is radically obscure and yet profoundly intimate, her playful subversions undercut the dominant interpretations her own associative writing invites into the text, peddling an idiosyncratic language that is impossible to master: 'Grammar grammatical grammatical fickle fickle in an instance with doubt a day. This is to be on account of grammatical every day' (48). While this grammatical ambivalence has been widely interpreted by Stein scholars

[108] Dydo, *The Language that Rises*, 393.

as a freeing, non-hierarchical manifesto for experimental language, it also alludes to an ideological 'fickleness' at the heart of grammar and its cultural uses.

The critical response to Stein's experimental works, and *How to Write* in particular, have broadly fallen in line with Will's assessment that it is 'radically anti-authoritarian'. Indeed, Lisa Ruddick claims that Stein's writing became a touchstone for the emerging fields of post-structuralism, feminism and queer theory such that, in the 1980s, her work became synonymous with the term 'antipatriarchal'.[109] Central to these assessments is the assumption that Stein's illegibility promotes a non-hierarchical response, which effaces 'authorial presence' and consequently provides, in Juliana Spahr's terms, an 'egalitarian theory of reading'.[110] For Dydo, *How to Write* and the texts that succeeded it represent a culmination of Stein's radical art, the point at which she has rejected 'all inflexible forms', including 'prescriptive grammar' and the patriarchal structures that come with it. In this way, Dydo claims that Stein's late work is 'a demonstration of the possibilities of grammar for democracy'.[111]

But, significantly, the radical political outlook that these critics infer from Stein's experimental texts is derived from the very absence of any explicit political viewpoint or clear subject in her work — as Ellen Berry observes, 'Stein's revolution was purely textual'.[112] In the 1990s many of Stein's more conservative political statements came to light, in particular the revelation that she had not only supported Phillip Pétain's Vichy government but also had embarked upon a project to translate some fifty of his speeches for an American readership.[113] While she was opposed to Hitler and Stalin's authoritarian regimes, she also exhibited a

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[109] Ruddick, 'Stein and Cultural Criticism in the Nineties,' 647.
[110] Will, *Gertrude Stein, Bernard Fay, and the Vichy Dilemma* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011), 12; Spahr, *Connective Reading*, 47.
[111] Dydo, *The Language that Rises*, 17.
[112] Ellen Berry, *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein's Postmodernism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 192, n.12.
[113] See Wanda Van Dusen, 'Portrait of a National Fetish: Gertrude Stein's "Introduction to the Speeches of Marchal Pétain" (1942),' *Modernism/modernity* 3, no. 3 (1996): pp. 69-92.

counterintuitive agrarian individualism that manifested itself most clearly in her explicit appeal to the American public to 'sa[y] no' to F.D.R.'s New Deal.[114] While the troubling conservative tendencies Stein exhibited were not uncommon among the key figures of high modernism, critics have been baffled by some of Stein's more incendiary statements.[115] In general, scholarship on Stein has largely sought to elide these contradictions by enforcing a division between her aesthetics and her politics.[116] Will makes some attempt to reconcile these two Steins — the radical aesthete and the proto-fascist — in the introduction to her monograph on Stein's Vichy connections by questioning the tendency among critics to view Stein's interest in disruptive language practice as inherently 'freeing' and 'progressive'. 'It is even harder to see', Will admits, 'how such a text might be seen to be anticipating, *precisely* in its literary experimentation, the reactionary political views that Stein overtly expresses in her later writings of the 1930s and 1940s'.[117] But as I have shown throughout this chapter, Stein's radical linguistic project is inseparable from these more conservative positions. While it is Stein's

[114] Stein's 'Money' series was published in American newspapers in 1936. In this particular version Stein evokes the metaphor of the father's traditional control over household finances not as a patriarchal critique of F.D.R.'s state intervention but as a safeguarding force against his governmental meddling: 'So, now please, everybody, everybody, everybody everybody, please, is money money, and if it is, it ought to be the same whether it is what a father of a family earns and spends or a government, if it isn't sooner or later there is disaster'. Despite Stein's celebration of the traditional family structure in 'Money' her criticism on the rise of authoritarian regimes in Europe centred around a negative perception of 'fathering': 'There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing.' Gertrude Stein, 'Money' in *How Writing is Written*, ed., Robert Bartlett Haas (LA: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), 107; Stein, qtd., in Will, *Vichy Dilemma*, 95.
[115] Among the many examples of Stein's troubling political interventions Will includes one interview from 1934 where Stein is quoted as saying 'Hitler should have received the Nobel Peace Prize [...] because he is removing all elements of contest and of struggle from Germany. By driving out the Jews and the democratic and Left elements, he is driving out everything that conduces to activity. That means peace.' Stein's insistence on 'peace' at whatever cost also drove her support for Pétain's collaboration. Will also considers the many other factors that might have explained Stein's interaction with the Vichy government, in particular her friendship with fascist sympathiser Bernard Fay and the possibility that she was collaborating as a means of ensuring her survival. Will, *Vichy Dilemma*, 73.
[116] Spahr, for example, includes an acknowledgement of the more problematic strains of Stein's work as an afterthought in her characterisation of Stein as democratic everywoman: 'I am well aware that I am in some sense candy-coating Stein's desire of bourgeois assimilation [...] and her complicated politics [...]. Yet if Stein's work is guilty of a bourgeois assimilation, it is a very peculiar manifestation of it.' Spahr, *Connective Reading*, 49.
[117] Will, *Vichy Dilemma*, 13.

imperative, as I outlined in the early sections of this chapter, to decentre the dominant or 'standard' linguistic order, her experimental work in the 1920s and 1930s does not begin from a position of rejecting these political and linguistic 'masters' but instead is intrigued by the kinds of political power that are at play in how we use grammar.

One of the primary ways in which Stein maintains this ambivalence in *How to Write* is by locating the problems and contradictions of social authority not in her own persona as writer but in grammar itself. The recurring structure, 'Grammar is …', serves only to underscore the impossibility of defining it any one way:

> Grammar is the art of reckoning. (48)
> Grammar is drained with by and to. (49)
> Grammar a title. (64)
> Grammar is not restitution it comes easily. (73)
> Grammar is unawaiting. (74)

In providing all of these different exemplars, Stein's speaker adopts a number of authoritative identities through which she attempts to explore these positions on language. These authoritative manoeuvres are most visible in 'Arthur a Grammar' where she bids her reader, 'Understand that grammar. Authority in the afternoon and after grammar. Grammar is in our power' (73). Stein's assertion that 'Grammar is in our power' has been widely cited as an example of her democratic vision for language, but even in this brief example the notion of grammar is unfixed and indeterminate. Over the course of these three brief lines, Stein's persona shifts from the schoolteacher, outlining her authoritarian lesson plan, to revolutionary leader claiming grammar for everyone. In this mock lesson plan 'authority' follows grammar, but it can only be achieved if the student comprehends it. As such, Stein abides by the holistic compositional model that builds from smaller units to larger concepts, placing grammar at the centre of her pedagogical programme. Stein's liberating final statement, then, seems to be intricately tied up in a more complex relationship to authority and mastery. Indeed, Stein's

constant switching of personas throughout *How to Write* more generally throws into question the identity of the collective 'we' to whom this grammar supposedly belongs. In 'Poetry and Grammar' Stein praises the indeterminacy of the pronoun, the fact that 'they are not really the name of anything'.[118] Stein's resistance to names and naming across her *oeuvre* and her interest in manipulating the ambiguity of the pronoun only highlights the radical instability of the 'our', who it refers to and what it possesses.

Stein's assertion, therefore, that 'Grammar may be reconstituted' (57) is not a call for a progressive and anti-hierarchical linguistic overhaul as it has been frequently interpreted but, rather, a statement on how grammar can be made to 'do' whatever we want it to. Indeed, the frequent imagery of reordering and rearrangement that pervades *How to Write* serves only to underscore how 'Grammar in use' (54) can be put to the service of very different, often opposing, ends. As such, *How to Write* is more an exploration of the ways in which grammar is 'fickle', that is, its ability to be both radical and conservative at the same time, than it being a blueprint for Stein's radical toppling of linguistic propriety. In order to view her language as 'antipatriarchal', therefore, we must also consider how her language moves through and interacts with the patriarchal models it resists and, inevitably, how it might adopt and appropriate some for its own use. If *How to Write* is, as Will suggests, a 'parody of the Harvard fundamentals', it is a parody that confronts and extrapolates the same clash between authority and democracy that underscored the fraught pedagogies of Wendell and Hill.[119]

'An argument to be fought': Writing against the programme

Stein's uniquely grammatical response to the types of authority (both political and linguistic) laid out by the Harvard writing programme is most evident in 'Forensics', the final piece in *How to Write*, which Stein claimed to be 'the end of my long series of meditations on

[118] Stein, *Writings 1932-1946*, 316.
[119] Will, *The Problem of Genius*, 100.

writing'.[120] This relatively short piece has been read by a number of critics as one of Stein's most clearly anti-hierarchical, anti-patriarchal texts. Rachel DuPlessis compares it to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, calling it an 'oblique study of the role of gender asymmetry and power in the formation of discourse'.[121] As in the other pieces in *How to Write,* Stein uses the framework and terminology of the Harvard programme to articulate these problems of authority. While DuPlessis's assessment is a convincing one, I want to suggest that 'Forensics' stages a complex opposition between experimental and communicative writing. Examining this friction between a model of explicit expression and one of suggestive implication also provides a lens through which to view the complicated intersections between Stein's conservative politics and her radical aesthetics.

We can identify this nascent tension in one of Stein's Radcliffe themes, in which she attempts to reconcile the division between these different institutionalized forms of expression. Forensics, in its traditional sense, characterises a style of legal proceedings and argumentation. At Harvard, as well as making up one of the four 'modes of discourse' (Narration, Description, Explanation, Argumentation), Forensics was a course in and of itself, which, as David Russell notes, 'was a written adaptation of the oral debate'.[122] Particularly in her later works, where Stein explicitly re-engaged with the 'modes of discourse' in lectures and experimental texts such as 'Composition as Explanation', 'An Elucidation', 'Narration', 'An Acquaintance with Description', it is clear that 'Forensics' forms part of this same return to the formal parameters of the Harvard programme. Stein took Forensics in her junior year, and was awarded an A — a marked departure from her middling C in English 22.[123] But in a theme from 1895, Stein expresses how she felt torn between her propensity for 'argument' and the aesthetic forms she

[120] Stein, qtd., in Dydo, *Language that Rises*, 406.
[121] Rachel DuPlessis, 'Woolfenstein, the Sequel,' in *Primary Stein: Returning to the Writing of Gertrude Stein*, eds., Sharon Kirsch and Janet Boyd (New York: Lexington Books, 2014), 40.
[122] David Russell, *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991), 51-52.
[123] Brazier, 'The Making of Gertrude Stein,' 635.

aspires to in her writing class: ‘Argument is to me as the air I breathe. Given any proposition I cannot help believing the other side and defending it. But I would be virtuous and would rather make a dismal failure of a description than revel in an argument. The one I get all the time; the other in English 22.’[124] Here, Stein presents an opposition between writing as a means of argumentation and writing as ‘virtuous’ art — although notably her syntactic inversion instils a level of ambiguity as to which activity is, for her, more worthwhile. Nevertheless, Stein’s perception of argument as flippant, an intellectual exercise in one’s own powers of persuasion and command of language, is set against notions of Wendellian aestheticism. The theme also highlights Stein’s contrariness, her propensity to argue for argument’s sake — perhaps another window into her reactionary political views in her later life.[125] Her aesthetic imperative to pursue a ‘failure of a description’ not only puns on the poor grades she received in English 22 but also echoes her endeavour in *The Making of Americans* and her early ‘portraits’ to achieve ‘complete description’.[126] Such connections further demonstrate how the central tenets of the Harvard programme remained central to Stein’s aesthetic throughout her career, particularly in these crucial moments where she is working through her own relationship to literary authority.

I will return to this distinction between argument and description in a moment, but first it is important to outline the ways in which ‘Forensics’ stages an argument for and against what Stein calls ‘established’ (394) forms. These forms, which can be directly linked to the linguistic terminology of the Harvard programme also signify broader social and national models. If, as I have argued, Stein’s exploration of grammar throughout *How to Write* showed that grammar is politically malleable, ‘Forensics’ turns its attention to how communication can be

[124] Stein, ‘Untitled Theme (February 16, 1895),’ in Miller, *Form and Intelligibility*, 130.
[125] A number of critics have explored Stein’s turn away from progressivism at the beginning of the twentieth century, in particular her abandonment of the women’s suffrage movement – although she ultimately returns to this subject in her opera *The Mother of Us All* (1947). See Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).
[126] Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 347.

manipulated to orchestrate social authority. Throughout 'Forensics' Stein harnesses the authoritative, instructional language of the writing programme, parroting Wendellian phrases that seem to give both compositional and moral imperatives: 'Just plan their use. Then carry it out in principle' (395). In one section, Stein equates linguistic skill with social authority:

> They say it is better to follow than to presume. Shown as shutters.
> Now what is forensics. Forensics is eloquence and reduction.
> It is they who were in a hurry.
> She made Caesar leave it to Caesars.
> What is forensics.
> Forensics is a taught paragraph.
> Paragraphs.
> Will they cause more as the middle classes. (386)

Exercising the pedagogical tone employed elsewhere in *How to Write,* Stein provides a commentary on the social conformity enforced through institutional education where students are expected to 'follow'. In the next line, 'Shown' masquerades as providing an argumentative demonstration, which is quickly transformed into a pun on visibility and clarity in the introduction of 'shutters'. Stein's representation of forensics seems to directly reference the characteristics of the Harvard programme, using vocabulary like 'eloquence' and 'reduction' that is decidedly out of place in Stein's largely monosyllabic lexicon. These descriptors conjure up the demands of the Harvard style: an emphasis on stylistic beauty worked through by painstaking revision. This association is enhanced by the notion of forensics as a 'taught paragraph', the aural play creating a *double entendre* combining its institutional meaning with a desirable 'tautness' of style. Stein, however, makes these two principles work against each other, as 'eloquence' is truncated by 'reduction', suggesting a kind of empty belletrism. These stylistic values, which correspond to the nineteenth-century principles of brevity and 'perspicuity' prominent in Hill's writing manual, are conceived, here as tools of homogenization used to help readers 'hurry' through a text and connote the kind of transparent

‘servility’ that Stein attributes to punctuation marks in ‘Poetry and Grammar’. The causal relationship between the ‘taught paragraph’ and the ‘middle classes’ intimately links these notions of linguistic conformity with the creation of social hierarchies that are, like paragraphs in a composition, infinitely self-perpetuating.

But, as we have seen, Stein is inherently interested in the expansion of the middle classes. Indeed, Stein’s project in *The Making of Americans* was precisely an attempt to convey middle class concerns without the burden of institutional style. Rather than providing an oppositional set of radical alternatives to this dominant linguistic order, as she does through the rhetorical to-and-fro in the other pieces in *How to Write*, Stein seems more interested in her own complicity and participation in the social order ‘Forensics’ represents:

> I agreed to everything.
> This was not my business.
> And yet I am not puzzled.
> Because I was obedient
> Now think of forensics.
> What are forensics establishing. (386)

By asking what forensics is establishing Stein questions the normative values that it perpetuates, but she also highlights the veracity of this kind of public rhetoric whose sole objective is to ‘persua[de]’ (393), ‘oblige’ (389), and ‘manage’ (386). The use of the present participle ‘establishing’, however, connotes an ongoing process rather than a fixed, dominant system, while the repeated iteration of the authorial ‘I’, in contrast to the ominous, oppositional ‘they’ that dominates ‘Forensics’, charts a transition from conformity to autonomy. Stein puts an end to this pronominal jostling with her proclamation ‘Now this is forensics for me’ (386), an assertion that both acknowledges her participation in the social and institutional implications of forensics and bypasses it in the construction of her own authoritative mode. In designating forensics as an ‘argument to be fought’ (386), rather than a prescribed and fixed form, Stein

asserts her right to have her say in the construction of collective linguistic and political models: 'Forensically this leads to establishment of a difference I beg to differ. Rather more than I beg to differ' (390). Here, Stein puns both on the argumentative rhetoric common to political discourse but does so in order to introduce ideas of marginality, or 'difference', into the dominant order. Stein applies this model of differentiation to the question of national identity:

> Forensics is in the state. They do feel that they are included in a state. In a state. A state is a piece of a part. Which they make added. Forensics is so true.
>
> A state apart. (390)

The interplay between the singular concept of the 'state' and its existence as 'a piece of a part' generates a metaphor of composition on the level of national consciousness. These images of harmonious division also serve as a corrective to Wendellian concepts of 'unity', which states that the composition should be grouped around 'one central idea'.[127] Stein literalizes this restrictive principle of composition transforming its sentiment into an image of aggressive militaristic force: 'Forensics begins with union and organisation. After that. Advance in volume' (393). While 'union and organisation' echoes Wendell's tenets of 'unity' and 'coherence', the imperative to 'advance in volume' corresponds to his principle of 'mass', but it is also simultaneously an order for mass production, a formula that can be replicated again and again. In contrast, Stein's refraction of the idea of the state into 'pieces' and 'parts' which are 'added' together not to make up a cohesive entity but 'a state apart'. Stein's endorsement of forensics as 'so true' speaks to a model of national balance built upon resistance and difference rather than conformity, a model of social authority generated from begging to differ.

These oscillations between compositional terms and images of national unity underscore Stein's conflicted sense of responsibility to a mode of national writing. 'Forensics' is inherently interested in this tension between writing as a form of social power and writing

[127] Wendell, *English Composition*, 122.

for art's sake, a question which lay at the heart of the Harvard pedagogy, exemplified in the paradoxical form of the daily theme. While the ultimate objective of the theme was to give students the correct moral and linguistic practice needed to actively participate in a democratic society, the theme came to be criticized as merely an ineffective, hermetic exercise. Stein is asking a very similar question in her exploration of literary authority in 'Forensics'; namely, in the split between 'argument' and 'description', should the writer use grammar for communication or for radical art? Written on the cusp of Stein's literary celebrity in the 1930s, 'Forensics' represents an attempt to answer the problems of social and political authority that arose from her studies in grammar. Towards the end of 'Forensics' Stein asks 'What is an argument. What are forensics. What are masterpieces' (398). The opposition between 'masterpieces' (which the reader of Stein cannot help but read as the 'master' in 'pieces') and 'forensics' foreshadows Stein's much-anthologized lecture 'What are Master-Pieces and Why are There so Few of Them' (1936), in which she defines the modernist masterpiece as 'not to be necessary, it had to be that is it had to exist but it does not have to be necessary'.[128] In this stark contrast to forensics, which, in the rhetorical tradition, was characterised by its social utility, Stein is faced with a choice as to what kind of authority she wants to claim for herself and her writing. Therefore, despite Stein's attempts to get back to the basics of grammar she is unable to untangle it from the architecture of social power.

In this way 'Forensics' charts, as Priscilla Wald writes of *The Making of Americans,* 'the irresistible pull of the cultural narrative' as Stein acknowledges the allure of literary authority and public acceptance that this kind of writing represents: 'It is very easy to make Forensics. Anxious./ At last I am writing a popular novel. Popular with whom' (391).[129] Stein's anxiety speaks to an uneasiness in moving into the realm of explicit communication, a move

[128] Stein, *Writings 1932-1946*, 357.
[129] Wald, *Constituting Americans*, 242.

which undoubtedly signalled a degree of artistic compromise. This is weighed up against the temptation of being listened to, of being acknowledged as the 'genius' she believed herself to be, even if wielding her 'identity' means entering a kind of governing relationship with her reader. As Stein observes, 'Forensics leads to reputation' (388).

When Stein asks her reader, 'Well what do you believe. Do you believe in ease in understanding' (389), she seems to be both demanding they pick a side, but also raising, once again, the question of clarity and intelligibility. In the essay 'Henry James' from *Four in America* (written in 1932-33), Stein presents the act of writing as a balance between communication and power:

> It is not clarity that is desirable but force.
>
> Clarity is of no importance because nobody listens and nobody knows what you mean no matter what you mean, nor how clearly you mean what you mean. But if you have vitality enough of knowing enough of what you mean, somebody and sometime and sometimes a great many will have to realise that you know what you mean and so they will agree that you mean what you know, what you know you mean, which is as near as anyone can come to understanding anyone.[130]

Rewriting Wendell's trinity of 'clarity, force, and elegance', Stein presents her use of language as a struggle to be heard. For Wendell, these three principles were necessary for successful communication with the reader, with clarity involving an appeal to the intellect and force to the emotion. In Stein's recapitulation of these terms, her turn to force over clarity suggests a belief that communication is not about being told something clearly but an emotional struggle between reader and writer. Although Stein's approach seems purely affective, her evocation of 'force' carries with it sinister political implications. In Stein's scenario the reader need not understand what they are agreeing to but simply to 'agree that you mean what you know', a blind faith in the 'vitality' of the speaker who has set out to convince them. This passage also

[130] Stein, *Writings 1932-1946*, 157-58.

opens up the fine aesthetic line Stein walks between a radical, suggestive form of writing and her more dubious political leanings. While it is important to note that both Stein's aesthetic judgements and her political positions during the 1930s and 1940s remain baffling and unclear, it is when Stein turns to more explicit forms of communication that her writing verges into unsettling ideological territory. In the period directly following the publication of *How to Write,* Stein would move definitively into her role as literary celebrity characterized by a turn towards public forms such as the lecture, autobiography, opera, and children's books.[131] These works leave behind the suggestive 'grammar of indeterminacy' that makes up *How to Write,* and instead privilege a more public, explicit discourse that leads to the expression of some of Stein's more contradictory and troubling political positions.

Coda: 'Wouldn't it Make a Good Daily'

The conflict Stein stages in 'Forensics' does not illuminate her perplexing political positions in the 1930s and 1940s, but it does help us think through Will's concern that Stein's radical anti-authoritarian aesthetics might contain her more conservative ideological outlook. In positioning herself as 'grammarian,' Stein could investigate the ways in which these political and social tensions surfaced and interacted in the ways we use — and are told to use — language. As I have shown, Stein's return to the tenets of the Harvard programme not only represented a re-engagement with its grammatical principles, but also its vision of Americanness. In her later work — which is profoundly shaped by the distressing political climate of the 1930s and the reality of the Second World War — Stein adopts a mantra of 'daily living', which is marked by a reversion to a more 'traditional' way of living. Although in these

[131] Although this late period in Stein's career is characterised by her more accessible and public-facing works, Phoebe Davis Stein points out that Stein also published her highly experimental war novel *Mrs. Reynolds,* written in 1941-42. Davis Stein claims that the novel represented a 'reversion' to a period when 'Stein's writing was too experimental to sell'. Phoebe Davis Stein, '"Even Cake Gets to Have Another Meaning": History, Narrative, and "Daily Living" in Gertrude Stein's World War II Writings,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 3 (1998): 571.

later years Stein moves towards more explicit modes of writing, a shift that brings with it a clearer and sometimes troubling expression of her conservative viewpoints, this is necessitated by a desire to return to 'daily writing' and to the experimental freedoms of her earlier work. In *Paris France* (1940) she states that 'I cannot write too much upon how necessary it is to be completely conservative that is particularly traditional in order to be free'.[132] Stein's conception of 'daily living' offers insight into how she conceived of the relationship between politics and aesthetics in her post-war years, a way of being both radical and conservative, habitual and experimental.

Stein's reversion to 'daily living' represents a complicated capitulation to traditional forms of political authority. The concept first arises in Stein's 1934 lecture 'What is English Literature' where it refers to the intersection between linguistic innovation and national art movements from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. In this context, 'daily living' represents an isolated 'island life' that produces a linguistically stable relationship between words and things, 'inside' and 'outside'. Stein initially characterises American literature as having no 'daily life at all', celebrating its confusion of 'inside' and 'outside' and, as a result, its linguistic ingenuity.[133] The kind of linguistic unfixedness that Stein describes here is both radically free and subtly aggressive, recalling Stein's characterisation of the American language constructed through 'choosing' words that they like best, 'shoving the language until at last now the job is done'.[134]

Phoebe Davis Stein reads Stein's return to the mantra of 'daily living' during the war years as a way of detracting her everyday domestic life and her artistic freedom from dominant master narratives of history and politics.[135] But Stein's reconnection of 'daily living' with

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[132] Stein, *Paris France* (New York: Liveright, 1970), 38.
[133] Stein, *Writings 1932-1946*, 217.
[134] Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, (New York: Random House, 1945), 250.
[135] Davis Stein, 'History, Narrative, and "Daily Living",' 570.

American geopolitical dominance and, crucially, with the insurrection of the American language as culturally triumphant, suggests a more complicated interaction with questions of political engagement, artistic freedom, and national identity. More so, 'daily living' demonstrates a clear analogy with the form of the 'daily theme', a conservative form at Harvard against which Stein developed her unique experimental style. Indeed, we might interpret Stein's turn to 'daily living' as part of the political and aesthetic '*volte-face*' she described in 'Composition as Explanation', a way of synthesizing old and new, and, more importantly, a way of exploring through writing what the connection between 'inside' and 'outside', 'parts' and 'wholes', would look like in this new world order.

For Stein, these political tensions always dissolve into the linguistic. It is telling that the only part of the Pétain project to be published was Stein's translation of his speech 'La langue française'.[136] For Stein, Pétain's surrender ensured 'peace' and by extension preserved the vitality of the French language. This sentiment represents a peculiar endorsement of the homogenizing force of political totalitarianism, which is compounded by Stein's view of the American liberation of France. In *Wars I Have Seen* (1945) Stein does not rejoice in the reinstatement of French independence but, instead, commends America's new geopolitical hegemony, a political position she explicitly conceives in terms of linguistic mastery. The American GIs, she claims, 'dominate their language'.[137] Stein's explicit linking of American military power with linguistic authority (a harking back to the connection between 'war' and 'academies' in 'Composition as Explanation') produces an amplified American character, a

[136] This was printed in the Vichy journal *Patrie* in 1941. Will, *Vichy Dilemmas*, 117. During this period Stein was also commissioned to write a children's book, *The World is Round* (1939), which was followed by two others, *The Gertrude Stein First Reader* (1946) and *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (1957). Neither of these latter texts found publishers during her lifetime, largely because they were deemed not suitable for children. As Julie Taylor notes, these pedagogical children's books are oddly 'anti-developmental' in character and project a rather dark attitude towards literacy and modes of cultural conformity. Julie Taylor, 'Cultivating Childishness: The Gertrude Stein First Reader and the Reparative Turn in Criticism,' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 37, no. 2 (2018): 349, 350.

[137] Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, 259.

completion of the American project of linguistic and political self-determination championed by institutions like the Harvard programme, manifesting on the global stage: 'they have become more American all American.'[138]

Stein's complicated construction of the American GI, as both an emblem of democracy in fascist-torn Europe and the harbinger of a different brand of linguistic and cultural standardisation, encapsulates the contradictory tendencies at the heart of her work. Stein's writing is, as Dydo suggests, a 'demonstration of the possibilities of grammar for democracy,' but only insofar as it is interested in how democracy is entangled in various forms of contradictory social and political power.[139] In her lifelong dialogue with the values and principles of the Harvard programme, Stein's work uses grammar as a means of defining and redefining her own notion of Americanness, a 'finally forward and back' between radical difference and social mastery.

[138] Ibid, 259.
[139] Dydo, *Language that Rises*, 17.

Lydia Davis: Breaking it Down

Grammar Questions

Lydia Davis's fiction is dominated by problem solving, whether it be the use of algebra to schematize the confusing relationships between a group of people ('Problem') or failures of narrativization ('Centre of the Story', *The End of the Story*). Like the title of her most famous story, 'Break it Down', Davis's stories, more often than not, logically take apart a problem only to expose that there is no satisfactory answer. Davis came of age as a writer at a time when American society was being questioned on all fronts. From the women's, gay, and black liberation movements that challenged the dominant patriarchal order, to protests against American military authority during the Vietnam War, to interrogations of the self brought about by the widespread accessibility of psychoanalysis, post-1960s America, and the postmodern aesthetics that accompanied it, was characterised by a pervasive and radical scepticism.

In the U.S. academy models of epistemological questioning were taking hold with the influx of continental philosophy — a clustering of diverse critical approaches now loosely termed 'French theory'. As Sylvere Lotringer and Sande Cohen attest, 'what French theory brought to America was a politics in language'.[1] In keeping with the countercultural tendencies of the 1960s, this 'politics' sought to 'scuttl[e] any discursive mode that refuses to account for its "implicit presuppositions"'.[2] These political and theoretical interrogations of language reflected broader debates over the validity of traditional linguistic systems. In the late 1960s, what Richard Rorty and others dubbed 'the linguistic turn' that originated in early twentieth-century philosophy had reached a stalemate in the row between Analytic and Ordinary

[1] Sylvere Lotringer and Sande Cohen, 'Introduction: A Few Theses on French Theory,' *French Theory in America* (London: Routledge, 2001), 5.
[2] Ibid.

Language Philosophy.[3] Around the same time Noam Chomsky began to challenge the scope of formal linguistics. His 1965 *Aspects in the Theory of Syntax* redirected the study of linguistics away from its predominantly descriptivist and behaviourist focus on phonology and instead advocated for the study of syntax, of larger grammatical structures that had until then been excluded from linguistic enquiry.[4] Although Chomsky's work is now widely contested, his efforts to study the deep, universal connections between language and the brain offered an enticing and transformative vocabulary for those outside the field.

While never fully adopting any of these formal lines of inquiry, Davis's work is both a product of and direct response to the many manifestations of scepticism in American culture from the 1960s to the 1990s. While her writing engages with theoretical questions at a remove, her fiction intensively and obsessively interrogates its subject. And nowhere is this analytic impulse more prominent than in Davis's treatment of language. But, unlike her postmodern contemporaries, Davis's brand of linguistic scepticism evades grander philosophical questions of language in favour of the more apparently mundane issue of grammar. We might interpret this focus as a commitment to the 'everyday', in the Wittgensteinian and Cavellian sense, a turn towards 'grammatical investigation', which Cavell defines as 'the transcendental deduction of human concepts'.[5]

A good example to begin with is 'Grammar Questions', from Davis's 2007 collection *Varieties of Disturbance.*[6] The story moves from a literal interrogation of grammar to a deeper ontological questioning, focusing on the protagonist's attempts to come to (grammatical) terms with her father's death, beginning with the seemingly simple question: 'Now, during the time

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[3] See, Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy,' *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992).
[4] John Lyons, *Chomsky* (London: Collins, 1972), 33.
[5] Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 170.
[6] *Varieties of Disturbance* and Davis's other story collections are reproduced in Lydia Davis, *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2011). Hereafter references to this edition will be given text, abbreviating *The Collected Stories* to *CS.* Lydia Davis, *Can't and Won't* (London: Penguin, 2014) will be given as *CW.*

he is dying, can I say, "This is where he lives"?' (*CS,* 527). This directness disarms the reader, the simplicity of the question short-circuiting the reader's ability to locate meaning. The syntax of this first line reveals a temporal awkwardness, the juxtaposition of 'Now' and 'during' betraying conflicting senses of stasis and duration. The clumsy construction of 'during the time he is dying' reads somewhat like an approximate translation, as though Davis is attempting to convey a tense that does not quite exist in English. Indeed, the philosophical problems that unfold from these grammatical investigations seem to demarcate the failures of language when addressing these ontological questions. Does Davis answer '"Well, right now he is not living, he is dying"', or '"He lives in Vernon Hall"' or '"He is dying in Vernon Hall"' (527)? The extreme, focusing literalism of Davis's approach is both poignant and comic, and her exploration of her response to these difficult questions articulates the tension between grammatical and ontological precision, through the realization that the terms we use to convey this precision are themselves imprecise. Davis's persistent questioning speaks to a kind of obsessive desire for correctness that is prevalent in so much of her fiction, a correctness not so much in the form of grammatical pedantry (although this does play a part, usually a comedic one) but of a search for an approximate honesty of representation. The convergence of grammatical and personal loss in Davis's story seems to dramatize the entrenched relationship between 'word' and 'world' that I outlined in my introduction and that Cavell's theorizes in his seminal essay 'Must We Mean What We Say?':

> We forget that we learn a language and we learn the world together, that they become elaborated and distorted together, and in the same places […] What seemed like finding the world in the dictionary was really a case of bringing the world to the dictionary. We had the world with us all the time, in that armchair; but we felt the weight of it only when we felt a lack in it. Sometimes we need to bring the dictionary to the world.[7]

[7] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 17.

The persistent logic of 'Grammar Questions' is directed towards this attempt to re-connect word and world through grammatical investigation, a way of breaching personal and linguistic loss (or 'lack') through an interrogation of the very instruments through which we connect and build language. But Davis does not simply use grief and mourning as some kind of literalization or analogy for this philosophy of language. Rather, she encounters her father's death (and the language she uses to describe it) not as an abstract problem of grammar but, as a reengagement with what Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'.[8]

Elsewhere in the story grammar enables a kind of denial, operating as a way to both grammatically and temporally defer grief. Davis's narrator notes that when her father is dead 'everything to do with him will be in the past tense' (527). This sentence has a minimalistic pathos, implying an aphoristic finality which is quickly undermined by the narrator's compulsive self-correction: 'Or rather, the sentence "He is dead" will be in the present tense, and also questions such as "Where are they taking him?" or "Where is he now?"' (527). Here, the narrator's grief is mediated and controlled through grammatical examples that illustrate her linguistic confusion. While grammar provides a framework into which she can put her grief — a reassuring, authoritative structure — deeper interrogations of grammatical form reveal the arbitrary and tenuous link between language and reality. In this way the narrator's emotion is hemmed into this system of representation, and the only way to work through her grief is to

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[8] The term 'forms of life' (*Lebensform*) is a contested one among students of Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, 'forms of life' are related to the idea of social 'agreement' such that language becomes, as Daniele Moyal-Sharrock notes, 'a shared way of acting'. In his interpretation of 'forms of life' Cavell describes the process of 'learning a language' as not merely 'learn[ing] the pronunciation of sounds and their grammatical orders, but the "forms of life" which make those sounds the words they are'. For the purposes of this chapter, I interpret 'forms of life' as a grammatical agreement between the individual and those around them. Davis and the other authors I discuss in this thesis use their investigations of grammar to search for certain 'forms of life' that have been lost or misunderstood (as in Davis and Wallace) or seek to re-evaluate and overturn existing ones (Stein). Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11, 15, 94. See also Daniele Moyal-Sharrock, 'Wittgenstein on Forms of Life, Patterns of Life, and Ways of Living,' *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* (October 2015): 21-41; Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 177-78.

gradually puzzle through these linguistic paradoxes. The narrator, therefore, deliberately enforces verbal instability, most evident in her use of nouns and pronouns, as she questions at what point her father stops being a 'he' and becomes instead 'the body' or 'it'. Yet the narrator notes, 'I will not be able to say "the body" in relation to him because to me he is still not something you would call "the body"' (527). At this juncture between referential accuracy, social convention, and her own personal connection to her father, Davis's narrator must negotiate the expectations of what '[p]eople may say' (527), her own emotion, and her fidelity to logical and linguistic accuracy. Indeed, as the narrator notes, it seems cold to call it 'the body' but it also cannot be 'his body' because 'he is no longer active or capable of owning anything' (527). This phrase commingles grammatical, physical and spiritual possession to interrogate the limits of identity: at what point does he stop being 'my father' and become merely 'the body'? Here, the narrator is preoccupied with what 'seem[s] correct' (528) but it is unclear whether it is a social, moral or logico-linguistic correctness that she seeks. What occurs in 'Grammar Questions' is the fundamental failure of the language of grief, its peculiar discordance with its prescribed, authorized forms.

Davis's work is often viewed as wholly distinct from her postmodern contemporaries, with no aesthetic movement seeming to quite fit her unique fiction. Part of the tendency to view Davis as operating in a kind of vacuum is derived from her own self-mythologizing. As she notes in a 1997 interview with Francine Prose,

> I don't have much trouble focusing on detail, word to word, sentence to sentence, but I have to make a major effort to step back from a piece of writing and summarize what its themes are. As I child I resisted knowing much about the outside world — politics, international situations [...] I hated history because the events could have come out too many different ways. Whereas I loved math because there was only one way a problem could come out.[9]

[9] Lydia Davis, 'Lydia Davis,' interview with Francine Prose, *BOMB Magazine* 60 (Summer 1997), n.p. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/lydia-davis/.

Despite these readings and self-readings of Davis as somehow disconnected from her contemporary moment, this chapter will argue that Davis is neither an apolitical nor non-programmatic writer. In fact, Davis responds to major literary currents in U.S. culture both programmatically and in a transformative and unique way. What I attempt to demonstrate, here, is that Davis engages with the linguistic aspects of twentieth-century U.S. culture as 'grammar questions', as a way of getting back to the basics of how language interacts with the everyday. I propose that the problems of grammar Davis engages with are not isolated, formalistic ones, but open out onto the complex cultural context within which she was writing. As such, this chapter will examine Davis's work through her ambivalent connections to a number of these contexts. My argument will begin by analysing the role of pedagogy in Davis's work, both in the McGurlian sense of the programmatic turn in post-war American fiction, and through Davis's exploration of didacticism as a way of writing fiction. I will then examine how Davis engages with 'French theory' — which was both fashionable and influential for so many of her contemporaries in the 1970s and 1980s — and how these intellectual currents intersect with innovations in formal linguistics both in the U.S. academy and in Davis's work. I will demonstrate how these various contexts jostle for position in an extended reading of Davis's story 'French Lesson' from her early collection *Break it Down* (1986). I will also make an argument for reading 'French Lesson' as a direct response to postmodernism on the one hand, and French feminism on the other. Finally, I end my chapter with a consideration of how correctness and normativity manifest in Davis's work.

Davis's engagement with these contexts is characteristically slippery and none of these contexts are self-contained throughout the chapter, instead they recur and inform each other. This investigation is not a search for an overarching ideology or theoretical frame through which to read Davis's work but rather an exploration of a writer who finds the contexts around her selectively and intensely 'interesting' without wholly subscribing to any one. This

ideological and aesthetic slipperiness, in turn, casts Davis as a representative figure for this tumultuous period in post-60s American intellectual and literary culture. Her work showcases the centrality of language and grammar to these intellectual movements, as her fiction explores language as a site on which various theoretical and political posturing play themselves out, only to repeatedly return her work to the often literal, Cavellian realm of the 'everyday'. As such, I argue throughout the chapter, that in the very act of questioning grammar, Davis brings forward deeper and more multifarious questions about the world around us. While Davis's fiction deals in minute, often mundane, situations, her intense focus is conducted amidst the broader context in the background, working with the idea that bigger things are made up of smaller units 'word to word, sentence to sentence'.

Genre Questions

Davis is an elusive figure for literary critics and historians. Larry McCaffrey's claim is representative: 'Davis's minimalist style was not developed as a reaction against the excesses of her postmodern contemporaries. Indeed, quite the contrary, both as a writer and a person Davis has evolved pretty much outside the context of contemporary American literary or cultural movements.'[10] Indeed, not only does Davis's work initially seem distant from major artistic movements of her time and place of writing, it has also appeared to many critics untouched by the political fracture of 1960s and 1970s radicalism and the ensuing Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Not even the widespread turn towards 'theory' that had swept the U.S. academy in the 1970s has obvious relevance to her writing. As such, critics have read her mostly in terms of her formal allegiances to European modernist avant-gardism, particularly in her textual dialogues with Kafka and Beckett, and via her translations of Marcel Proust,

[10] Larry McCaffrey, *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 61.

Gustave Flaubert, Maurice Blanchot and Michel Leiris. In light of these connections, many have questioned where exactly Davis fits in the schema of contemporary American literature.

Despite Lydia Davis's widespread renown (she received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2003, is a Chevalier of the *Ordre des Artes and Letters,* and was awarded the Man Booker International Prize in 2013) there have been relatively few scholarly appraisals of her work. In the 1980s, Marjorie Perloff was the first to attempt to fit Davis's work into a broader overview of an American avant-garde, linking her to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of the 1970s and 1980s and categorizing Davis's stories as 'language games' along Wittgensteinian lines.[11] Since then, despite Davis's critical acclaim, her inclusion in Larry McCaffrey's *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors* (1996), and myriad interviews in publications such as *BOMB Magazine* and *The Paris Review,* there has been only a smattering of journal articles published on her work. Christopher Knight's analysis of Davis's 1995 novel, *The End of the Story* addresses issues of narratology, autobiography and truth-telling in Davis's unusual novelistic debut.[12] Both Joshua Cohen's and Karen Alexander's readings turn their attention to the intense analytical process inherent in and constitutive of Davis's writing. Cohen designates this as a tendency towards a self-conscious dramatization of incomprehension, what he calls 'the depressive mode' by way of the psychoanalysis of Jean Laplanche.[13] Alexander's critique leans more towards Davis's sense of play, her narratological and generic slipperiness. Davis, according to Alexander, leads her readers down a path of futile analytical reasoning; her fiction resides in 'confusion' generated by 'a too literal belief in or too trusting reliance on the

[11] See Marjorie Perloff, 'The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties', *American Poetry Review* 13, no. 3 (May-June 1984): 15-22; and Marjorie Perloff, 'Fiction as Language Game: The Hermeneutic Parables of Lydia Davis and Maxine Chernoff,' in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds., Miriam Fuchs and Ellen Friedman (New Jersey: Princeton, Princeton UP, 1989): 199-214.
[12] Christopher Knight, 'Lydia Davis's Own Philosophical Investigation: *The End of the Story*,' *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 2 (2008): 198-228.
[13] Joshua Cohen, 'Reflexive Incomprehension: on Lydia Davis,' *Textual Practice* 24, no. 3 (2009): 501-516.

system of language'.[14] In *The American Short Story Since 1950* (2010) Kasia Boddy treats Davis's work as a culmination of the various formal tensions at play in the history of the short story form, analysing her fiction in terms of LANGUAGE poetry, literary minimalism, the tradition of prose poetry descending from Baudelaire, the more contemporary phenomena of 'sudden fiction', and ultimately rejecting each as a totalizing explanation for Davis's *oeuvre*.[15] More recently, Jonathan Evans has published the first monograph on Davis's work, *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis* (2016), which makes a case for her translation practice as a key to understanding her fiction writing. Evans analyses Davis's fiction alongside her literary translations of Proust, Blanchot and others, and examines the ways in which Davis parodically engages with 'work-for-hire' translations, sometimes using them as 'found' material for her own fiction.[16] While translation provides an important context through which to understand Davis's engagement with grammar, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to develop an argument that moves beyond Evans' comprehensive analysis of the intersections between Davis's style and her translation practice. As such, this chapter will examine instead how Davis's translations expose her to various intellectual and philosophical contexts and how these encounters might impact her writing.

Generic distinction has been a primary concern for readers of Davis. Almost all of the aforementioned critical works (with the exception of Cohen's) begin by interrogating Davis's use of form, and while almost all agree that Davis is an intense formalist of sorts, they cannot quite pinpoint exactly what that form might be. Although Davis herself prefers the term 'story', critics have sought to find new approximations for her formal innovations. On awarding Davis the Man Booker International Prize in 2013 Christopher Ricks struggled with exactly how to

[14] Karen Alexander, 'Breaking it Down: Analysis in the Stories of Lydia Davis' in *Scribbling Women and the Short Story Form: Approaches by American and British Women Writers*, ed. Ellen Burton Harrington (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 172.
[15] Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story since 1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010), 150-151.
[16] Jonathan Evans, *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis: Translation, Rewriting, Intertextuality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2018), 21.

'categorize' her unique fiction, going on to try on a few possible labels on for size: 'miniatures, anecdotes, essays, jokes, parables, fables, texts, aphorisms or even apophthegms, prayers or simply observations'.[17] Even Davis's own designation of her writing as 'story' seems (perhaps fittingly) anticlimactic. Expressing the defeat that many critics feel when they enter this generic labyrinth, Craig Teicher praises Davis as 'the master of a literary form largely of her own invention'.[18] These formal uncertainties first surfaced in Perloff's early comparisons of Davis's work to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Indeed, Davis's tendency to play with the visual layout in some of her pieces have led to a number of her stories being included in the *Best American Poetry* series (1999 and 2001) and still more in the *Best American Prose Poems* (2003). Davis's turn to the novel in *The End of the Story* — a contravention of her characteristic brevity — provoked similar confusion among critics. Just like her stories, its generic identity was defined through its resistance to the very formal categories to which it subscribes; as one reviewer wrote*,* it is 'a novel that doesn't much want to be a novel, that barely is a novel, but can be nothing else'.[19]

These problems of categorization are everywhere in Davis's work. Not only is the genre of Davis's writing largely ambiguous but such generic slippages often become the subject matter of the stories themselves. In 'The Letter', which details the protagonist's attempts to decipher a French poem she has received from her ex-lover, Davis dramatises generic and communicative confusion through the placement of a comma. During the protagonist's analysis of the letter she notes the inclusion of a return address, which prompts her to question whether the sender of the poem wants an answer – suddenly the poem becomes a vast subjunctive

[17] Christopher Ricks, qtd. in Anon. 'Press Release: Lydia Davis wins the Man Booker International Prize 2013,' May 5, 2013. https://themanbookerprize.com/news/2013/05/22/lydia-davis-wins-man-booker-international-prize-2013.
[18] Craig Morgan Teicher, 'Lydia Davis defies the labels, except intriguing and funny,' *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 12, 2009. https://www.cleveland.com/books/2019/01/are_books_clutter.html.
[19] Michael Hofmann, 'Rear-View Mirror,' *London Review of Books* 18, no. 21, October 13, 1996. https://www.lrb.co.uk/v18/n21/michael-hofmann/the-rear-view-mirror.

dialogue, communication driven by miscommunication. Looking at the page she notices, 'The date, May 10, is in the upper-right-hand corner […] he has put her name at the top, with a comma after it, in line with his name below the poem. The date, her name, comma, then the poem, then his name, period. So the poem is the letter' (*CS,* 44). The interpretation of the poem as a letter hinges upon the inclusion of the comma as a formal convention. Not only does the presence of the grammatical mark determine the meta-genre of the story but it also facilitates a dialogue between the protagonist and her unnamed lover whose simultaneous absence and presence dominate the text. In her fragmentary essay 'Form as a Response to Doubt' (1987), Davis states that 'Doubt, uneasiness, dissatisfaction with writing or with existing forms may result in the formal integration of these doubts by the creation of new forms, forms that in one way or another exceed or surpass our expectations.'[20] In 'The Letter' the narrator's doubt as to the purpose of the letter and in her own interpretation of the relationship facilitates the creation of a new form, or rather, to transform one form into another, more desirable one. Davis conflates the search for human connection (and the realization of its loss) with another 'grammatical investigation'.[21] As Davis writes in 'Form as a Response to Doubt', doubt produces the 'philosophical problem of seeing the written thing replace the subject of the writing'.[22] The comma, a punctuation mark suspended between the function of connection and division, for the narrator, transforms a 'poem composed by someone else' (43) into a personal and emotional address, but in doing so mediates and replaces the relationship itself: the act of communication reduced to the formalities of punctuation. Still, the comma allows the text to be read a certain way, its inclusion overturns the narrator's previous interpretation and imposes itself as a structure and form which it does not, at first, appear to be. Davis, therefore,

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[20] Lydia Davis, 'Form as a Response to Doubt,' *HOW(ever)* 4, no. 2 (October 1987), https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/print_archive/alerts1087.html.
[21] Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 170.
[22] Ibid.

manipulates and inhabits the hegemonic function of the comma that Stein so detests, playing with its implications and transforming it into a commentary on how grammar dictates and mediates relationships.

'Plain Jane': Davis and Pedagogy

The symbiotic relationship between the literary marketplace and academic institutions has been well-mapped in recent years. Judith Ryan's *The Novel After Theory* (2014) describes how literary theory has 'infiltrated' contemporary notions of authorship, while Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (2009) explores the institutionalization of creative writing in post-war American culture and its influence on literary form.[23] Indeed, as McGurl argues, the increasing popularity of the post-war MFA programme in American universities led to 'a dramatic escalation of the relationship between the profession of authorship and the school, a systematic coupling, without (as of yet) a final merging, of art and institution'.[24] Davis is not a by-product of the creative writing workshop, but nor does her work exist in a cultural vacuum sharing little with her direct contemporaries. Davis's father was a literature professor and short story writer first at Smith College and then at Columbia University, while her mother, also a short story writer, published widely in magazines, including *The New Yorker.*[25] The couple were staunch liberals and moved in high-flying, academic-literary circles.[26] A year after receiving her undergraduate degree from Barnard College in 1969, Davis moved to France to become a translator, living in bohemian and, as Dana Goodyear notes, 'romantic, self-imposed' hardship.[27] There she set up a small magazine, *Living Hand,* with her then-partner Paul Auster,

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[23] Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 1; Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009).
[24] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 4.
[25] Dana Goodyear, 'Long Story Short,' *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/17/long-story-short.
[26] Goodyear notes that Lionel Trilling, Erica Jong, Grace Paley and Edward Said were among the guests at parties regularly thrown by Davis's parents. Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

which published her first collection, *The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories,* in 1976. At various points throughout her life, however, Davis's translation work could not fully support her, and it was necessary to join the creative writing faculty at various universities, most recently at SUNY in Albany. As such, Davis neither adheres to nor fully sidesteps the dominant trends described by McGurl. A number of her stories feature academics as characters, with titles such as 'The Professor' and 'Ph.D', which reads, 'All these years I thought I had a Ph.D./ But I do not have a Ph.D.' (*CW*, 283). Similarly, *The End of the Story* could be described as a campus novel, a genre touted by Ryan as indicative of this institutional partnership between writer and academic in American fiction.[28]

Davis actively resists this 'systematic coupling' between author and academic even as she seems to invite it into her work. *The End of the Story,* rather than satirize the affected academic, dramatizes the necessary tension between the writer and the academy. The narrative recounts an affair between the narrator, a writer and a translator who takes a position as a writing instructor at a West Coast university, and her student. At the same time, the main action is repeatedly interrupted by the narrator's struggle to write the novel. As such, *The End of the Story* actively resists, or deconstructs, the conventional campus narrative, both in its inability to actually tell the story and, it can be argued, in its inversion of the traditional gender dynamic between teacher and student. The novel documents its protagonist's myriad distractions and stalemates, her inability to write because of her more lucrative commitments to teaching and her translation work. Indeed, the novel is infinitely attentive to the economics of the writer's affiliation with the university, the trade-off between creative labour and teaching or translating work: 'Part of it may be that translators are paid by the word, so the more carefully they work on a translation, the less they are paid for their time, which means that if they are very careful

[28] Ryan, *The Novel after Theory*, 2.

they may not earn much'.[29] Significantly, very little of Davis's campus novel actually takes place on the campus itself, with most of the action occurring in single-roomed apartments, bars, cafes, and the roads and walkways between them. As such, Davis situates her novel exactly on the periphery of the institution. Kerry Sherin notes that Davis's fiction often explores the 'shapeless' path of the female writer through the literary-academic sphere, describing Davis's female protagonists as the spectral inverse of the familiar literary figure of the 'brilliant young male writer'.[30] In this way, Davis's relationship to the academy is decidedly un-institutional, defined through her resistance to it, her unbelonging.

Davis's story 'A Position at the University' further illustrates this entangled relationship:

> I think I know what sort of person I am. But then I think, But this stranger will imagine me quite otherwise when he or she hears this or that to my credit, for instance that I have a position at the university: the fact that I have a position at the university will appear to mean that I must be the sort of person who has a position at the university. But then I have to admit, with surprise, that, after all, it is true that I have a position at the university. And if it is true, then perhaps I really am the sort of person you imagine when you hear that a person has a position at the university. But, on the other hand, I know I am not the sort of person I imagine when I hear that a person has a position at the university. Then I see what the problem is: when others describe me this way, they appear to describe me completely, whereas in fact they do not describe me completely, and a complete description of me would include truths that seem quite incompatible with the fact I have a position in the university. (*CS*, 299)

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[29] It is interesting to note that later in this passage Davis's narrator describes meeting other translators, most of whom are women. Davis's subtle emphasis on the displacement of the underpaid female literati in academic spheres emerges only as an unexplored, minor theme and it is often undermined by Davis's dismissal of these allegiances: 'At first I talk to the woman [translator] with enthusiasm, because there is so much I have wanted to say about translating to a person who understands it […] Then my enthusiasm slowly dies, because everything she says to me is a complaint, and I see that she has no joy in translating — no interest in her own work and no interest in me or my work either'. The image of the woman of letters made insipid and apathetic by her economic status is an underlying anxiety in Davis's writing, much of which offers similar gripes about her 'work-for-hire' projects. Lydia Davis, *The End of the Story* (London: Penguin, 2015), 87. Hereafter references to this edition will be given in-text referred to as *ES*.

[30] Kerry Sherin and Lydia Davis, 'Reading at Kelly Writers House', University of Pennsylvania, March 30, 1999. http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Davis.php.

Here, Davis actively resists an institutional identity whose associations are entirely alien to her own vision of herself. Her language is equivocal, punctuated with expressions of conditionality ('but', 'if it's true') and measured concessions ('I have to admit, with surprise'), which neither categorically rejects this identity nor gives in to it. The story winds and unwinds through almost identical sentence structure and word choice; its meaning shifts only through the manipulation of certain linking words as though illustrating the close proximity of these two identities. Davis's evocation of the notion of 'complete description', one which is achieved by the kind of minute approximations and stultifying repetition found in the prose of *The Making of Americans,* casts 'A Position at the University' in a decidedly Steinian light. The failure of 'complete description' is both literary and taxonomic. Davis's repetition of 'a position at the university' becomes a tautological mocking of the institutional identity itself, allowing its implied associations and assumptions to multiply in the reader's mind yet never be fully resolved by a true act of description. Her appeal to a kind of Steinian form here gestures towards an avant-garde anti-institutionalism. The recurring identity marker of the 'sort of person who has a position at the university' is both scornful and undefined. Towards the end of the story its tone is more defeatist as the narrator begins to assimilate the phrase into her own identity. The final, cryptic reference to 'truths' which are incompatible with her position at the university seems to almost reduce the story *ex post facto* to a kind of logical exemplar ('All people who have a position at the university are writers', 'Lydia Davis is a writer' etc.). The referral of identity to logical propositions seems to bluntly claim the final word over the assumptive hearsay of the rest of the story, using logic, as Davis often does, as a comedic reinforcement of control of a sprawling narrative.

If Davis resists the institutional identity of the college professor, her body of work seeks to emulate and inhabit a different kind of pedagogical scene: the remedial grammar lesson. Davis plays with the pedagogical relationship in a group of what I call her 'example stories',

including 'Example of a Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room', 'Honouring the Subjunctive', and 'A Double Negative', the last of which reads as follows:

> At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child. (*CS*, 373)

Many of these stories consist of 'found' sentences, pieces of language from Davis's reading or her environment. By presenting these sentences under exemplar titles, Davis is creating her own demonstrative phrases, not unlike those found in a grammar book. But while 'A Double Negative' is instructive it also comprises a fragmentary narrative structure. In this way the story acts as a literalization of the structuralist narratology put forward by Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes, which breaks narratives down into a discernible syntax. As Barthes claims, narrative 'shares the characteristics of the sentence without ever being reducible to the simple sum of its sentence: a narrative is a long sentence, just as every constative sentence is in a way the rough outline of a short narrative'.[31] Indeed, for structuralists the use of grammar in literary studies was not just a useful metaphor for the systematic analysis of narrative but a way of getting closer to literature through the innovations provided by linguistics, and vice versa. As Todorov notes, the 'notion itself of a grammar of narrative cannot be contested. This notion rests on the profound unity of language and narrative, a unity which obliges us to revise our ideas about both […]. Ultimately language can be understood only if we learn to think of its essential manifestation — literature'.[32] But while 'Double Negative' clearly presents the analogy between sentence and narrative, it also deconstructs this comparison in the interaction between the grammatical and narratological function of the story itself. Looking beyond the sentence as grammatical illustration reveals an elliptical and intriguing narrative which

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[31] Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,' in *Image-Music-Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 84.
[32] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 119.

dramatises a nexus of social, psychological and personal expectation encapsulated in the grammatical performance of the word 'not'. The grammatical transformations of the sentence are determined by the placement and duplication of 'not', each iteration minutely shifting the meaning of the sentence, and, in turn, alluding to a slightly different narrative focus. The narrative function, however, is delimited by the story's grammatical form. Taking Barthes and Todorov's analogy, 'A Double Negative' fulfils its grammatical function in the sense that it is a complete sentence, but it does not progress into higher narrative levels. Yet there is a narrative impulse inherent in the story. Indeed, in the reproduction of various kinds of double negatives, the story produces multiple narrative possibilities, but in doing so undermines the function of the story as a singular grammatical example. The syntactic logic of the sentence cancels itself out, the double negative creating a (false) positive, a kind of prolonged potentiality rather than any kind of narrative realisation. 'A Double Negative' offers three examples for the price of one, transforming the syntactic structure of the sentence — the largest possible unit in linguistics — into a garden of forking paths illustrating minute shifts in the protagonist's psychology and her unarticulated narrative.[33]

While the analogies between structuralist narratology and 'A Double Negative' are generative, the story can also be interpreted through a purely linguistic lens. Francois Cusset's *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* outlines a history of the appropriation of 'French theory', as it came to be known, in the American academy.[34] Cusset, and other historians of this subject, have largely ignored the concurrent emergence of 'French theory' and Chomskyan linguistics, which both descend from a common point of origin in Saussurean linguistics. Chomsky's reorientation of linguistics towards the study of the sentence, in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965),

[33] Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', 82.
[34] Francois Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

brought the subject of linguistics closer to that of the structuralist and poststructuralist narratologists. In moving linguistics away from phonology and into the realm of syntax and semantics Chomsky's programme provided literary scholars with a new vocabulary for the close analysis of texts. While critics such as Barthes were using the sentence as a framework through which to analyse larger narrative structures, a parallel movement, stylistics, sought to examine the minute grammatical nuances within the sentence structure as a means of defining the phenomenon of literary style using the principles and techniques of Chomskyan linguistics. Stylistics, which was only briefly popular in the 1960s and 1970s, brought the linguistic and literary into a new and exciting relationship, and seemed to provide an answer to the persistent desire for a systematic methodology for literary studies called for since the nineteenth century.[35] Donald Freeman notes that this brand of study viewed literary language as 'a particular exploitation of a grammar of possibilities'.[36] In short, it was not enough to recognize a text's linguistic features as in some way 'poetic' or as a deviation from the 'standard' (as the practice of 'close reading' did) but these features would be examined using linguistic methodology to try to systematically pinpoint why certain grammatical features produce the literary effects that they do. Davis's minute attention to grammatical features and aspects of style is a quality no doubt inherited from her commitment to the practice of 'close translation', which Jonathan Evans has thoroughly examined in his study of the interaction between Davis's aesthetics and her translation practice.[37] While Evans does not find any extensive engagement with linguistic or translation theory in Davis's work, I would argue that Davis's process of

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[35] I am taking Stylistics, here, to be the particular brand of literary studies taken up by Richard Ohmann and others in the 1960s and 1970s which was explicitly linked to the linguistic methods arising from Chomskyan linguistics. As Donald Freeman notes, earlier iterations of stylistics had existed whose focus was more philological, behaviourist, or phonological (such as that of the Prague Linguistic Circle, for example). See Donald C. Freeman, 'Linguistic Approaches to Literature' in *Linguistics and Literary Style*, ed. Freeman (San Francisco: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1970), 6.

[36] Ibid, 13.

[37] Evans, *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis*, 71.

'close translation' means that she attends systematically to the minute grammatical reality of the sentence (either when translating or composing) in much the same way as a stylistician would.

The linguistic transformations of 'A Double Negative' chime with stylistician Richard Ohmann's application of Chomsky's theory of generative grammar in his analysis of literary language. Central to Ohmann's critique is the Chomskyan notion of 'deep' and 'surface' sentence structures, which states that although the surface structure of a sentence may vary its deep structure remains wholly the same. Chomsky argued that complex sentences are derived through transformations of original 'kernel sentences' (usually very basic declarative sentences in English), which are lengthened through 'recursions', the additions of 'single loops' deriving from the original kernel.[38] Therefore, the difference between the sentences 'Mark threw the ball' and 'the ball is thrown by Mark' are merely differences in surface grammatical structures; their 'deep structure' or kernel remains unified.[39] This kind of grammatical creativity was, for Ohmann, the very basis of literary style. As he notes,

> The pianist performing a Mozart concerto must strike certain notes in a certain order, under certain restrictions of tempo, in a certain relation to the orchestra, and so on. These limitations define the part of his behavior that is fixed. Likewise, the tennis player must hit the ball over the net with the racket in a way partly determined by the rules of the game (errors and cheating are not style). But each has a significant amount of freedom, beyond these established regularities.[40]

[38] Lyons, *Chomsky*, 72-4; John Collins, *Chomsky: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2008), 53. This distinction between surface and deep structure parallels somewhat the structuralist binary between *story* (the sequence of narrative events) and *discourse* (the expression of the 'story').
[39] Collins, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 81.
[40] Richard, Ohmann, 'Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style,' *WORD* 20, no. 3 (1964): 426.

Davis has often praised Samuel Beckett's grammatical ingenuity as generative for her own fiction, admiring 'the acrobatics he performs with syntax': 'he will make the language strange and new, even though it is still technically conventionally grammatical'.[41]

In 'Generative Grammar and the Concept of Literary Style' Ohmann demonstrates that grammatical transformations such as 'deletion' have a significant bearing on the individual style of the author (for example, Hemingway performs a good deal of deletion, while Henry William Faulkner does not). By reversing all of the grammatical transformations which occurred in these authors' sentences and reducing them back to their 'kernels', Ohmann ascertains a stylistic pattern for the author he is studying.[42] In her story, 'The Cottages', Davis seems to parody this process by refusing to employ deletion in her sentences, clumsily inflating them through repetition:

> She is seventy-nine or so, and on the one hand it's hard to talk to her (she has come for dinner, it's just the two of us […]), **it's hard to talk to her** because she has only four or five things she wants to talk about and she forgets the name of every person and **the name of** every thing **she wants to talk about** and when groping to describe the thing **whose name she has forgotten** forgets the name of what she needs to describe to identify to me the first things she has forgotten [...] (*CS,* 120, emphasis added).

The parts highlighted in bold might easily have been removed, the final phrase could be replaced by 'it', and even the repetition of the verb 'forget' could be reduced — particularly in a story of only a few pages — but their inclusion effectively represents the confused and trapped language of a forgetful old woman. The language of the sentence continuously loops back on itself, its syntax mimicking her static cognitive process. Indeed, the writer's ability to manipulate the reader through syntactic and stylistic choices is a prominent concern of both Stein and David Foster Wallace, one that is rooted in the conception of style and character

[41] Lydia Davis, '"Honor the Syntax": an Interview with Lydia Davis,' interviewed by Lola Boorman, *Post45*, October 22, 2018. http://post45.research.yale.edu/2018/10/honor-the-syntax-an-interview-with-lydia-davis.
[42] Ohmann, 'Generative Grammars,' 436.

advocated by Barrett Wendell and other the nineteenth-century rhetoricians. Davis subscribes to this belief in the intersection of style and self. In her translation of *Du côté de chez Swann* she attempted to retain Proust's syntax, word order, and even matching his punctuation 'comma for comma', stating that 'Proust felt [...] that a long sentence contained a whole, complex thought, a thought that should not be fragmented or broken.[43] The shape of the sentence was the shape of the thought, and every word was necessary to the thought'.[44]

The correspondence between the pliability of surface structure grammar and its psychological implications not only shares similarities with complex linguistic theory, but also forms the basis of the contract between reader and writer. Davis's own grammatical acrobatics can be considered both as complex linguistic studies and the illustration of remedial, schoolroom grammar. As such the implications of Davis's work splinter into the high and low, speaking to multiple contexts and imagined audiences at any one time. This blending of high and low is one of the strongest correlations between Davis's work and her postmodern contemporaries, but it is also an aesthetic impulse which descends directly from Stein. Stein's similar use of pedagogical forms, in particular that of the grammar or writing lesson, also takes as its basis the blending of high and low. For Stein, however, this method is employed in the service of her own aesthetic programme, while in Davis's work these pedagogical moments serve to undermine the reader's ability to identify the writer's aesthetic approach, or even to locate the writer herself.

As is clear from so many of her stories, Davis's fiction employs a plain, basic lexicon, in a devotion to the creation of complex ideas out of simple vocabularies. Engaging in a kind of Oulipian (or Ohmannian) creative challenge, Davis's stories often use a plain idiom and a more straightforward grammatical sentence structure as a limit with which to experiment. In

[43] Lydia Davis, 'A Problem Sentence in Proust,' *The Literary Review* 45, no. 3 (2002): 473.
[44] Lydia Davis, 'Translator's Note,' Marcel Proust, *By Way of Swann* (London: Viking Books, 2003), xxx.

her interview with Francine Prose, Davis recalls learning to read with the 'Dick and Jane' books: 'I loved learning the words "look" and "see": "Run, Jane, run. See Jane run". It was so clear and easy and unconfusing and neat.'[45] This kind of linguistic neatness is derived from a kind of strict concision, a 'plainness' which Davis describes as being at the heart of her love of English: 'I love the Anglo-Saxon words as opposed to the Latinate. Bread, milk, love, war, peace, cow, dog. The English word "and" seems much more solid, like an apple. Maybe it has to do with those early Dick and Jane books again.'[46]

Davis's valorisation of simplicity here evokes McGurl's description of literary minimalism's 'aestheticization of '"Dick-and-Jane prose" as a reenactment of the original acquisition of the verbal self-control for which the children's primer was the program.'[47] The return to a kind of remedial, pedagogical primal scene at the core of the minimalist model was read by many as a kind of literary 'dumbing down', a regression of American literature away from psychological and aesthetic complexity.[48] John Barth famously attested that he would be unlikely to find 'a sentence of any syntactical complexity' in minimalist writing.[49] While Davis's fiction revels in a kind of return to simplicity, her work pushes back against the minimalist programme and, seemingly, Barth's explicitly linguistic critique of it. 'Honouring the Subjunctive', another 'example story', seems to directly parody this assumption about minimalism's reductive character. The story reads,

> It invariably precedes, even if it do not altogether supersede, the determination of what is absolutely desirable and just. (*CS*, 377)

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[45] Davis, interviewed by Prose, n.p.
[46] Ibid.
[47] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 293.
[48] See John Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-line Fiction* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992); James McDermott, *Austere Style in Twentieth-Century Literature: Literary Minimalism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006); Robert Clark, *American Literary Minimalism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014); and chapter 5 in McGurl, *The Program Era*, op. cit.
[49] John Barth, 'A Few Words About Minimalism', *The New York Times*, December 26, 1986. https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/28/books/a-few-words-about-minimalism.html.

This sentence fragment is taken from the first section of John Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* 'The Lamp of Sacrifice', and appears unattributed in Davis's collection.[50] In appropriating Ruskin, however, Davis uses the sentence which once formed part of a rhetorical argument and empties it of its context. By taking only a sentence fragment Davis severs the sentence's relationship to the grammatical antecedent of 'it', which precedes, and supersedes, the 'desirable and just'. The subjunctive phrase, 'even if it do not' — the ambiguous and unusual 'do' further obscuring what the 'it' could be — takes the central position in the particular fragment Davis has selected, suggesting a balance between the fluid, forward-moving lexicon of 'invariably', 'precedes', and 'supersedes' and the more definitive, weighty 'desirable' and 'just' that seem to halt the sentence. As such the subjunctive impulse of the sentence becomes an invitation to the reader's interpretation. 'It' may as well be a blank space to be filled by the reader, the story becoming both a grammatical demonstration and a subjunctive promise of fulfilment.

Davis has expressed an affection for the creation of such grammatical exemplars: 'I really love the example sentences that are given in a grammar. I collect foreign grammars and I love just reading, you know, "Peter will be coming on the train today", […] they actually have content, but the content sort of floats there divorced from any story'.[51] While complicating the notion of authorial ownership, Davis's misuse of quotation serves paradoxically to assert her own subjectivity, in the presentation of the most minute examples of language which she finds 'interesting'. Davis, therefore, confounds the view of minimalism as syntactically

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[50] The full sentence reads, 'As far as I have taken cognizance of the causes of the many failures to which the efforts of intelligent men are liable, more especially, in matters political, they seem to me more largely to spring from this single error than from all others, that the inquiry into doubtful, and in some sort inexplicable, relations of capability, chance, resistance, and inconvenience, invariably precedes, even if it do not altogether supersede, the determination of what is absolutely desirable and just'. John Ruskin *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Vol. 8*,* eds. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 20.

[51] Davis, interview by Boorman, '"Honor the Syntax",' n.p.

reductive, by here facilitating extreme minimal form through an example of grammatical complexity. It is this narratological impulse to both expand and contract in Davis's work that prompts McGurl to describe Davis as a 'miniaturist', 'small and self-contained but not linguistically parsimonious [...] maximalism in a minimalist package, or, in the Deleuzian idiom, as the becoming-maximal of Carverian minimalism.'[52]

***Exercises du Style:* Davis and Theory**

Cusset claims that post-structuralist theory first trickled into the American academy through French departments, from which it began to be disseminated as 'awkward translations' that were later picked up by literary scholars.[53] These early iterations of French theory were published in academically-affiliated journals that often had a counter-cultural flavouring, and which frequently published experimental poetry alongside texts by Derrida, Deleuze, and Baudrillard.[54] As such, the rise of 'theory' was precipitated by 'the new cult of the theoretical text' in experimental poetry movements, such as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry with whom Davis is often associated.[55] As Cusset notes, the 1970s were 'the decade of French theory's countercultural temptations, its anarchic expansion, by way of alternative journals and rock concerts, but it was also the decade of the first academic uses of French theory, if only as the instrument of a (purely discursive) subversion of the university institution'.[56]

While Davis attended Barnard College in the late 1960s, just before these theoretical leanings began to take hold of the academy, early, 'awkward' translations of these seminal texts had already begun circulating in French departments across the U.S. When she went to Paris after finishing her degree, Davis became a translator and helped run *Living Hand*, alongside Paul Auster. While much of Davis and Auster's translations during this period were

[52] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 375-76.
[53] Cusset, *French Theory*, 60.
[54] Ibid, 61.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid, 54.

what Davis describes as 'work-for-hire', she also published her first translation of the philosopher and theorist Maurice Blanchot in a 1977 edition of *Tri-Quarterly.*[57] Her translation of *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays* (1981) was the first collection of Blanchot's critical essays to be published in English, and she continues to be his foremost translator.[58] As such, while Davis's engagement with poststructuralist theory remains indeterminate, her own role in disseminating Blanchot — whose philosophy was formative for the work of figures like Derrida and Hélène Cixous — in American intellectual circles places Davis, yet again, in a peculiarly tangential relationship to the narrative of French theory in America. While her continued engagement with the work of figures such as Blanchot highlight Davis as a reader of 'French theory', these encounters come out in her work not as a meditation on ideology or aesthetics but, rather, as stylistic exercises. In an interview in 2007 Davis noted that her translations of Blanchot taught her 'to stay extremely close to the text […] practising an extreme fidelity'.[59]

As is clear from Davis's fiction, which often dramatizes her reading of authors and theorists such as Samuel Beckett and Michel Foucault, these critical currents enter her writing not as grand philosophical ideas but as issues of language, narrative, and translation. I will argue here that Davis's work engages with trends in 'French theory' but does so by actively resisting it as a body of ideas, instead encountering them as problems of grammatical precision, engaging with theorists as a kind of *exercise du style.* As Cusset describes, 'theory is to the American literary field at the end of the twentieth century what "woman" was to Baroque poetry — a source of inspiration, a site for the invention of a language, and a license for expression'.[60] Davis's work uses 'theory' less as inspiration than as mundane, quotidian

[57] Evans, *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis*, 10.
[58] Ibid, 33.
[59] Lydia Davis, *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red* (London: Sylph Editions, 2007), 7.
[60] Cusset, *French Theory*, 103.

triggers which spark digressions on familial relationships, aging, memory loss, and everyday distractions.

'Foucault and Pencil' dramatizes this deflationary attitude towards fashionable 'French theory'. The story follows its narrator's failed attempts to read Foucault in French at snatched periods throughout the day (in a therapist's waiting room, on the subway, etc.). As such, the reading is continuously interrupted by everyday life and the meandering thoughts of the narrator: 'Sat down to read Foucault with pencil in hand. Knocked over glass of water onto waiting-room floor. Put down Foucault and pencil, mopped up water, refilled glass' (*CS,* 151). The continual yoking together of 'Foucault' and 'Pencil' throughout the story casts them as a single entity, standing in lieu of a book title. But the equation of Foucault with pencil, here, also seems to signal the act of writing or, at least, the idea of 'marking' the text: 'Came to sentence that was clear, made pencil mark in margin' (152). This mark does not highlight an important thought or concept the text, but, rather, underscores a moment of stylistic clarity, a reinforcement of the reader's comprehension. Davis's narrator consciously separates her own acts of writing from her reading of Foucault: 'Took out notebook and pen to make note about passengers [on the subway], made accidental mark with pencil in margin of Foucault, put down notebook, erased mark' (152). The deliberate act of erasure suggests an unwillingness to permit crossover between theory and her own writing, a division we might read as a kind of artistic statement for Davis's work as a whole. While the narrator is perpetually poised to begin the act of writing — either in her own notebook or to begin her annotations of Foucault's text — her 'pencil' remains 'idle in hand' (152), illustrating a fundamental tension between 'theory' and the act of writing that goes against the grain of Davis's postmodern affiliations.[61]

[61] The foregrounding of 'pencil' might also carry a secondary significance if we consider its French translation *stylo* which shares a root with *style,* both deriving from *stylus,* a writing instrument or tool to make an engraving. This intricate linking between the instrument of writing and its product, the idea of style as an imprint, suggests a layering of styles in the story. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018). s.v. "style, n.".

Evans identifies a number of Blanchotian techniques in 'Foucault and Pencil'. In particular he suggests a clear engagement with Blanchot's belief that 'the *récit* is not the narration of the event; the narration is the event'.[62] As such, many of Blanchot's texts are about the experience of reading itself, a dramatization of the process of comprehension. Davis employs a similar method in 'Foucault and Pencil' but she displaces the act of reading Foucault onto a search for grammatical taxonomy. Rather than conveying the ideas expressed in Foucault's text, the narrator itemizes her attempts to understand it: 'Short sentences easier to understand than long ones. Certain long ones understandable part by part, but so long, forgot beginning before reaching end' (151-52). Rather than making clear the meaning of the text, this process merely helps the narrator gain a greater grammatical understanding of her lack of comprehension:

> Understood more clearly at which points Foucault harder to understand and at which points easier: harder to understand when sentence was long and noun identifying subject of sentence was left back at beginning, replaced by male or female pronoun, when forgot what noun pronoun replaced had only pronoun for company traveling through sentence. Sometimes pronoun giving way in mid-sentence to new noun, new noun in turn replaced by new pronoun which then continued on to end of sentence. (152)

The story dramatizes an intense linguistic awareness of syntactic structure, which eclipses the meaning of the sentence itself. The removal of pronouns seems both to work in direct opposition to Foucault's unstable use of grammatical categories but also to further uproot the nouns and verbs used in the narrative, making them at once intimately notational and elusively abstract. The narrator's recursive attempt to establish an 'order of things' in Foucault's text is contrasted with her description of the 'conflict' she is experiencing in her personal life, which seems to propel her forward uncontrollably: 'argument itself became a form of travel, each

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http://www.oed.com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/192315?rskey=HIb6Dw&result=1&isAdvanced=false.

[62] Evans, *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis*, 34.

sentence carrying arguers on to next sentence, next sentence on to next and in the end, arguers were not where they had started' (151). The ambiguous use of 'argument' here which might have referred to the rhetorical content of Foucault's text but instead refers to a quarrel the narrator had earlier that day, blurs the distinction between the theoretical and the everyday. As Evans notes, 'there is a metaphorical translation between Foucault's book and the argument, where the difficulties of comprehension are carried over from one domain to another'.[63] The tension between the concrete and the abstract, the everyday and the theoretical, is most evident at the end of the story, when the narrator admits she does not understand 'when subject of sentence was noun like *thought*, *absence*, *law*, easier to understand when subject was noun like *beach*, *wave*, *sand*, *santorium* [*sic*], *pension*, *door*, *hallway*, or, *civil servant*' (152). This need for tangibility and concreteness presents Davis as a kind of failed reader of theory, one who is interested in it not for its ideas but for the linguistic challenge it presents. In such a way Davis might be well described not as a 'structuralist' but, as Barthes describes, an agent of 'structural activity' who deals in 'neither form nor content but the proceedings between them', who 'takes the real, decomposes it, recomposes it.'[64]

Texts like 'Neitszche' (*sic*) promise an erudite philosophical subject matter only to be comically undermined by a confessional and mundane un-learnedness:

> Oh, poor Dad. I'm sorry I made fun of you.
> Now I'm spelling Nietszche wrong, too. (*CS*, 622)

The story's title plays on the reader's association of the philosopher who had experienced a resurgence of interest in the 1970s; Cusset notes that a 1978 special issue of *Semiotex(e)* dubbed him 'the clarion of the counterculture.'[65] Indeed, Davis's story parodies the use of Nietzsche

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[63] Ibid, 139.
[64] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes: Critical Essays*, trans Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972), 215.
[65] Ibid, 70.

as a kind of intellectual shorthand, undermined by both her and her father's inability to spell Nietzsche's name accurately. Rather than capturing the radical character his philosophy evokes, Davis dispels the theoretical 'aura' associated with Nietzsche and other theorists by presenting her engagement with his philosophy as a mundane parable of aging, the kind of *faux pas* that undercuts its own highbrow connotations and resituates her reader in the realm of everyday misunderstanding. Characteristically, Davis redirects her reader from the intellectual to the personal, using this comedy of erudition as a way to showcase a more intimate relationship with her father. For Davis, linguistic and grammatical slippages often begin as access points into broad philosophical questions about language, but are quickly converted into more personal, human ones.

Lessons in 'French Theory'

Davis's fascination with fragments of language transforms her fiction into language lessons, whether it is in the identification of complex grammatical structures in the everyday — such as 'Example of a Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room' — or in her more explicit use of pedagogical metaphors as vehicles for her experiments in narration. 'French Lesson 1: *Le Meurtre*', an elliptical detective story told through the guise of a remedial French grammar lesson, dramatizes this fascination with language and language learning in Davis's writing. In interviews, Davis has traced her fixation with the mechanics of language to her early experiences learning German and French as a child:

> Actually I spent my second grade year in Austria. I had one year of learning to read in German. I still have the German textbooks in which the letters got smaller and smaller as the pages progressed through the book […] learning another language when I was seven probably made me hyper-conscious of language; also the German language in the classroom was a wall of incomprehensibility around me. Gradually the words began to have meaning. But first I heard the language as rhythm.[66]

[66] Lydia Davis, interview by Prose, 'Lydia Davis,' n.p.

‘French Lesson 1’ articulates a number of these ideas. The teacher-cum-narrator slowly introduces her reader to a series of French vocabulary related to *la ferme* — as the narrator notes, one must ‘[a]lways start learning your foreign language with names of farm animals’ (*CS*, 103). The narrator does not provide a translation for these words but rather allows their meaning to become clear through the context of the sentence: ‘Learn what a *vache* is. A *vache* is milked in the morning, and milked again in the evening, twitching her dung-soaked tail, her head in a stanchion’ (103). The narrator’s tone is didactic, forcefully so in some parts of the story, as the lesson is conducted through a string of imperatives which shape and direct the student’s attention. As such the story models the progression of a remedial language lesson, building from basic concepts to more abstract, complex ones: ‘We can now introduce the definite articles *le, la,* and *les*’ (103). The aim of the lesson is to form a full sentence, moving slowly through nouns, articles, prepositions and verbs, until all the parts of the sentence are in place: ‘*la femme est dans la cuisine*’ (109). This notably gendered image projects a familiar female stereotype. Indeed, the story is implicitly concerned with French as a gendered language. The rigid construction of the French sentence, which puts each syntactical element in its correct order and place, also seems to constrict and dictate the societal and spatial placement of *la femme* in the story. *La femme* is confined to the kitchen table only to look out of the window and partially perceive the sinister events unfolding.

At times the narrator’s authority feels almost totalitarian as she painstakingly controls the slow drip of grammatical concepts available to the reader as though too much information would be destabilizing (‘we can safely, however, introduce a preposition at this point’ [107]). Indeed, at all points the narrator is directing how her students think and process language (‘you will know this is wrong’ [105]). The lesson progresses through a comical call-and-response, the teacher posing questions to her absent students. This didactic questioning occurs regularly throughout the story and the reader’s obligatory silence only exemplifies the comically

overbearing character of the narrator and parodies the format of the self-taught language lesson popularly disseminated through books or audio tapes: '*Un* is masculine, *une* is feminine. This being so, what gender is *un poulet?* If you say masculine you are right, though the bird herself may be a young female' (107). Only when the student has mastered the lexical field of *la ferme* are they permitted to move into the linguistic world of *la ville*.

More complex topics are deferred for future study ('The rules and their numerous exceptions will be covered in later lessons' [104]), but the narrator does let the reader in on the pedagogical philosophy behind her lesson:

> Try to learn what this preposition means by the context in which it is used. You will notice that you have been doing this all along with most of the vocabulary introduced. It is a good way to learn a language because it is how children learn their native languages, by associating the sounds they hear with the context in which the sounds are uttered. If the context changed continually, children would never learn to speak. Also, the so-called meaning of a word is completely determined by the context in which it is spoken, so that in fact we cannot say a meaning is inescapably attached to a word, but that it shifts over time and from context to context. (108)

The integration of these remedial, incremental lessons with theories of language acquisition further foregrounds the story's instructional bent of the story but also alludes to a complex set of what the narrator calls 'modern and contemporary ideas about language' (108). Indeed, it is through these interactions that Davis's story gestures towards the intertwined discourses of linguistic theory, language philosophy, and structuralist/post-structuralist theory. The narrator's model of language acquisition here appears to be fundamentally behavioural, based on the idea that children learn their native language through exposure to how language works in their daily environment.[67] But the narrator's theoretical allegiances transform as she gives her explanation. She notes that if the context in which the child is learning the language were

[67] Randy Allen Harris, *The Linguistics Wars* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 55.

to change continuously s/he would never learn how to speak. Yet in the next sentence the narrator notes that the contexts of words are fundamentally unstable and arbitrary such that meaning is fixed only by socially agreed-upon rules determined by context-based 'language games', with each game comprising a different set of rules. As such, Davis's language lesson rejects the notion of transcendental or essential meaning (again subverting the conventions of a remedial language lesson, which may seek to project a more singular sense of authority) but her affiliations, to a Saussurean model of structuralism or a Wittgensteinian view of 'language games', seems to shift and evolve within the space of the sentence so that the reader can never fully affix her clearly to any one mode of understanding.

Mid-way through the lesson the narrator introduces a piece of 'language history' and 'a language concept' (104) to the reader which engages, somewhat evasively, with problems of linguistic reference. The narrator states,

> We have just said that we have our own words in English for the same things. This is not strictly true. We can't really say there are several words for the same thing. It is in fact just the opposite — there is only one word for many things, and usually even that word, when it is a noun, is too general (104).

This assertion, and the examples that follow it, represent an amalgamation of various language theories without fully assimilating its view to any of them. The narrator here seems to discredit the possibility of direct translation because of the instability of systems of reference. Therefore, there are not a series of words in different languages (*house*, *maison*, *casa*, *hus*) that all connote a single monolithic object, but rather the monolithic word *house* connotes a vast number of types of object in the real world. At once Davis is attentive to the minute refractions of the philosophical and linguistic theory of reference but also pokes fun at the reductionism of this theoretical posturing. For example, Davis playfully alludes to the legacy of Saussurean structuralism by using the word *arbre* (tree) to illustrate how these theories simplify the tangible variety in the real world:

> A French *arbre* is not the elm or maple shading the main street of our New England towns in the infinitely hot and listless, vacant summer of our childhoods, which are themselves different from the childhoods of French children […] An *arbre* is a plane tree in an ancient town square with lopped, stubby branches and patchy, leprous bark standing in a row of similar plane trees across from the town hall (105).

In this sense, Davis challenges the nature of the relationship between signifier and signified — and the notion of direct reference — by foregrounding the problem of cultural translation, and of language as experiential and determined by its specific use in the world, ultimately conveying a more Wittgensteinian view. The over-abundance of detail in this description parodies not only the reductive vocabulary of the language lesson, but also its universalizing tendency in structuralist linguistic theory. While this example seems to fall in line with Saussure's theory of 'arbitrariness' in that the singular word *arbre* connotes different arbitrary meanings predicated on experience, social convention, and historical factors, Davis's over-elaboration seems to ridicule it, allowing her example to run away with the concept she is illustrating.

It is worth noting that Davis's descriptions here also express a cultural relativity which is, uniquely for her work, distinctly and pastorally American. She describes a *maison* as not 'wood-framed with a widow's walk and a wide front porch' (105), alluding to a decidedly more rural or suburban East Coast suburban architecture, but instead 'laid out on a north-south axis, is built of irregular, sand-colored blocks of stone, and has a red tiled roof, small square windows with green shutters' (105). The persistent effort to represent the meaning of these two French words (*arbre* and *maison*) through their fundamental difference to their American incarnations alludes to a Derridean conception of meaning as predicated on the simultaneous enactment of difference and deferral. Yet Davis also undermines this view through the specificity of her description which reverts her use of language back to a descriptivist theory of reference. The narrator's assertion that 'these are modern and contemporary ideas but they are generally

accepted' (108) serves to further destabilize the shifting boundaries of these theoretical paraphrases. It is clear that that this one 'language concept' alludes to many others, demonstrating Davis's idiosyncratic but informed engagement not only with linguistic theory but also with narratology, structuralism, post-structuralism.

These winks, both in 'French Lesson' and Davis's other stories, to widely known (if not widely read) 'theory' is testament to the playfulness which constitutes so much of Davis's work. As we have already seen in 'French Lesson', what seems to be a harmless grammar lesson becomes a pedagogical game of cat-and-mouse between Davis and her reader, but I want to propose that it can also be read as a subtle, ludic critique of the aesthetics and concerns of postmodern fiction. The objective of 'French Lesson' is to lead the reader towards understanding their 'first complete sentence in French' (109). As such, narrative is dependent not on the resolution of the detective story but rather on the completion of the sentence. While the linguistic aspect of the story remains dominant, as the grammar lesson builds from smaller lexical categories into a larger syntactic structure, the narrative begins to fracture into plot-driven digressions which undermine the contextless universality of the grammatical example. Therefore, the distinction between a live chicken and poultry is illustrated firstly through cooking instructions before ultimately dissolving into a mystery story:

> After the age of ten months, however, when [the bird] should also be stewed rather than broiled, fried, or roasted, she is known as *la poule* and makes a great racket after laying a clutch of eggs in the corner of the poultry yard *la femme* will have trouble finding in the morning, when she will also discover something that does not belong there and that makes her stand still, her apron full of eggs, and gaze off across the fields (107).

The grammar lesson strains under the pressure of this encroaching mystery story, refracting into these narrative digressions before pulling itself back into the realm of grammatical formalism: 'Notice that the words *poule*, *poulet*, and *poultry*, especially when seen on the page, have some resemblance' (107). Like 'A Double Negative', a seemingly formalist grammar

exercise opens the door to constrained narrative forms. Once again Davis uses the sentence as both a linguistic and a narrative limit, not to constrain her writing but to generate new forms.

Davis's exploration of the interaction between the detective story and the sentence as a narrative unit gestures towards prominent trends in postmodern literature and theory. As Michael Holquist notes, '[w]hat the structural and philosophical presuppositions of myth and depth of psychology were to Modernism (Mann, Joyce, Woolf, etc.), the detective story is to Post-Modernism (Robbe-Grillet, Borges, Nabokov, etc).'[68] Indeed, the detective story was not only a fascination of the postmodern writer, but it was also the primary model for the structuralist narratological theory put forward by Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, Seymour Chatman, and Gérard Genette. Todorov's 'The Typology of the Detective Story' (1971) conceives of the formulaic nature of the form as a perfect illustration of his conception of narrative as a finite set of functions and agents combining to form different narratological 'codes'.[69] These narrative codes, what Todorov called 'the grammar of narrative', are generated through series of underlying 'universal' rules that govern narrative in the same way that grammar governs language use.[70]

In 'French Lesson' Davis makes the syntactically complete sentence both the object of the grammar lesson and a key to solving the detective story in what seems to be a literalization of these prominent strands of structuralist narratology. When the student finally completes their first sentence in French towards the end of the lesson, '*la femme est dans la cuisine*' (109), this basic syntactic structure facilitates the creation of a series of other sentences: '*La vache est dans la grange. La pomme de terre est dans la bassine. La bassine est dans* the sink' (109). This not only illustrates the Chomsky's notion of 'generative grammar' — the idea that the

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[68] Michael Holquist, 'Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction,' *New Literary History* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 135.
[69] Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 108.
[70] Ibid.

rules of a grammar allow language to be combined in an infinite number of patterns — but also showcases the structuralist view of narrative as an endless combination and recombination of different agents and functions to create new stories, each piece fitting into its prescribed slot in the narrative 'sentence'. The reversion back to English at the end of the final French sentence ('the sink') puts a stop to this self-perpetuating structure, imposing a linguistic limit on the reader and thereby regaining narrative control by reintroducing their lack of understanding.

The imposition of this uncertainty reintroduces the mood of apprehension that characteristically begins traditional detective stories. In 'French Lesson', the mystery never fully materializes; instead the story is suspended in the anxiety-ridden period before a crime is discovered, the moment when things begin to feel amiss. Not only, then, does Davis's detective story remain unsolved, but the crime that would require investigation is never actually narrated. At the end of the story, the narrator provides the reader with a new set of vocabulary that will help them ascertain 'the whereabouts of *le fermier*' and 'follow him into *la ville*' (109). The list ranges from general nouns ('*le sac:* bag'), to more specific words relating to certain species of birds, to the more sinister trio of '*la hachette*: hatchet […], *l'anxiété*: anxiety, *le meurtre*: murder' (109). Here, the narrator abandons the structure of context-based learning to gesture towards the continuation of the detective story. It is in this way that Davis's use of this form is characteristically postmodern, falling into the category, as Holquist and Stefano Tani have outlined, of the 'anti-detective story' which uses the familiar conventions of the form to unsettle and subvert the expectations of the reader.[71] A major feature of this use of the form is its subversion of the traditional 'end-dominated' structure of the conventional detective story, which results in the investigation of the crime petering out rather than fully resolving.[72]

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[71] See Holquist, 'Whodunit'; and Stefano Tani, *The Doomed Detective* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984).
[72] Alison Russell, 'Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy:* Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction,' *Critique* 31, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 71.

Davis's foregrounding of context-based language learning in 'French Lesson' shares similarities with the language-dominated plot of Paul Auster's 'City of Glass' (1985), the first detective story in his quintessentially postmodern *The New York Trilogy*. The thematic connections and divergences between these two texts highlight not only Davis's complex relationship to the conventions of postmodernism but also her somewhat oblique engagement with the tenets of poststructuralist theory. 'City of Glass', in part, follows Peter Stillman who, as a child, was locked in a dark room by his father for nine years so that he would not learn a corrupted linguistic system and, instead, discover 'God's language'.[73] Stillman's seclusion produces a disturbing and extremely isolated private language, not only devoid from any human context but, due to the dark room in which he was imprisoned, from any kind of external referent at all. When he meets the novel's protagonist, Daniel Quinn (who has been mistaken for the 'detective' Paul Auster), he has been somewhat rehabilitated but remains decidedly extra-linguistic. He is unable to fully assimilate his name with a sense of personal identity, and his language seems to exist outside of temporal limits — after his long Beckettian speech the narrator Quinn notes, 'The speech was over. How long it lasted Quinn could not say. For it was only now, after the words had stopped, that he realized they were sitting in the dark.'[74] Most pertinent for our purposes here, Stillman makes poems that 'cannot be translated.'[75]

Davis's 'French Lesson' demonstrates some clear parallels with Auster's text, namely their engagement with the form of the detective story as a way to interrogate problems of language and translation. *The New York Trilogy* very explicitly does this along poststructuralist lines. In Alison Russell's exhaustive reading of *The New York Trilogy* as a kind of manifestation of Derridean poststructuralism, she argues that the novel dramatises a logocentric

[73] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 24.
[74] Ibid, 26.
[75] Ibid, 22.

search for the transcendental signifier through the trope of detective fiction.[76] The directness through which Russell could apply poststructuralist theory to Auster's text prompted critic Scott Dimovitz to refer to the novel as '*Derrida for Dummies*'.[77]

According to Russell, Auster's *The New York Trilogy* enacts a narrative plot which is under threat from the erasure of writing under the sign of deconstruction, a literalization of writing *sous rature*.[78] Having run out of pages in his notebook Quinn vanishes from the text, literalizing the Derridean paradigm that '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*'.[79] Russell notes that 'City of Glass' is rooted in the concept of paternal authority and the disruption of these patrilineal hierarchies.[80] Naming is a pervasive theme in the novel, with characters being mistaken for others, taking pseudonyms or choosing to call themselves something else. In contrast, Davis's story extracts the notion of identity inherent in, and the referential problems associated with, proper names. The agents of her narrative are identified by their noun only (*la vache, le poulet, le fermier*). Indeed, '*la femme* of *le fermier*' (106) (translated as the wife of the farmer) is defined entirely through her relation to the patriarchal noun, who also gives his 'name' to the environment in which the story takes place (*la ferme*). Notably, the story begins to centre upon the distinct absence of *le fermier*, much like Auster's narrative focuses on the fundamental 'absence' of the signified (and, incidentally, of the older Peter Stillman who Quinn has been contracted to find). As *le fermier's* absence becomes more and more conspicuous, *la femme* of *le fermier* comes to be referred to as simply *la femme* (woman), loosened from her linguistic attachment to the male signifier. Indeed, *la femme* becomes the primary agent through which the mystery begins to unfold. The reader continuously follows her lines of perception to

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[76] Russell, 'Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*,' 71.
[77] Scott Dimovitz, 'Public Personae and the Private I: De-Compositional Ontology in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 615.
[78] Russell, 'Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*,' 75.
[79] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2016), 159.
[80] Russell, 'Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*,' 73

discover things amiss on *la ferme.* The unwriting of the male agent in Davis's story, an act which necessarily transforms the function of '*la femme*', is a significant contrast to Auster's narrative, which actively erases its female characters.[81] Davis's linguistic detective story is not about erasure and the 'deconstruction' of linguistic relationships but, rather, her fiction seems to amplify and transform the imaginative worlds created by her play with language. As such, while Auster's narrative dramatizes the impossibility of comprehension, 'French Lesson' is about facilitating and extending understanding. Language, for Davis, is the key to the mystery, and with each word acquired the mystery becomes clearer to the reader as they are slowly given the tools with which they might solve the crime.

'The name of what I am': Locating Feminine Identity

Davis is a prolific borrower of texts and voices, a tendency which may have bled into her fiction from translation practice. In interviews she has described how she views translation as 'assuming a disguise', and has often spoken of her taste for literary imitation, sometimes writing in the style of Kafka and Beckett.[82] A great number of the stories in *Can't and Won't* (2014) are brief retellings of anecdotes from Flaubert's letters, rendered in a style that is at once foreign and familiar — as Kasia Boddy notes, 'Each [story] starts as Flaubert and ends as Davis'.[83] In her interview with McCaffrey, Davis describes her fascination with translation as

[81] This erasure of female characters (with the exception of Virginia Stillman) includes the autobiographical erasure of Davis herself from Auster's narrative. At the opening of 'City of Glass' Quinn, a writer of detective fiction, is mistaken for a private detective named Paul Auster. In this disorienting play of metafiction and autobiography, Quinn reveals that his wife and son are both dead. Following the pattern of patrilineal naming, it is significant that Auster gives his detective the first name Daniel, the same name as the son he had with Davis. In an interview with Larry McCaffrey and Sinda Gregory, Auster noted that he wrote the novel to imagine 'what would have happened to [him] if I hadn't met [his second wife Siri Hustvedt] and what I came up with was Quinn.' But in writing his second marriage out of existence he more conspicuously erases his first, both by leaving Quinn's wife conspicuously unnamed but also in her textual death. Paul Auster, 'Interview with Larry McCaffrey and Sinda Gregory,' in *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews and The Red Notebook* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 313.
[82] Lydia Davis, interviewed by McCaffery, *Some Other Frequency*, 75.
[83] Kasia Boddy, 'Lydia Davis,' *The Telegraph,* November 5, 2010. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8113668/Lydia-Davis.html.

allowing her to occupy the position of the other, and in doing so accessing a type of writing that is somehow denied to her through her own aesthetic standards: 'Writing like other people allows me to be able to do certain things — a long, lush description of a summer evening — that I have no place for in my own work'.[84] Davis's use of 'found' material corresponds to the writer's historical role as magpie and plagiarist, supporting Roland Barthes' view that 'style is essentially a citational process, a body of formulae, a memory […] a cultural and not an expressive inheritance'.[85] Davis's playful refusal to attribute certain stories generates a self-imposed ambiguity in her authority as a writer. This rejection of the writer's persona, Craig Dworkin argues, instead allows for 'the direct presentation of language itself', reducing the 'I' to a disembodied part of speech.[86]

In blurring the boundaries of the authorial 'I', Davis de-escalates the 'I' as a philosophically and politically loaded concept. It is profoundly significant that most of the disguises that Davis assumes are male ones. Moreover, Davis has often expressed ambivalence in identifying herself with the feminist movements of the 1970s:

> I specifically resisted feminism when I was first writing. I have never had a program in my writing. I never said to myself that I was going to write about women's issues and speak for women. I suppose I have acted like a feminist in certain ways, and I have believed in most or all of the things that feminists believe in, so it wasn't that I was opposed to their goals theoretically or emotionally. But I have never been an activist [...]
>
> After a while though, I drew much closer to women writers, women of a hundred years ago, everyone. I'm identifying with other women, their lives and struggles and so on, even though I still don't label myself a feminist as such. This is a complicated area because so much of what any writer does is blind. You can think you're a terrifically independent woman, but then you discover that what you're doing and thinking is what everyone is doing and thinking or is in some way predetermined.[87]

[84] Davis, interviewed by McCaffrey, *Some Other Frequency*, 75.
[85] Roland Barthes, 'Style and its Image,' in *Literary Style: A Symposium,* ed. Seymour Chatman (New York: Oxford UP, 1971), 9.
[86] Craig Dworkin, qtd. in Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2010), 17.
[87] Davis, interviewed by McCaffrey, *Some Other Frequency*, 76.

In this sense, Davis's work does not have the feminist political thrust of other female experimental writers of her generation who came of age during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and witnessed its subsequent backlash in the 1980s. But to what extent is Davis's work in some way 'predetermined' by the theoretical currents of French feminism? Indeed, Davis's writing seems to lean heavily towards a philosophical interrogation of self through language, along the lines of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, than towards feminism's political manifestations in the fight for gender equality.

Davis's fiction is replete with female identities and uniquely female problems, although these almost always manifest, characteristically, in abstract forms. Very often Davis tends to present male-female relationships in fabular, almost essentialist ways. A brief scan of her titles reveals this trend: 'Mothers', 'Visit to her Husband', 'Meat, My Husband', 'The Thirteenth Woman', 'A Man in Our Town', 'My Husband and I'. While Davis often presents characters in seemingly straightforward, heteronormative relations to one another — male characters often only appear under the name 'husband' — these relationships are often exposed as hopelessly fraught. In 'My Son', a woman attempts to work through her relationship to her ex-husband and his new wife by re-casting them as her niece, her son, her aunt, and so on; 'Problem', meanwhile, negotiates complicated familial relations by reducing each agent to a letter reconfiguring human relations in terms of a mathematical problem, 'X is with Y, but living on money from Z' (124). In 'Wife One in the Country' she inverts the nominal identity of 'wife' in light of the presence of Wife Two, questioning the logical validity of her own claim to the title. Such stories question the instability of feminine identity as essentially feminine, seeming to test the boundaries of an Irigarayan system of sexual difference, which deconstructs sexual binaries (Man/Woman, Husband/Wife, *le fermier/la femme du fermier*) through the multiplication of feminine identities. The 'Husband' in Davis's story retains his central position

and identity, merely substituting 'Wife One' for 'Wife Two'. When 'Wife One', who is now no longer a wife because she has been negated by 'Wife Two', takes her 'Son' (who is, like the husband, a kind of phallocentric constant in this patriarchal order) to visit his father. In doing so she is further relinquished of her identity as mother. Devoid of these essentialist feminine identities of 'wife' and 'mother' and made Other not only to a male identity but to another feminine identity, her existence is reduced entirely to basic bodily functions, as she repeatedly 'swallows food again' (171) in a mechanical, detached manner.

This schematization of male-female relationships never seems to fully work itself out, advocating for neither an eradication of gender distinctions through equality nor a French feminist assertion of sexual difference. These meditations on gender roles remain algebraically unsolved. As we have repeatedly seen in 'Foucault and Pencil', 'Grammar Questions' and elsewhere in Davis's *oeuvre,* she tends to interrogate pronominal relationships, in particular the notion of the authorial 'I', which she views as a philosophically loaded term. Notably, it is Davis's earlier stories which deal most directly with this theme, many of which also use the metaphor of psychotherapy to explore ideas authorial and personal subjectivity. It is in this way that Davis's work intersects most clearly (if not particularly neatly) with the concerns of Irigaray and Cixous and other proponents of *écriture féminine.*

As we have seen, Davis often takes advantage of pronominal ambiguity; a number of her stories turn upon the misapprehension of pronouns, using a literal linguistic and spatial logic to complicate the expression of relationships. Kasia Boddy draws a parallel between Davis's work and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry deriving from her 'rejection of both narrative characterisation and the inward gaze of the lyric in favour of a conception of personality rooted in language'.[88] This notion chimes with the picture of female subjectivity presented in Irigaray's 'The Three *Genres*', which highlights the distinction between the male 'I', which

[88] Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story Since 1950*, 150.

asserts its position in relation to the 'you' and the 'world', appropriating and subordinating them to his linguistic position, and the female 'I', which 'makes way' for the 'you' and the 'world', requesting continuous affirmation from them as a means to constitute her identity.[89]

Irigaray writes that, 'the transformation of the autobiographical *I* into another cultural *I* seems to be necessary if we are to establish a new ethics of sexual difference'.[90] The sense of a pronominal making way, a self-exiling of the feminine 'I', occurs most prominently in Davis's parable-like stories. In these texts, subjectivity is a relative and, often, spatial occurrence, attaching itself to each and every passing entity without having any fixed or essential meaning of its own. In 'Once a Very Stupid Man', for example, the protagonist conflates her own identity with that of a 'bearded man' sitting at the table next to her in a cafe. Recognizing their spatial symmetry, she cannot separate the 'I' from the 'he': 'since she herself, as she wrote this, was writing at the next table, she was probably calling herself a bearded man. It was not that she had changed in any way, but that the words *bearded man* could now apply to her. Or perhaps she had changed' (112). The fact that both the narrator and the bearded man are writing at the time of the encounter, an act which simultaneously requires an authorial performance of identity and precipitates its dissolution. The woman's identification of herself as the 'bearded man' comes after she has written about it in her journal; looking outward she turns this observation in on herself. Without an 'I' to define the bearded man against, there is nothing stopping her becoming him.

The dissolution or intermingling of identity markers occurs also in a number of stories which explore point of view. Francine Prose notes that one of Davis's most prominent themes is 'the self watching the self write'.[91] This motif structures *The End of the Story,* where the

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[89] Luce Irigaray, 'The Three in *Genres'*, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 146.
[90] Ibid, 148.
[91] Davis, interviewed by Prose, 'Lydia Davis,' n.p.

story of the protagonist's affair is fragmented by self-reflective passages on the narrator's planning, composition, and editing of the novel, such that the act of writing gradually consumes the writing itself. Michael Hoffmann interprets the narratological instability of the novel as creating a 'negative space' generated by the degradation of writerly authority in the presentation of the work-in-progress which is irresolute even in its choice of pronoun.[92] Davis's protagonists often struggle to identify with their pronouns, believing the 'I' to be inadequate for their purpose. In what seems to be a direct enactment of Irigaray's description of the difference between male and female discourse, 'Story' traces its narrator's attempt to ascertain whether her lover is lying to her. Irigaray argues that women generate statements such as '(I) <You love me?> (you)' while men construct sentences of the type '(I) <I wonder if I am loved> (you)'.[93] As Irigaray notes, 'in the first case […] [t]he world view of perspective often belongs to *you;* in the second, it often belongs to *I*'.[94]

As such, Irigaray argues that male discourse is firmly grounded in the positionality of the 'I'. He asks self-reflexive questions rather than appealing to his interlocutor, constructing his narrative around his perceptions, thoughts, emotions, while other agents in his narrative serve only to reflect and reinforce images of himself. Female discourse, however, needs to solicit a response from the other, affirming herself only through her verbal relation to her interlocutor. The narrator of 'Story' repeatedly questions her partner, continuously and relentlessly demanding a response from him despite the fact that he is clearly lying. As such, her partner's response is to narrate and re-narrate (when his lie is found out) his movements. The story is entirely defined by the protagonist's attempts to construct an account of her lover's whereabouts despite the physical and verbal barriers to this task. The narrator drives to her lover's house where 'the light is on, but I can't see anything clearly because of the half-closed

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[92] Hofmann, 'The Rear-View Mirror,' n.p.
[93] Irigaray, 'The Three in *Genres*,' 145.
[94] Ibid.

venetian blinds and the steam on the glass' (*CS,* 4). When the couple finally speak, the confrontation is still characterized by the lover's reticence and the protagonist's attempts to narrativize the event. The lover's speech throughout the story is sparse, but as they confront each other the protagonist notes that he says, '"Look", and my name, and I am waiting for him to say that she is here and also that it's all over between us. But he doesn't, and I have the feeling he did intend to say something like that, at least that she was here, and that he then thought better of it for some reason' (5). Here, the lover seems to start to explain himself, but instead his imperative 'Look' acts instead to refocus the attention of the reader and the protagonist onto him so that his appeal to understanding becomes instead 'Look at me'. Similarly, after his quite unclear explanation he presupposes the protagonist's ability to comprehend his narrative, stating 'You don't understand, do you?' (5). The lover's directive then triggers another attempt to piece together the story, as the protagonist 'tr[ies] to figure it out' (5). The protagonist's questioning, her attempt to reconstruct the story, therefore, allows the reinforcement and affirmation of the male 'I' insofar as the story becomes about trying to uncover his movements and motivations, while the female 'I' recedes. The narrator resorts to writing the events down in the 'third person and the past tense' (3) as a way of gaining control of her own narrative, to reaffirm herself in the discourse of her own story, a tactic also employed by the protagonist of *The End of the Story.* But, in the novel and the story, even the third person becomes an insufficient mode of expression: 'Then a day came when I had used she for I so long that even the third person was too close to me and I needed another person, even farther away than the third person' (*ES,* 202).

Davis seems to eschew both the earnest search for the self and the postmodern enactments of the 'death of the author' to explore instead the self's many confused and unstable meanings, exposing the instability of representation, in what Joshua Cohen has called 'reflexive incomprehension'. This reflexivity 'distances, doubles, and ironizes the discursive forms that

govern experience and its representation, and so breaks up any presumed unity of narrative consciousness'.[95] The problem of locating identity within the act of writing manifest in psychoanalytical explorations of the self in a number of Davis's early stories. The absence of the subject drives 'Examples of Confusion' (another 'example story' of sorts). Proceeding through fifteen fragments detailing its protagonist's lapses in cognition and recognition, the story begins as a kind of Lacanian pastiche in which a woman looks through the plate glass window of a closed coffee shop, remarking on the 'depth of the shop and the depth of the reflected shop, in the darkness of that mirror, which is or is not the darkness of the night behind me[…] I see my white jacket fluttering past disembodied[…] and I think of how remote I am, if that is me. Then think how remote, at least, that fluttering white thing is, for being me' (*CS,* 300). In the next section the protagonist looks into her bathroom mirror and feels alienated from her body, and her identity: 'I look at my bare feet on the tiles in front of me and think: Those are her feet. I stand up and look in the mirror and think: There she is. She's looking at you. Then I understand and say to myself: You have to say *she* if it's outside you […] In the mirror, you see something like your face. It's *her* face' (301). The association of the reflected self firstly with remoteness, and then with the externalised third person foregrounds Davis's flirtation with an impersonal mode that is unmistakably Kafkaesque. Indeed, here, the narrator seems to associate her femininity with a kind of impersonality, as though it is precisely her status as female which is unrecognizable and externalized. Notably, her inability to identify herself as female is rooted in her misrecognition of her own body. Frequently in Davis's fiction the speaker's body is portrayed as disconnected from the internal consciousness of the 'I'. As such, Davis demonstrates not only a Lacanian rupture of the ego but, crucially, an alienation from the self from within one's own body, a rejection of the female form. Joshua Cohen theorises this psychological disembodiment in Davis's work as a 'depressive mode', evident in

[95] Cohen, 'Reflexive Incomprehension,' 501.

a string of stories which allude to or are framed by psychotherapy.[96] Cohen attests, however, 'that Davis' work simultaneously solicits and refuses a psychoanalytic approach' in a similar fashion to how her work teasingly alludes to, while simultaneously shutting out, other theoretical applications.[97] While Cohen's evaluation seems to accurately underscore the problems of interpreting Davis's fiction along any kind of theoretical, philosophical or ideological line, Davis's focus on grammar mediates any psychoanalytic explorations of the construction of the female self in 'Examples of Confusion'. Grammar and linguistic experimentation, therefore, offers a productive lens through which to examine her ambivalent political relationship to feminism.

It is significant, then, that what Davis describes as her two most 'explicitly' political stories 'A Mown Lawn' and 'Suddenly Afraid', both approach female identity through linguistic experimentation that challenges the semantic nature of the word 'woman'.[98] 'Suddenly Afraid', which reads, as a continuation of the title, 'because she couldn't write the name of what she was: a wa wam owm owamn womn' (703), fractures the word 'woman', drawing attention not to its meaning but to the materiality of the word itself. The word remains unuttered, forcing the reader to complete Davis's anagram and to supply this identity for the narrator when she cannot. Here Davis's speaker is cast as anti-Adamic, unable to name and therefore to identify within the symbolic order. But this linguistic reluctance also expresses, perhaps, a political discomfort towards identity politics. The narrator's inability to name herself a woman, despite that being the 'name of what she was', expresses a resistance to and frustration with this affiliation. The garbled ordering of the letters suggests a haphazard association with what it might mean to be a woman, while the final incarnation of the word

[96] Ibid, 503.
[97] Ibid, 507.
[98] Lydia Davis, 'Fellows Brunch at the Kelly Writer's Center', University of Pennsylvania, April 25, 2017. http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Davis.php.

‘womn’ seeks to abbreviate the lexical binding of ‘woman’ to ‘man’ to the point of erasure. In this final dismemberment of the male suffix, Davis’s ‘womn’ achieves the same transformation as *la femme* in ‘French Lesson’, a severance, if an insufficient one, of female identity from its position as a deviation of masculinity.

Davis’s earlier story ‘A Mown Lawn’ operates in a similar fashion to ‘Suddenly Afraid’, engaging in a similar semantic game which is at once anagrammatic, associative, and aural. Jonathan Evans interprets the story’s italicisation of ‘*mown lawn*’ and its many pseudo-synonyms as disconnecting the word from a causal relationship with the rest of the sentence and to an external referent.[99] By making these familiar words ‘foreign’ through this typographical feature, their meaning is partially abstracted. Taking Evans’ analogy a step further, the reader’s immediate association is challenged by the words’ isolation from the rest of the text, producing the same effect as saying a word repeatedly until it begins to lose its meaning. Davis relies on this partial defamiliarization but also on the reader’s assumption of meaning, manipulating this moment of confusion to produce new connections. Indeed, the political implications of the story are not immediately apparent. Davis characteristically relies on suggestion and association to place broader concepts in relation to each other, sidestepping any overt expression of her own politics and instead leading the reader to puzzle through their own ideological assumptions. The story can be read as an antecedent to ‘Suddenly Afraid’, beginning with the sentence, ‘She hated a *mown lawn.* Maybe that was because *mow* was the reverse of *wom,* the beginning of the name of what she was — a *woman’* (314). Lexically connecting ‘woman’ to ‘mown lawn’, the narrator characterizes the latter as having a ‘sad sound to it, like a *long moan’* (314). The movement between ‘woman’ and ‘mown lawn’ is generated through phonetic association, a tactic which is reinforced by the onomatopoeic

[99] Evans, *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis*, 64.

literalization of this process in the evocation of ‘long moan’. The initial association of womanhood with hatred and lamentation sets off a series of transformations, in which ‘*lawn’* becomes ‘*man’* the reverse of which is ‘*Nam,* a bad war’ (314). The triangulation of woman, man, and the Vietnam War brings to mind the political unrest of the 1960s and 1970s in which anti-war protests and the sexual liberation movement had reached their peak. That each of these words is constituted from the reduction or reorientation of the word before it (reduction of woman to man, the reversal of man to Nam) implies a fundamental complicity between these three concepts. The reader is enticed to read this as a political complicity; the intermediary function of ‘*man*’ between ‘*woman*’ and ‘*Nam*’ seems to assign blame, highlighting both fundamental gender difference but also male political control. The seemingly trivial transformation of ‘*lawn*’ into ‘*lawman*’, ‘*Law and Order*’ and ‘*mow* a *lawn*’ (314) allies abstract concepts with suburban mundanity. The more overt political connection between ‘*Nam*’ and ‘*Law and Order*’, evoking civil unrest, appears diluted by the imperative to ‘*mow* the *lawn*’. But these political suggestions linger and permeate. The implication of protests and the enforcement of ‘*Law and Order*’ places the word ‘*mow*’ in a more sinister context, alluding to the phrase ‘to mow down’. The story more explicitly expresses its political leanings when the narrator states that ‘All of America might be one *long mown lawn*. A *lawn* not *mown* grows *long*, she said: better a *long lawn*. Better a *long lawn* and a *mole*. Let the *lawman* have the *mown lawn*, she said. Or the *moron*, the *lawn moron*’ (314). The narrator’s conception of America as the site upon which these contrasting political visions are playing out, between ‘*long*’ and ‘*mown*’, leans towards a liberal vision. The narrator’s final assertion, to ‘let the *lawman* have the *mown lawn*’, however, suggests a kind of defeat. It also seems to surrender the identity of ‘*woman*’ to the control to the ‘*mown lawn*’. As such, the story’s political message is not wholly one of resistance nor of conformity, but a kind of personal indifference, a shrugging of the shoulders in the narrator’s designation of ‘*mown lawn*’ Americans as

‘*moron[s]*’ (314). As such, Davis seems to (mis)lead her reader towards some kind of political statement, only to withdraw at the last minute with the more nonsensical assertion of ‘*lawn moron*’ (314) which seems to announce the end of the word game through its inability to generate new meaningful phrases. But this conclusion also reasserts the terms of the word game itself such that the reader begins to question whether they were reading too much into Davis’s anagrammatic word play.

‘But it does seem correct to say’: Correctness and Norms

Davis’s use of the ‘mown lawn’ as a metaphorical site on which the big political issues of late twentieth century play out, is compounded by the image of the ‘mown lawn’ as a recognizable signifier of American normativity. Identical, well-kept front lawns which, as Davis’s narrator notes ‘are valued by so many Americans’ (315), conjure images of sprawling American suburbia. Indeed, throughout the story the narrator keeps reverting back to the idea of the ‘*mown lawn*’ even as this phrase transforms into broader, more politically charged concepts, almost as though these issues are pushing at the boundaries of this image of American everyday life. As the story progresses the narrator creates a linguistic and conceptual link between social normativity, dubious political policy, and social ills: ‘So often, she said Americans wanted *more mown lawn.* All of America might be one *long mown lawn’* (314).

Davis’s work is fascinated with ideas of correctness and normativity, although not in the same fervent way as we shall later see in the work of David Foster Wallace. Davis is profoundly interested in correctness as a social and linguistic limit, something which can be deviated from or whose boundaries can be stretched to more creative ends. Therefore, while Davis seems pedantic in her attentiveness to grammatical accuracy and the formality of her language, it is usually the error — or the paradoxes of correctness as is the case in ‘Grammar Questions’ — which captures her imagination. Her story ‘Marie Curie, So Honorable a Woman’ consists of extracts from a biography of Marie Curie she was commissioned to

translate.[100] Fascinated by how badly written it was, Davis decided to translate it literally, achieving a story written entirely as linguistic malapropism:

> Woman of pride, passion, and labor who was an actress of her time because she had the ambition of her means and the means of her ambition actress of ours, finally, since between Marie and atomic force, the filiation is direct.
>
> Besides, she died of it. (*CS,* 404)

Here Davis emphasizes the biography's repetition and melodrama, exaggerating the notion of bad writing through her reciprocal bad translation. The story plays on the ridiculousness of idiom when it is misappropriated and misused, underscoring the communicative contract between language users. While 'Marie Curie, so Honourable a Woman', for the most part, is understandable, there are moments where it lapses into complete incomprehension. Davis is not only interested in everyday exemplars of complex grammatical structures, like in 'Example of a Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room', but also in the moments where communication breaks down, where language writes itself into ungrammaticality.

The notion of 'correctness' is a theme which is deeply rooted in Davis's own linguistic history — it is perhaps unsurprising that she once studied briefly to become a speech therapist.[101] As she describes in her 1996 interview with Larry McCaffrey,

> My father and mother were both hyperconscious of language in a way that went far beyond just correcting a mistake. Language was discussed constantly and naturally whenever and wherever it came up. Correctness: not only correct grammar but language correctly expressive, correctly pleasant to the ear also (my father would actually apologize if he repeated a word in a sentence!) Nobody used slang in the family, but not because it was frowned upon: it's hard to remember, but if I imagine my brother or me using a slang expression, I see a kind of spotlight of attention being turned on it for the curiosity it was, I see it being at the very least pointed out, at the most discussed, its origin pondered.[102]

[100] Evans, *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis*, 111.
[101] Goodyear, 'Long Story Short,' n.p.
[102] Davis, interviewed by McCaffrey, *Some other frequency*, 69.

The practice described here of taking colloquial or 'incorrect' language seriously, examining it almost etymologically, is exactly the method Davis adopts in her fiction. Her attentiveness to correctness, however, does not map onto a rigid vision of normativity either in her fiction or her world view, as stories such as 'A Mown Lawn' show. Unlike David Foster Wallace, who had a very similar, grammatically-focused upbringing, Davis's view of language is not a traditionally prescriptivist one, but instead takes a similar view to Cavell's interpretation of prescriptivism in his seminal essay 'Must We Mean What We Say':

> The other point I wish to emphasize is this: if a normative utterance is one used to create or institute rules or standards, then prescriptive utterances are not examples of normative utterances. Establishing a norm is not telling us how we ought to perform an action, but telling us how the action is done, or how it is to be done. Contrariwise, telling us what we ought to do is not instituting a norm to cover the case, but rather presupposes the existence of such a norm, i.e., presupposes that there is something to do which it would be correct to do here. Telling us what we ought to do may involve *appeal* to a pre-existent rule or standard, but it cannot constitute the establishment of that rule or standard.[103]

Cavell's contradiction of the very terms of prescriptivism in language usage is derived from a view of a language as both a product and instrument of social connection. By demoting the concept of the 'norm' from its position as symbolic law (as the French feminists might have seen it) and uncovering it as, instead, the product of social exchange and human interaction with language itself, Cavell casts the idea of the 'norm' and of 'correctness' as part of an evolving system of communication. Davis's fiction operates through a similar lens; her work repeatedly examines the paradoxes and challenges of social correctness through a forensic attention to how we use language to communicate. Through her intensely close focus Davis transforms 'normative' language, or language which is taken for granted as normal, and shows

[103] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 21.

how it is in some way deviant, illogical, making her reader question it. This is prominent in the title story of her collection *Can't and Won't*, which reads as follows:

> I was recently denied a writing prize because, they said, I was *lazy.* What they meant by *lazy* was that I used too many contractions: for instance, I would not write out in full the words *cannot* and *will not,* but instead contracted them to *can't* and *won't* (*CW*, 46).

Here, Davis parodies the critical response to her own writing, both of her perceived 'correctness' — which Michael Hoffman observed as an 'other-century decorum' — and in the fact that she 'always writes full sentences, is very careful with her tenses and auxiliaries, and tends to avoid contractions'.[104] The story also subverts Davis's supposed propensity for reduction, both in her language and her narrative form, and in doing so comically expands the story (and her contractions) through the provision of an unnecessary example of her use of 'can't' and 'won't'. The use of the expanded 'cannot and will not' cancels out the criticism while also doubly refusing to conform to this more formal mode of composition. In addition to a correctness in language, Davis is also committed to, perhaps obsessed with, conveying things correctly in her fiction. This lends her prose a self-conscious quality as her logical reasoning unwinds from a single observation into a compendium of alternative interpretations in an effort to find the most correct solution. As we have seen, Davis often does this by using the same vocabulary with only minute changes to word order which subtly change the meaning of her sentence and force her reader to attend closely to her prose in order to discern these shifts in logic.

As is characteristic of Davis's style, her concentrated analysis of the contraction lingers just slightly too long so as to disarm her reader. Her blunt, overly-literal explanation highlights the absurdity of the issue and of the notion of correctness in language. Davis also employs this method in 'We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders', which

[104] Hofmann, 'The Rear-View Mirror,' n.p.

both demonstrates and parodies academic fascination with incorrect language use. The story takes the form of a mock-linguistic report analysing twenty-seven get well cards sent to a member of the fourth grade class.[105] Here, the narrator is much less interested in the sick child than in the sentence structure of the children's letters. Detailing the 'general appearance', 'length', use of 'formulaic sentences', and 'overall coherence' of each one, the study pays great attention to sentence structure. Assigning creative weight to conjunctions in compound sentences such as 'but' or 'because', the narrator notes that 'the most common, and least expressive, conjunction is *and'* (*CS*, 540). The study also encompasses a stylistic account of the letters, noting with relish one of the children's use of the 'Anglo-Saxon [verb] *yank'* (542). The mock-academic tone attempts to draw conclusions from the largely meaningless and formulaic phrases, resulting in a number of comic insights and characterizations: 'the length and content of the shortest letters appear to connote depressive or apathetic states of mind in their authors' (539). In one section, under the title 'Formulaic Expressions of Sympathy', the narrator details uniform set phrases such as 'Miss you' and 'Hope You Are Feeling Better' and examines how various letters have deviated from these prescribed forms. Davis parodies her narrator's scientific detachment from the content of the letters. Indeed, what is lost from the narrator's linguistic report is the recognition of the letters as small acts of communication — the recipient of the letters is notably absent. As such, the story directs its critical gaze, allegorically, onto the abstraction of linguistic study away from the view of language as a fundamentally social phenomenon.

Despite trying to quantify and generalize the information garnered from the get-well cards, the narrator's focus on deviations from normative usage serves to foreground the individual characters of the anonymous authors. Here, stylistic deviance subverts the empirical

[105] The cards themselves were sent to Davis's brother after a childhood accident, which Davis's mother had kept. Davis, interviewed by Boorman, '"Honor the Syntax",' n.p.

desire to identify universal models and codes, instead revelling in idiosyncratic personal use. The examination of incorrect linguistic expression as an implicit mark of individuality is prominent in this story and elsewhere in Davis's work. Indeed, while Davis pokes fun at the reading of psychological detail into the placement of commas and slips in verb tense, she does believe that the structure of the sentence is inherently tied to the consciousness of the writer. As she wrote of her attempts to translate Proust: 'Proust felt, however, that a long sentence contained a whole, complex thought, a thought that should not be fragmented or broken. The shape of the sentence was the shape of the thought, and every word was necessary to the thought'.[106] The notion of style as an expression of self is an important one for Davis, one that strengthened through her work in translation, but which is also problematized in her parodic mimicry of other writers.

As I discussed in my previous chapter, these ideas about style are rooted in nineteenth-century writing pedagogy. By the time Davis began writing, however, these ideas had developed alongside the developments of formal linguistics. The structuralist paradigm had always emphasized the difference between *langue* (the system of language) and *parole* (language as it is spoken), focusing its efforts on the underlying structure of *langue* rather than dealing with the messier realm of everyday speech. Chomsky's programme took up this division, recasting Saussure's terms as *competence* ('the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language') and *performance* ('the actual use of language in concrete situations').[107] Grammar then provides all the necessary rules for an 'ideal-speaker' to express the language to its full capacity.[108] The imagining of an overarching, universal 'norm', regardless of its potential unknowability, corresponds to the longstanding belief, outlined in my previous chapter, that 'good English' was somehow representative of national unity and moral strength. As I will

[106] Davis, 'Translator's Note,' xxx.
[107] Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2015), 4.
[108] Ibid.

demonstrate in my final chapter, these social and intellectual forces play into the presentation of standard English as the 'norm' from which all other ways of speaking and writing deviate, positioning all 'non-standards' modes of expression as deficient. Davis's earlier work was written at a time when this kind of linguistic normativity was being challenged through the social shifts of the latter half of the twentieth century. As McGurl notes, with the Cold War emphasis on notions of 'selfhood' and 'self-discovery' there was a distinct shift in favour of the expressionist 'I am' in American fiction and M.F.A. programmes.[109] This propensity for personal authenticity in narrative was encapsulated in the creative writing programme's mantra, 'find your voice'.[110] But as social hierarchies came to be questioned in the wake of the civil rights movement, 'I' no longer solely referred to the standard English-speaking, educated classes but began to lean towards a more multicultural, ethnically diverse 'I' as a benchmark for the American self. 'In American literature of the 1960s and 1970s', McGurl states, 'very few people were taking exceptional pride in proper English, and hybrid vernacular projects [...] were all the rage'.[111] In her characteristically idiosyncratic way, Davis's protagonists speak a hyper-correct standard English but do so to demonstrate the profound strangeness of 'normative' language, her investigation of grammar thriving on the possibilities of mistakes, distractions, memory loss, and shifts in attention that prevent the everyday performance of 'correct' speech.

We might read this defamiliarizing tendency in Davis's work as not only examining issues of linguistic normativity as they pertain to social convention and conformity, but also as playing a role in relocating the indeterminacy of language and grammar in the everyday. In this way, Davis's focus is notably Wittgensteinian; many of her stories begin the philosophical

[109] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 265.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid, 267.

work of, as Cavell describes, 'leading words back' from the 'metaphysical to the everyday'.[112] The narrator of 'Thyroid Diary', who believes her cognitive processing has been severely affected by her underactive thyroid, describes trying, in her translation practice, 'to find an equivalent in English before I really understand the French. Then I realize that I don't understand the French, even after trying several times' (*CS,* 388). Once again, Davis uses translation as an analogy for more philosophical problems of language. Davis's narrator finds herself looking at the dictionary and finding it to be no help to her. The narrator tries to 'put down something noticeably wrong, so that later I will see that the spot needs work, but everything I think of is so poor it's embarrassing' (388). The narrator's lack of connection between the world and word is therefore doubled, in her initial inability to understand and translate the French word into an English one and then in her inability to provide a deliberately incongruous substitute. The narrator's will to correctness, here, is described as socially crippling: she is embarrassed by her own failures to both find the word and then an adequately wrong word. But her embarrassment has no recipient, the entire social exchange plays out in the act of translation and of writing. The narrator's inability to find the word, then, seems directly linked to a deficit of interpersonal communication. Notably, the narrator's 'embarrassment' causes her to search for the word in the dictionary, resulting in her 'learning more about *embarrassment* and its earlier, concrete meaning of "encumbrance" or "obstruction"' (388). The exposition of 'embarrassment' results in the convergence of world and word, as the narrator locates tangible and identifying meaning in the word's concrete usage which has become abstracted and deferred over time.

Davis's work is often about an extreme questioning of the standard as a kind of deviance in and of itself, an accidental construction of rules that determine how we communicate and

[112] Stanley Cavell, *As Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 35.

yet whose transgression has profound consequences. For example, ‘Letter to a Funeral Parlour’, like ‘Grammar Questions’, seeks to preserve a decorum surrounding the language we use to describe death. In the titular letter Davis writes to complain about the funeral parlour’s use of the term ‘*cremains’* to describe her father’s ashes (380). Davis objects to the imposition of a technical word onto the public sphere: ‘You in the business must have invented this word and you are used to it. We the public do not hear it very often. We don’t lose a close friend or a family member very many times in our life [...] Even less often do we have to discuss what is to be done with the family member or close friend after their death’ (380). What is at issue here is the provision of a word for something which should remain without a language. As ‘Grammar Questions’ demonstrated, the grammar of mourning should not be easy and formulaic, it should, rather, be painstakingly interrogated, worked over. The space left by a lost relative cannot be filled with the pithy terminology of *cremains,* which Davis compares to other commercialized products like ‘Cremora, or Coffee-ate’, ‘*Porta Potti* or *Pooper-scooper’* (381). Ventriloquising her father, Davis analyses the linguistic and rhetorical effects of this kind of language: ‘In fact, my father himself, who was a professor of English and is now being called *the cremains,* would have pointed out to you the alliteration in *Porta Potti* and the rhyme in *pooper-scooper.* Then he would have told you that *cremains* falls into the same category as *brunch* and is known as a portmanteau word’ (381). This re-embodiment of her father through the unveiling of these linguistic devices allows Davis to show that grammar is a deeply personal and affective matter. She ends her letter with a conservative correction, suggesting the funeral parlour continue to use the traditional word ‘*ashes*’: ‘We are used to it from the Bible, and are even comforted by it. We would not misunderstand. We would know that these ashes are not like the ashes in the fireplace’ (381). Therefore, Davis ends with a reversion to linguistic ambiguity, a loosening of hyper specificity and correctness and a confidence that certain words somehow find the correct meaning. In this conservative reversion to the Bible as an instrument

of shared value, Davis expresses a cathartic, affirming vision for language as, if not universal, broadly and commonly known. This is the same sentiment expressed frequently in her stories when her characters refer back to the etymologies of words and in doing so take steps to clarify the world around them.

While Davis's voice is corrective at times these prescriptive impulses are deployed in the Cavellian sense of a continuous social moulding of the language community through grammatical interrogation. In adopting an almost extreme version of the 'standard', Davis tests language's ability to stretch and change within such tight constraints. In doing so, she sets her limits as both the normative conventions of English usage and the deep grammatical structures which govern and underpin these conventions. In this way, her writing bridges a gap between the social and the structural, treating grammar not as an overarching system of linguistic authority but as a fundamental manifestation of Wittgenstein's 'forms of life'.[113] Her work repeatedly dramatizes what happens when isolated linguistic curiosities enter into social situations. As such, her writing seems to converge with the stylistican Donald Freeman's definitions of 'style' as 'a particular exploitation of a grammar of possibilities'.[114] Davis's 'correctness' is not one of conservative linguistic principles or pedantry, but an openness to such a 'grammar of possibilities', which provide a correct representation for the problem at hand. In the same way Davis's fiction seems to intersect with the dense intellectual and political context in which she was writing, engaging with complex theoretical concepts but doing so at a remove. As such Davis helps us to tell an alternative story about the latter-half of the twentieth century, one which clearly demonstrates the centrality of grammar to broader intellectual contexts of 'French theory', McGurl's 'programme era', the political inheritances of the 1960s, Chomskyan linguistics, and the intricates of social correctness. Davis's work is both at the

[113] Cavell, *The As Yet Unapproachable America*, 46.
[114] Freeman, 'Linguistic Approaches to Literature,' 4.

centre and the margins of these movements; her work acts as a nexus on which these overlapping ideas and influences play out while never allowing any one to take over.

Davis is neither a representative figure (of an institutional trend, an aesthetic movement, or an ideological or theoretical viewpoint) nor can she be described, as she has been, as wholly singular. Instead, Davis straddles these two positions, revelling in the tangled, multifarious influences available to her. But her stories always find their way back from these wider contexts to more personal and intimate subjects, investigating grammar as diverse 'forms of life'. In my next chapter, we shall see how this highly-populated, tumultuous intellectual and political scene, which is highly generative for Davis, comes to be viewed by David Foster Wallace as irreparably fractured and profoundly troubling. Both authors use grammatical investigation as a way of getting to the heart of problems of communication. For Wallace, as we shall see, the notion of a shared grammar becomes a potential framework to solve the fundamental problems of communication caused by political division, and racial and social difference. Davis's project may not seem as ambitious as Wallace's and yet her analytical interest in the way in which grammar mediates and determines human relationships seems, in some way, to achieve a similar objective in a less conservative way. In treating the everyday, as Cavell states, as a 'point of view', Davis uses grammar as a way of questioning language and in doing so extracts it from its philosophical and political contexts and regrounds it in the realm of the everyday.[115]

[115] Cavell, *The As Yet Unapproachable America*, 35.

David Foster Wallace: A Grammar of Ethics

'English is all we've got'

David Foster Wallace's fiction is a product of many of the same intellectual contexts that surrounded Lydia Davis's work and in many ways exemplifies the institutional connections between fiction and 'theory' that Judith Ryan identifies as a hallmark of late twentieth-century writing.[1] But while Davis's evasive engagement with models of philosophical questioning was profoundly generative, this same intellectual scepticism became, for Wallace, the source of theoretical paralysis. Wallace's fiction repeatedly dramatises a self-conscious, over-analytical impulse in his characters, a hyper-awareness that ultimately leads to solipsism and isolation. This is most visible in Wallace's 2001 short story 'Good Old Neon', which begins 'My whole life I've been a fraud'.[2] Neal, the story's protagonist, is a depressed advertising executive who lives an outwardly fulfilling life but whose scepticism about all forms of human communication leaves him isolated, trapped in spiral of self-conscious overthinking. Neal, who we learn has committed suicide by car crash and is narrating the story from beyond the grave, locates his fundamental inability to make meaningful connections in the inadequacies of 'one-word-after-another-word English' (151), which creates 'all these total misunderstandings of what's really going on at the most basic level' (151).

In his attempts to find a way to express himself to those around him Neal parrots a number of different social language games, experimenting with the language of psychotherapy, Buddhist meditation, and evangelical Christianity. Neal finds that he is not able to convey anything true about himself through these various languages but is merely performing the act

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[1] See Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012).

[2] David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion* (London: Abacus, 2012), 141. Hereafter all references to this edition will be given in-text.

of communication. Neal's disillusionment with English as an effective means of expression leads him to seek out 'universal forms', identifying mathematical logic as a 'clean and mechanical' (147) means of neutralizing the uncertainty inherent in human communication. Rejecting English, which can be performed and manipulated to allow its user to play multiple roles, Neal seeks instead the kind of objectivity found in 'a theorem's proof' that is 'true everywhere and all the time, not just when you happen to say it' (167).

Neal's narrative is caught up in this paradox between wanting to express himself 'in logical terms, since they're the most abstract and universal. Meaning they have no connotation and you don't feel anything by them' (164) and his realisation that 'English is all we've got to [...] try to have anything larger or more meaningful and true with anybody else' (151). Language is portrayed as an ill-fitting structure that doesn't adequately represent our vast, inexpressible inner experience. Neal describes our internal lives as 'enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe' but notes that 'the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes' (178). He describes death as a release, an opening of the door, allowing one to be fully 'expressible' and 'in anyone else's room in all your own multiform forms and ideas and facets' (178).

For Neal, however, this grand empathetic vision, which, in turn, facilitates the true expression of the self, can only be achieved, paradoxically, through self-annihilation. But his death is mitigated by a shift in narrative perspective; moving quickly between the various characters in Neal's life, finally settling on one David Wallace who is seen looking up Neal's photograph in 'his 1980 Aurora West W.S. yearbook' and trying 'through the tiny keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my death' (180). The mid-sentence shift into David Wallace's voice, in which he recalls his own feelings of fraudulence and crippling self-consciousness, offers fiction as a meaningful substitute to Neal's nihilistic

view that knowledge of the other can only be achieved through death. In his attempts to understand Neal (both imaginatively and through his own investigation of self) David Wallace becomes both reader and author of Neal's story and is placed in an interlocutory relationship even if no words pass between the two characters.[3] Where Neal succumbs to the reality of the 'cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else', David Wallace 'prohibit[s] that awareness from mocking the attempt', allowing 'the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him' to 'comman[d] that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, "Not another word"' (181).

The concerns outlined in 'Good Old Neon' might be read as an aesthetic statement for Wallace's work as a whole, which is fundamentally concerned with the obstacles to human connection and how to overcome them.[4] Wallace's verbal dexterity, his ability to mimic various literary styles and technical vocabularies, are a hallmark of the author's much-lauded style. It is difficult not to consider Neal, with his futile attempts to find a meaningful 'language' and his hopeless dissatisfaction with the contingency of 'English', as a fictional stand-in for the 'real' David Foster Wallace. Like Neal, Wallace was intrigued by the logical stability universal forms had to offer, having briefly pursued a doctorate in analytic philosophy in 1987. In 2003 he published *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* in which he noted that the 'lack of specific real-world referents' in mathematics allows it to 'yield maximum hygiene'.[5]

[3] David Hering places specific emphasis on the resolution of 'Good Old Neon', which he claims portrays a 'hitherto undramatized relationship between author, character and reader' and marks a significant departure in Wallace's oeuvre in which 'David Wallace' is configured not as author but as character. This contrasts with other iterations of this authorial persona such as that of the 'Author Here' section in *The Pale King* that forcefully asserts itself not just as 'not some abstract narrative persona' but 'the real author', a detail that Hering interprets as a recurring 'monologic' impulse in Wallace's work. David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 116; 146.

[4] Clare Hayes-Brady argues that Wallace's 'great intellectual concept' is his fraught awareness of 'the paradoxical interdependence of isolation and connection.' In *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 96.

[5] David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 22-23, 31.

But while Wallace was drawn to the ways universal forms have the potential to remove 'misunderstandings', he found the anaesthetizing effect of logical process immensely troubling, believing that logic's separation from 'real-world referents' leaves it ethically bereft.[6] As he states in *Everything and More,* 'metaphysics exacts nothing of ethics or moral value or questions about what it is to be human'.[7] English, for all its imperfections, represents both the obstacles and the solution to the problem of communication, thus forming the basis of his belief that 'language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming and remedying'.[8]

The notion that language is inadequate and yet wholly necessary for, as Wallace puts it, 'interhuman life itself' forms the basis of his review of Bryan Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, originally published in 1999 as 'Tense Present' and then collected under the title 'Authority and American Usage' (2005).[9] Unlike the amoral, abstract universal systems explored in 'Good Old Neon', which only serve as an instrument of Neal's alienation, Wallace views language, and more specifically grammar, as the ethical and political foundation of American society:

> If you are thinking that all this seems not just hideously abstract but also irrelevant to the Usage Wars, or to anything you have any interest in at all, I submit that you are mistaken. If words' and phrases' meaning depend on transpersonal rules and these rules on community consensus, then language is not only non-private but also irreducibly *public, political,* and *ideological.* This means that questions about our national consensus on grammar and usage are actually bound up with every last social issue that millennial America's about — class, race, sex, morality, tolerance, pluralism, cohesion, equality, fairness, money: you name it. (88)

By casting grammar as an urgent civic matter Wallace identifies it as a means by which a nation fractured by polarising political viewpoints, identity politics, consumer culture, and

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[6] Ibid, 31.
[7] Ibid, 95.
[8] David Foster Wallace, interviewed by Larry McCaffrey, 'A Conversation with David Foster Wallace,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993), http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by- larry-mccaffery/.
[9] David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (London: Abacus, 2005), 70. Hereafter references to this edition will be given in-text.

postmodern *ennui* might be reshaped on a democratic scale. Wallace presents grammar as a moral code, a touchstone through which national consensus might be achieved. In a direct inversion of the longing for abstract, mathematical form in 'Good Old Neon', Wallace highlights the necessity for a shared language, a subject which is 'both vexed and highly charged' (72), to be 'literally *worked out* instead of merely found' (72, emphasis in original).

Working backwards from this complex political and linguistic position, this chapter will examine how Wallace negotiates the opposition between difference and universality as a grammatical problem, as well as an aesthetic and political one. Moving between considerations of language's philosophical problems and his more practical concerns with basic communication, Wallace ultimately sought to promote a shared language that 'the nation uses to talk to itself' (109). He envisages language as capable of addressing the expansive and seemingly irreconcilable differences (gender, race, class, regional etc.) present in American society by providing a common ground through which these diverse groups could communicate. In 'Authority and American Usage', he identifies standard English as a problematic but viable solution to these problems of political and linguistic consensus. In Wallace's view, the grammar a community uses as well as the rules and conventions it decides upon, should be arrived at through focused labour, guided by the 'rigor and humility' that makes up what he calls 'Democratic Spirit', a kind of 'advanced US citizenship' (72), which does not lean towards either liberal or conservative political or linguistic viewpoints but seeks to provide, as Jeffrey Severs notes, a kind of democratic 'balance'.[10]

[10] Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017), 1. It is worth noting that Wallace's concerns about language were limited to his American context. As Andrew Warren argues, '[Wallace's] sole case study was America, either because he thought it exceptional or exemplary, or simply because it was all that he knew well enough to write about.' Throughout his career, he persistently conceives of specifically American problems as universal ones. The problematic association of Americanness with universality is further complicated by Wallace's particular conception of his American audience as white, well-educated, middle-class, and male (although he always referred to his reader as 'she'). Wallace's broader universalising statements about language and on other subjects should be considered in light of his conflicted and sometimes problematic conception of both his audience and the society he was hoping to affect.

‘Authority and American Usage’ demonstrates just how ‘vexed’ language usage can be by exploring the ‘seamy underbelly of U.S. lexicography’ (67) and by establishing America’s political divide in terms of the opposition between linguistic ‘descriptivism’ and ‘prescriptivism’. Prescriptivism, the practice of deciding and disseminating what is and isn’t ‘good’ grammar, is the governing logic of schools, universities and other institutions. It associates ‘correctness’ with the usage of ‘educated’ speakers and linguistic authorities. Descriptivism, in contrast, comprises the methodological basis of traditional linguistics. Descriptive linguists believe that language’s correct use is derived from how it is used by native speakers. Wallace characterises these two linguistic attitudes as political extremes, describing ‘Popular Prescriptiv[ists]’ as ‘mostly older males, the majority of whom actually do wear bow ties’ (79) and categorising the field as largely dominated by ‘linguistic conservatives’. Conversely, ‘Descriptivists’ are cast as having their ‘ideological roots firmly in the US Sixties’ (80).

These two models of how linguistics interacts with the political also maps onto Wallace’s aesthetic concerns about the role of the writer in the public sphere. As Robert Chodat argues, Wallace is a writer who is far more interested in perpetuating ‘a grand message’ through his fiction, than he is in the ‘here and now’ of his situation.[11] Chodat considers how Wallace, as part of a particularly didactic sub-tradition in American writing, is inherently preoccupied with how his fiction generates ‘a vocabulary of ought and ought-not’, a moral code for the way in which communities and individuals interact.[12] While I agree that Wallace’s writing exhibits a decidedly ‘prescriptive’ impulse, particularly in his later works, I will argue here that in his

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Andrew Warren, ‘Wallace and Politics’ in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace,* ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), 175.

[11] Chodat includes Wallace in a group of writers that he calls ‘postwar sages’, writers who go against the grain of twentieth and twenty-first-century American fiction in their concern for ‘telling’ rather than ‘showing’. Robert Chodat, *The Matter of High Words: Naturalism, Normativity and the Postwar Sage* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 3.

[12] Ibid, 2

early texts he is fascinated by cultural and linguistic difference. Understanding Wallace's work through the complex moral tension between descriptivism and prescriptivism laid out in 'Authority and American Usage' provides, therefore, a key to understanding Wallace's own 'vexed' political and aesthetic vision.

In this brief outline of the chapter's key concerns a constellation of terms and oppositions has already arisen — prescriptivism, descriptivism, consensus, universality, and difference— all of which inform and modify each other. As both 'Good Old Neon' and 'Authority and American Usage' demonstrate, Wallace viewed grammar just as inextricable from issues of culture, philosophy, politics, and identity as he did from the problems of aesthetics. If the boundaries between universality and difference, or between prescriptivism and descriptivism, blur — and, despite Wallace's characteristic pedantry in qualifying his own language, they do — it is because of the tightly wound complexity with which he was treating these concepts, not as self-contained ideas but as a condition of what he calls 'muddy bothness'.[13] Examining a range of texts across Wallace's career I will explore how an application of the principles of prescriptivism and descriptivism to Wallace's fiction might help us to make sense of these varied currents in his work. In the first half of the chapter I will explore how, in contrast to Chodat's assertion that Wallace is predominantly prescriptive, much of Wallace's early work is concerned with a descriptivist form of fictional representation. His first short story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), his essay on rap and hip-hop *Signifying Rappers* (1990), and early sections of *Infinite Jest* (1996) track Wallace's struggle to incorporate and absorb difference within his own writing. Through these texts Wallace undertakes a linguistic study of difference, the most pertinent and fraught moments of which

[13] Wallace uses this term in an essay on the director David Lynch to describe the uncomfortable ways in which Lynch presents his characters as simultaneously good and bad, a quality that makes them 'complex, contradictory, real'. Claire Hayes-Brady appropriates the phrase to theorize what she reads as Wallace's resistance to absolute ideological positions, favouring process instead of conclusion. David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 2004), 211; Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 24.

deal with race. At the same time Wallace is undertaking these fictional explorations of difference, he is, in key non-fiction texts such as 'E Unibus Pluram', repeatedly emphasising and dramatizing the need for consensus and communication. It is in *Infinite Jest* that these two modes begin to converge and vie for dominance and where Wallace explores the various pitfalls of each. Finally, taking 'Authority and American Usage' as a statement of Wallace's aesthetic and social outlook for his later writing, specifically his unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), I shall chart his ultimate reversion to a prescriptivist politics that endorses standard English as the necessary measure required to break free of the solipsistic and divisive cultural conditions of the Culture Wars. 'Authority and American Usage' is poised just at the moment when Wallace begins to turn away from his study of difference and back towards a vision of political and social consensus. My next section will dig deeper into the 'seamy underbelly of U.S. lexicography', exploring the ways in which Wallace used the concepts and principles of formal linguistics as not only a driving force for his fiction but also for his political worldview.

Politics and the English Language

Wallace's interest in linguistic philosophy and the ways it plays out in his fiction has been widely scrutinised in the years following his suicide in 2008. Despite his clear fascination with matters of grammar and language use, however, critics have largely neglected how developments in formal linguistics in the latter half of the twentieth century might have impacted on Wallace's work. Instead, his texts have been more frequently examined in relation to what Richard Rorty described, in 1967, as the 'linguistic turn', which saw issues of language dominate the major strands of Anglo-American philosophy. [14] His first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987) has been widely read as staging a linguistic and philosophical debate between

[14] Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy' in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992), 8.

Wittgenstein and Derrida, and the vast majority of criticism has sought to frame his work as an oscillation between these two philosophical outlooks.[15]

While the philosophy of language undoubtedly underpins much of Wallace's writing, a far less explored aspect of his work is his obsession with grammar, which also emerges as a pervasive theme in his fiction. Wallace's fastidiousness regarding matters of grammar and usage was often used by the author to illustrate his folksy hang-ups and compulsions, almost always for comedic effect. He admitted in an interview with Larry McCaffrey that he had always been a 'hard-core syntax weenie'.[16] Wallace's self-identification as a SNOOT, which he defines in 'Authority and American Usage' as 'this reviewer's nuclear family's nickname à clef for a really extreme usage fanatic', is rarely paid any critical attention.[17] But I propose that Wallace's SNOOTitude reveals a much deeper engagement with linguistic theory than his self-satirizing polemics on the misuse of apostrophes let on. In 'Authority and American Usage', two prominent schools of linguistic thought come to the fore as unlikely metaphors in his outline of the political tension between cultural difference and national consensus: the first is Chomsky's theory of 'Universal Grammar', which views grammar as an innate property of the human mind, and the second is the sub-field of sociolinguistics, which seeks to study language in its relation to social structures and cultural differences such as race, class, gender, and region. These two concurrent strands of linguistic study speak to different concerns in Wallace's fiction and political outlook, charting his interest both in the social diversity of language and his belief in deep, unifying structures.

[15] There have been a considerable number of critical works on Wallace's connections with philosophy, for example, *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy,* eds. Robert K. Bolger, and Scott Korb (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) and Allard den Dulk *Existential Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015). More recently Clare Hayes-Brady has examined Wallace's work within the philosophical traditions of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Richard Rorty. See also Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, op. cit.
[16] Wallace, interviewed by McCaffrey, 'A Conversation with David Foster Wallace,' n.p.
[17] Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 69.

The publication of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957) and *Aspects in the Theory of Syntax* (1965) caused a significant shift in American linguistics, away from Leonard Bloomfield's behaviourist model that had dominated linguistic study since the 1930s. Chomsky's theories challenged Bloomfield's practice in a number of key ways. Firstly, his expansion of linguistic study from phonology (the study of sounds) and morphology (the study of words) to syntax meant that linguists could examine the ways in which words and grammatical features combined into larger linguistic structures. Secondly, while Bloomfield's model had focused on the *parole* side of Saussure's *langue/parole* binary, Chomsky turned his focus instead to *langue,* the system underlying language and the relationship between this system and its expression (*parole*). Chomsky re-termed this binary *competence* and *performance.* As Randy Allen Harris notes, 'Chomsky changed the focus of linguistics radically — from discovering good grammars to justifying and evaluating them'.[18]

The relationship between *competence* and *performance* forms the basis of Chomksy's theory of 'Generative Grammar'. Its main innovation was a reconsideration of grammar not as a collection of existing utterances but as a system that contains the potential to produce new kinds of utterances. In other words grammar is like a game, comprised of a system of rules rather than 'a set of moves'.[19] As such, the language user could manipulate these rules to play the game however they liked, employing, as Chomsky describes, 'infinite use of finite means'.[20] Grammar, therefore, is not a static system but an innately creative and 'generative' process. As Chomsky argues, 'from this conception of language, it is only a short step to the association of the creative aspect of language use with true artistic creativity'; grammar is an 'instrument of free self-expression'.[21] Competence is defined as 'an idealized description of

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[18] Randy Allen Harris, *The Linguistics Wars* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 41.
[19] E.F.K. Koerner, *Toward a History of American Linguistics* (Abington: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 145.
[20] Noam Chomsky, 'Language and Freedom,' *The Chomsky Reader*, ed. James Peck (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 154.
[21] Ibid, 68.

the linguistic competence of native speakers of that language'.[22] The idea of the 'ideal' language speaker is a significant one, particularly if examined alongside sociolinguistics and when considering Wallace's later turn to standard English in 'Authority and American Usage'. While Chomskyan linguistics acknowledges the impossibility of this 'ideal' language community, its area of study nevertheless seeks to uncover the aspects of grammar that are both innate and universal. This is the basis of Chomsky's widely known and controversial theory of 'Universal Grammar', undoubtedly an attractive concept for Wallace who was profoundly interested in the idea that, as he puts it in 'Authority and American Usage', we are all 'hardwired to the same motherboard'.[23]

Emerging at exactly the same moment as Chomsky's pursuit of universality, the field of sociolinguistics sought to study language and its relation to various social factors, like race, class, gender, and geographical region. Sociolinguistics derived its methodologies from a confluence of dialectology and linguistic anthropology and had its origin in the work of nineteenth-century scholars such as William Dwight Whitney, Franz Boas and Edward Sapir, although the contemporary scholar William Labov is largely credited with having founded the field in the mid-1960s.[24] This brand of linguistics treats language as a living social organism which is profoundly affected by social, political, and cultural structures and institutions.

Labov's work began in the more traditional study of dialect and 'language change'. His influential *The Social Stratification of English In New York City* (1966) precipitated further study on the particular social conditions surrounding black English, which would later come to be called African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This project coincided with the heightened political climate of civil rights era and intrinsically linked sociolinguistics with

[22] Ibid, 85.
[23] Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 105.
[24] While many believe that the sociolinguistic method originated with Labov, Koerner outlines the true origins of this sub-field in the work of certain nineteenth-century linguists and philologists. See chapter 10 in Koerner, *Towards a History of American Linguistics*.

social justice.[25] Indeed, Labov collaborated in a number of government-sponsored research programmes and testified in Senate committees on the importance of acknowledging various dialects as socially valid in institutional settings. Labov's *Language in the Inner City* (1972) was born out of his curiosity about whether dialect differences were causing low literacy rates among urban African American students.[26] His team's findings not only set out one of the first comprehensive linguistic analyses of AAVE but also demonstrated how the awareness of AAVE as a distinct linguistic system might be put to use to increase the achievement of African American students in the public school system. The conceptualisation of black English as linguistically distinct from standard English had far reaching implications. Henry Louis Gates Jr. quotes Labov's assertion that 'things are happening in black grammar' in the introduction to his ground-breaking *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988). Gates Jr.'s evocation of these developments in sociolinguistics not only speaks to the validation that a serious linguistic study of black dialect gave black writers and critics of this period, but also shows how central linguistic aspects were to the solidification of black literary criticism.[27] The codification of cultural or ethnic difference as a set of grammatical rules would become an important idea for Wallace, who was grappling with questions about

[25] Koerner, *Towards a History of American Linguistics*, 266.
[26] More contemporary sociolinguists have criticized the early methodology of Labov as privileging a specific generational, regional, and gender-based assessment of AAVE. Indeed, in *Language in the Inner City,* Labov defines Black English Vernacular (BEV) as 'the relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black youth in most parts of the United States today, especially in the inner city'. As Renée Blake argues, however, 'This description of vernacular or core black culture constructs authentic African American membership and language as male, adolescent, insular and trifling. By default, everyone else in the black community, regardless of age, is a lame'. (A 'lame' is considered to be a person in a linguistic community who is unfamiliar with its linguistic norms'). William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black Vernacular English* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), xvii; Renée Blake, 'Toward Heterogeneity: A Sociolinguistic Perspective on the Classification of Black People in the Twenty-First Century', *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes our Ideas About Race,* eds. Sammy Alim, John R. Rickford, and Arnetha F. Ball (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 157.
[27] Despite this endorsement of the sociolinguistic project, Gates would later be a strong opponent (alongside Maya Angelou, Jesse Jackson and others) of the Oakland School Board's controversial 1996 recognition of Ebonics as distinct from standard English. I will discuss the Ebonics controversy later in this chapter. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), ix.

communication, isolation, and cultural fracture. Grammar, as a set of rules or a system to be studied, could provide crucial access to the reality of the other. While Jeffrey Severs notes that Wallace's work is inherently concerned with the Wittgensteinian notion that we are 'all in here together [...] in language', his fiction and essays are haunted by a perpetual awareness of how language often does not support a broad-based notion of community and instead enforces isolation and 'Group-exclusion'.[28] Situating Wallace's fiction between Chomskyan models of linguistic universalism and sociolinguistic explorations of cultural difference opens up a central tension in his aesthetic and social philosophy and allows one to address the pervasive issue of communication in his work on a deeper linguistic level.

'Arrangements of Distance': ***Girl with Curious Hair***

Wallace's first story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair,* written during his MFA at the University of Arizona in 1987, has been most commonly appraised as a 'response' to the literary models that underpinned the post-war creative writing programme. Kasia Boddy argues that each of the stories in the collection mimics a different postmodern precursor, including John Barth, Philip Roth, William Gass, Vladimir Nabokov, and Bret Easton Ellis.[29] This early evaluation of *Girl With Curious Hair* as a self-conscious inheritor of postmodernism has contributed to the consideration of the collection, alongside other works, as promoting a homogenous order that privileges the subjectivity of the white, male 'genius' at the expense of marginal subjectivities. While *Girl with Curious Hair* can indeed be understood as an exercise in stylistic mimicry, and, as Boddy notes, a deliberate stylistic 'exhaustion' of its predominantly (white, male) postmodern forebears, these interpretations have largely obscured

[28] Jeffrey Severs, *Wallace's Balancing Books,* 13; Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 103.
[29] Kasia Boddy, 'A Fiction of Response: *Girl with Curious Hair* in Context,' in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 24. Lucas Thompson's more recent *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017) seeks to reorient debates around Wallace and literary influence away from American postmodernism, instead focusing on Wallace's engagement with global literature.

the fact that the collection also includes some of Wallace's most direct confrontations with racial and sexual difference. *Girl with Curious Hair,* then, offers up an opportunity to read Wallace's early attempts to represent and explore diversity, a project that is closely tied to the linguistic and stylistic experimentation of the collection. Indeed, his stories are just as much concerned with the notion of dialect as they are with metafiction, pastiche and other hallmarks of postmodern style. The narrator of 'Say Never' is a Roth-like, elderly Jewish immigrant named Labov who, sharing his name with the eminent sociolinguist, tells his story through broken English. 'John Billy' and 'Everything is Green' adopt a mystified pseudo-Appalachian dialect that is a prominent motif across Wallace's work. Samuel Cohen claims that these stories, and Wallace's frequent reference to trailer parks, address a kind of 'raced whiteness', a characterisation that is often linguistically marked as both deviant and poetic, as in the Toni Ware sections of *The Pale King.*[30] In addition to these explorations of regional and ethnic diversity, both 'Lyndon' and 'Little Expressionless Animals' depict same sex relationships, while the collection's title story explores not only the racist attitudes of its central characters but also uses racial difference as a means of interrogating problems of communication and empathy that are so central to Wallace's critique of postmodernism.

In this way, incidences of and encounters with difference form the basis of the stories in *Girl with Curious Hair* and have an important role to play in interpreting how Wallace sought to integrate diversity into his work. The conversation regarding Wallace's often problematic attitude towards race has been less dominant than that concerning his treatment of women, but it has nevertheless been more critically productive.[31] Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Samuel Cohen,

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[30] Samuel Cohen, 'The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,' in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, eds. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 240.

[31] The critical backlash against Wallace has been largely intertwined with critiques of his readership, which, as Hayes-Brady notes is heavily biased 'towards the Y-Chromosome' (*Unspeakable Failures*, 167). Many of these early criticisms of Wallace's devoted 'lit-bro' fanbase came from outside the academy: see Molly Fischer, 'Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace,' *The Cut*, August 12, 2015, https://www.thecut.com/2015/08/david-foster-wallace-beloved-author-of-bros.html; Deirdre Coyle, 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me,' *Electric Literature,* April 17, 2017,

Lucas Thompson, and Jorge Araya's critical interventions consider how racial difference operates within Wallace's broader commitment to 'connect to [the] reader across the barriers that divide individuals from each other'.[32] These critical perspectives offer two possible lenses through which to read Wallace's encounters with difference, which broadly map onto the varying linguistic concerns that Chomsky and Labov represent. The first is Jorge Araya's claim that Wallace often introduces racial otherness into his fiction as a strategy of 'emphasizing difference' and, therefore, as a way to dramatize and work through problems of communication that arise from social and cultural stratification.[33] The second is derived from an interview Wallace gave in 2000 in which he praises the Jewish-American writer Cynthia Ozick, claiming that when he reads her work he experiences 'an utter erasure of difference, which does not happen to me with a lot of other writers from different cultural backgrounds'.[34] Here, Wallace mourns his inability to directly access writing from such 'cultural backgrounds' in the way that he can access Ozick's — or rather, in the way that Ozick's makes itself available for a kind of cross-cultural dissolution of difference. Thompson identifies the 'erasure of difference' as a central aspect of Wallace's treatment of race, stating that Wallace believed 'specific cultural content [to be] a mere surface-level dissimilarity that should not distract from a text's

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https://electricliterature.com/men-recommend-david-foster-wallace-to-me-7889a9dc6f03. These were followed by Amy Hungerford's argument that, based on troubling revelations about how Wallace treated women throughout his life, we should cease to read him altogether. Amy Hungerford, 'On Not Reading DFW,' in *Making Literature Now* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016). These interventions on the basis of Wallace's biography and influence have been mitigated by an increasing number of attempts to critically explore Wallace's vexed relationship to gender difference in his work. This has been most comprehensively done in Hayes-Brady's *Unspeakable Failures*. and Mary K. Holland's '"By Hirsute Author": Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace,' *Critique* 58, no. 1 (2016): pp. 65-78. See also, Adam Kelly's reading of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in light of French feminism, and Lee Konstantinou's consideration of Wallace's 'bad' influence. Both in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018).

[32] Samuel Cohen, 'The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,' 30. See also Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2006); Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace*; Lucas Thompson 'Wallace and Race,' in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*; Jorge Araya, 'Why the Whiteness?: Race in *The Pale King*,' in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (Ipswich, MA: Salem, 2015).

[33] Araya, 'Why the Whiteness?,' 240.

[34] Wallace, qtd. in Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 197.

instantiation of universal truths and themes'.[35] The tension between 'emphasis' and 'erasure' speaks to the broader aesthetic dilemma I outlined in my introduction. Examining Wallace's representations of race in early stories such as 'Girl with Curious Hair' and 'Lyndon', alongside his explicit engagement with African American art in *Signifying Rappers* (1990), helps untangle the various ways in which Wallace interrogates the notion of a shared language.

While grammar is not as central to 'Girl with Curious Hair' as it is elsewhere in Wallace's work, the story offers a way of elucidating Wallace's complex interlinking of racial difference with problems of communication and solipsism. The story's action unfolds during a concert by the jazz pianist, Keith Jarrett, and is narrated by Sick Puppy, an overtly racist and sociopathic young Republican (a precursor to Bret Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman) who is accompanied by his lover, Gimlet, and a drug-fuelled crew of punks sporting an array of exaggerated hair styles. The eponymous 'curious hair' belongs to a young girl who is seated directly in front of Sick Puppy and his cronies. Gimlet's fascination with the girl's 'blonde and curled hair' — features that suggest whiteness — is juxtaposed with Sick Puppy's overt racialization of Keith Jarrett's hair: 'all I could see of Keith Jarrett was the back of him and his hair's afro while he played'.[36] Jarrett's face, like the girl's, is turned away, actively concealed from Sick Puppy's point of view, his 'afro' standing in as an all-consuming signifier for his racial identity. Similarly, the description 'his hair's afro' amplifies Jarrett's hair — and, by extension, his blackness — to almost mythical proportions, serving to further distance Jarrett from Sick Puppy as racially other. But the focus on hair rather than faces serves only to blur the boundaries of racial identity. The girl's blondness does not *de facto* signify her whiteness just as Jarrett's afro falsely marks him as black.[37] Therefore, while Jarrett's performance

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[35] Ibid, 197.
[36] David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus 2009), 63, 60. Hereafter all references to this edition will be given in-text.
[37] While he is clearly characterised as African American in the story, Keith Jarrett is not actually black. This mistake is not uncommon — Jarrett has spoken at length in interviews about people refusing to believe that he is white. He puts this down largely to his association with jazz and the fact

provides the basis for this communal encounter between the story's characters, their one-directional gaze forecloses any act of mutual recognition.

As such, the story's central image is predicated on a (misdirected) racial gaze, which serves to underscore the failures of empathy. Cheese, one of Sick Puppy's crew, is the only character who seems to transcend the hollow feedback-loop and drug-induced self-consciousness experienced by the other characters. Cheese, who is set apart from the other members of Sick Puppy's crew because he is bald, is later revealed to be in an interracial relationship. He is characterised by his openness, not only in acting as an empathetic listener when Sick Puppy opens up about his disturbing childhood, but also by fulfilling a didactic role, explaining Jarrett's music to Sick Puppy in a way that momentarily seems to break through the latter's sociopathic apathy. Configuring Jarrett's improvisational jazz to be 'a line instead of a composed and round circle' (66), Cheese interprets the 'line' as antithetical to the recursive feedback-loop that Wallace saw as the primary aesthetic effect of postmodern fiction. Instead, the line projects outwards, foregrounding individual expression while still soliciting response. Sick Puppy recognizes the line as expressing something alien to his experience, claiming that 'line was like a little life story of the Negro's special experiences and feelings' (66). His appreciation of the music (via Cheese) nevertheless allows Sick Puppy to access his own interior self: 'without me even noticing the fact that Cheese took us from discussing musical genres and Keith Jarrett's negro experiences and emotions to no music and my white experiences and emotions' (67). The success of 'the line' in penetrating Sick Puppy's sinister,

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he wore his curly hair in an 'afro style' in the 1970s and 1980s. Whether, in 'Girl with Curious Hair', this is a mistake on Wallace's part or Sick Puppy's is unclear. Indeed, none of the criticism on the story or the collection more generally has picked up on this misidentification, perhaps, due to the fact that the story's racial implications have largely been ignored. Whether or not Wallace's misidentification of Jarrett is intentional, we can still read it as integral to the story's central action and to Wallace's developing attitudes towards racial difference. James Lincoln Collier, 'Jazz in the Jarrett Mode,' *The New York Times,* January 7, 1979. https://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/07/archives/jazz-in-the-jarrett-mode-jarrett.html.

vacant persona demonstrates a model of empathy and mutual understanding that is generated through a logic of separation (or an emphasis of difference) rather than connectedness, even though this empathy problematically privileges 'white experiences' at the expense of black ones.

The problems of empathy and communication raised in 'Girl' find greater expression in 'Lyndon', where personal and political concepts of 'love' and 'responsibility' are similarly configured in terms of 'distance'. As Severs notes, 'Lyndon' presents 'a rare opportunity to scrutinize Wallace in terms of race, gender, and sexual identity', while also exploring his affinities with the values of Lyndon B. Johnson's 'Great Society'.[38] While 'Lyndon' indeed crystallizes many of these key concerns, Wallace's early work is much more engaged in considerations of cultural diversity than Severs suggests: from mediations of ethnic and sexual difference throughout *Girl with Curious Hair, Signifying Rappers,* and his uncollected story 'Solomon Silverfish', to his diverse cast of characters in *Infinite Jest.* The story tells the fictional account of Boyd, a closeted gay man who is hired as an aide to Johnson and whose dutiful obsession with the President consumes his life. The story plays with layers of public and private selves; Boyd's public commitment to Johnson is buttressed by a kind of familial bond between the two men, the intensity of which is such that they are suspected by the other political aides of forming a romantic attachment. Boyd's feverishly dutiful relationship to Johnson is contrasted with his private, and crucially secret, life with René Duverger, a Haitian immigrant who later dies of what seems to be an anachronistic case of HIV/AIDS. At the story's surreal conclusion, the gravely ill Duverger disappears and it is revealed to Boyd that he has been taken to be 'presented to the President who is dying' (114). Boyd finds the two men in bed together, embracing, alongside a set of policy documents that Boyd thought he had lost.

[38] Severs, *Wallace's Balancing Books*, 78.

‘Love’ and ‘responsibility’ arise as central concepts for the story as a whole, with each character offering competing definitions of the words. Duverger’s marginalization (Severs reads his name as a derivation of ‘diverge’ or ‘divergent’) is exemplified specifically in his linguistic relationship with Boyd. Because Duverger’s English is limited, he and the protagonist speak ‘a kind of pidgin when alone’ (99).[39] Linguistically, pidgin languages are defined as having a ‘simplified grammar and a smaller vocabulary than the languages from which [they are] derived, used for communication between people not having a common language.’[40] Therefore, while pidgin’s grammatical simplicity renders it unrefined and clumsy, its remedial quality allows it to bridge the gap between fundamentally diverse experiences. In the story, however, the juxtaposition between Duverger’s limited English and Boyd’s limited French serves only to dramatise their disconnection:

> *‘Ce n’est pas moi qui tu aimes.’* [sic]
> ‘Of course I love you. We share a life, René’.
> He was having difficulty breathing. ‘*Ce n’est* not I’.
> ‘Whom, then?’ I asked, rolling him off. ‘If you say I do not love you, whom do I love?’
> *‘Tu m’en a besoin,’* he cried, rending dark bedroom air with his nails. ‘You *need* me. You feel the responsibility for me. But your love it is not for me.’
> ‘My love is for you, Duverger. Need, responsibility: these are part of love, in this nation.’ (99)

This passage is undoubtedly indebted to James Baldwin’s 1956 novel *Giovanni’s Room,* a heavily annotated copy of which can be found in Wallace’s personal library at his archive at the Harry Ransom Centre. In the novel, the protagonist’s conversations with his lover Giovanni move in and out of French and English, but the characters’ proficiency in both languages does not lead to the kind of linguistic misunderstanding characteristic of the above exchange between Boyd and Duverger. In a scene from *Giovanni’s Room,* Giovanni and David

[39] Ibid, 79.
[40] *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), s.v. ‘pidgin, n.’. http://www.oed.com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/143533?redirectedFrom=pidgin.

have a similar conversation to Boyd and Duverger's, Giovanni asking David '*Je t'aime, tu sais?*' and David replying '*Je le sais, mon vieux.*'[41] The scene from 'Lyndon' is almost a direct inversion of this. Where Giovanni affirms that he loves David, Duverger accuses Boyd of loving another: '*Ce n'est pas moi qui tu aimes.*' When Boyd assures him that he does, Duverger repeats his statement '*Ce n'est* not I', his mid-sentence shift into English generating a double negative. Unlike the reciprocal affirmation of love in *Giovanni's Room,* in which the answer is returned in the same language the question is asked, Duverger and Boyd engage in continuous, disruptive code-switching which defers the realisation of communal meaning. The conversation degenerates further into subjective definitions of love, demonstrating a fundamental difference between the two.

Boyd's conception of love is inherently bound up in notions of duty and responsibility. His emphasis on 'this nation' displaces the private, erotic valence of Duverger's definition, transforming it into a social and civic act. The evocation of national love serves not only to sublimate the private into the public, but also further emphasizes Duverger's alienation from the American way of life. This intimate exchange echoes the broader political themes of the story, which presents Johnson's politics as a model of American civic responsibility at odds with what Wallace viewed as the destructive self-gratification of the 1960s. In one scene Johnson expresses his disconnection from the 'youth of America' (106) who he believes have substituted 'feelings' for 'responsibility'.

In the final sections of the story, while Boyd is searching both for Duverger and the lost policy documents, he is summoned by Ladybird Johnson, who is silently attended by her black maid Wardine, and who informs him that Duverger has been taken to keep Johnson company

[41] In Wallace's annotations the page number for this scene is circled and annotations are given along the margins. While the edition of the novel in Wallace's collection is from 2000 it is highly likely that Wallace would have first read the novel either during his undergraduate degree or his MFA. David Foster Wallace's annotations of James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2000), 110, in David Foster Wallace Library*,* Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

on his deathbed.[42] Perplexed at the situation, Boyd expresses first concern for Duverger's health and then for his poor English, doubting his ability to communicate with the President. Despite this, Ladybird discloses that Lyndon and Duverger manage to have 'conversations of great length' (114), and she confirms that 'M. Duverger has impressed Lyndon as a truly singular Negro, Mr. Boyd. They have discussed such issues close to Lyndon's heart as suffering, and struggles between sides, and Negroness' (115). Not only do Lyndon and Duverger, then, inexplicably transcend linguistic barriers but they enter into a dialogue which expresses Duverger's racial marginalisation, a subject that is otherwise unvoiced in the story. The union of Johnson and Duverger introduces an alternative definition of 'love' to the one outlined by Boyd previously. As Ladybird expresses to Boyd, 'love is simply a word. It joins separate things' (115). 'Love' and 'responsibility' are, for Johnson, 'arrangements of distance' like 'a federal highway, lines putting communities, that move and exist at great distance, in touch' (115). In this model, facilitating empathy, consensus and connection is — like building federal highways — central to the mission of national government.

This grand structural metaphor can also be interpreted as a more intimate, syntactical one. Ladybird's description of love as a 'word' that 'joins separate things' configures it as a grammatical copula, a verb that links together a subject and its complement.[43] Significantly, in

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[42] It is apparent that 'Lyndon's Wardine is a prototype for *Infinite Jest's* Wardine section, which I discuss in greater detail in a later section. Wallace had a few dry runs at this character before giving her full expression in the opening sections of his novel. Wardine appears again in his early story 'Solomon Silverfish' as an African American prostitute and drug addict. In each instance Wardine is black and she barely speaks – she is usually mediated through another character – but her physical presence is emphasized. Her recurring presence across this early period of Wallace work, namely the late 1980s, makes her a significant figure in how Wallace conceptualizes race at this time.

[43] In Gayatri Spivak's analysis of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* she interprets the structure of the novel as a 'grammatical allegory', centred upon a reading of the novel's central section, 'Time Passes' as the 'copula' that facilitates the completion of both Lily's painting and the novel itself. As Spivak argues, 'the copula is not only the pivot of grammar and logic, the axle of ideal language [...] it also carries a sexual charge. "Copulation" happens not only in language and logic, but also between persons.' In Spivak's reading the copula mediates the masculine and feminine forces within the novel, both preserving and subverting the symbolic order of language. The erotic potential of Wallace's definition of 'love' as both sexual and grammatical is significant in one of only a few incidences in Wallace's work that depicts sexual relationships (and, in particular, a same sex relationship) in an

'Lyndon', tension arises in the conversations between Duverger and Boyd precisely because of their grammatical confusion over what subject and object the word 'love' or 'aimer' joins, a tension that is enhanced through the repeated objectification of Duverger throughout the story. Recasting 'love' as copula, moving it into the ontological role of the verb 'to be', shifts Duverger's grammatical role from object to subject-complement, something that completes the meaning of the subject. Duverger's new proximity to Lyndon, therefore, makes him not the object of Lyndon's love but crucially constitutive of the latter's identity. The grammatical definition of 'love' also subscribes to the same kinds of 'arrangements of distance' generated by the highway metaphor; while the copula joins together two things it also keeps them separate, enforcing with its own syntactical placement a distance between the two objects. The main grammatical copula in English is 'to be', whose function in creating and erasing distance will be crucial to my analysis of how Wallace attempts to write racial difference into *Infinite Jest.* The model of empathetic distance outlined in 'Lyndon' offers a key to Wallace's political vision, but this metaphor becomes considerably more complex when it directly encounters the question of racial difference.

As Severs notes, Wallace sets Johnson's more traditionally liberal politics against the cultural fracture of the 1960s.[44] Duverger's position as triply marginalized — as black, homosexual, and an immigrant — embodies the vast societal changes occurring in the 1960s and, at the same time, reflects the fraught social conservatism of the 1980s at the time Wallace was writing. Despite the promise of social reconciliation at the end of the story, the final image of Duverger and Johnson in bed projects a conflicted image of racial tolerance, one that is at once optimistic about the possibility of understanding and yet which is also coloured by the

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intimate and fulfilling manner. In this instance the erotic implications of the copula work to complicate its symbolic function. Boyd, who works predominantly on public correspondence and policy documents, cannot comprehend how the copula might signify a more private form of communion. Gayatri Spivak, 'Unmaking and Making in *To the Lighthouse*,' in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 43.

[44] Severs, *Wallace's Balancing Books*, 79.

imagery of disease and decay. Duverger's disease causes his 'brown' skin to fade to 'grey' (103), while elsewhere Boyd notices Lyndon's 'brown-freckled fingers' (106) as though Lyndon is taking on Duverger's lost pigmentation. In the story's final image Boyd looks on at Duverger who is 'curled stiff on his side, a frozen skeleton X ray, impossibly thin, fuzzily bearded, his hand outstretched with dulled nails to cover, partly, the white face beside him, the big white face attached to the long form below the tight clean sheets' (117). The emphasis on Lyndon's whiteness, here, is counterposed with Duverger's near invisibility. Finally, Boyd hears 'lips that kissed the palm of a black man as they moved together to form words' (118). This peculiar juxtaposition of race, love and language plays out in the wake of Duverger's depersonalization and, crucially, the dissolution of his racial difference. The physical proximity of Johnson and Duverger, a kind of spatial literalization of the grammatical copula, leads to a grotesque closeness that obscures both racial and linguistic expression. The resolution of 'Lyndon' is indeterminate: on the one hand, it preaches a model of empathetic distance, a kind of civic 'love' that facilitates the inclusion, coexistence, and communication of the other; on the other, the story portrays the sublimation of Duverger's racial otherness to Lyndon's wider political purpose. As such, this final scene actively stages the distinction between the 'emphasis' and 'erasure' of difference through the problem of linguistic communication. While I return to this concept in my discussion of *Infinite Jest,* I want to first consider what happens when Wallace's tries to emphasize racial differences rather than erase them. In particular, how does Wallace negotiate the principles of 'love' and 'distance' set out in 'Lyndon' when the cultural differences in question refuse to be erased?

Emphasizing 'Entitlement' in *Signifying Rappers*

In his essay *Signifying Rappers,* co-written with his friend and roommate, Mark Costello, in the summer of 1989, shortly after the publication of *Girl with Curious Hair,* Wallace explores these key aesthetic and political questions through an explicit consideration

of racial difference. As Costello notes in his 2013 introduction to *Signifying Rappers,* the socio-economic conditions surrounding the evolving rap scene in late-1980s Boston — namely 'the bloodiest' period of gun violence 'in Boston's history' — was 'more my concern than Dave's'.[45] Recalling their first encounter with hip hop, Costello describes Wallace 'maniacally' transcribing its breakneck wordplay, 'pen in hand, big silver boom box to his ear' ('Preface', x). Indeed, the most energetic sections of Wallace's portion of the essay refer directly to rap's linguistic and formal creativity. According to Wallace, the tight limitations imposed on rap's form, in particular in its commitment to straight rhyme, necessitate subversive and 'complicated prosodic innovations — disordered but effective enjambment, stresses alternated between standard feet, wild combinations of iamb with trochee and both with spondee, the kind of metrical libertinism that spells f-r-e-e-v-e-r-s-e but is here required by *exactly* the sort of tight aural walls free verse was all about knocking down' (110-11). Rap's ability to achieve radical linguistic forms through a reversion to strict, traditional poetic structure shares similarities with Stein's complex appeal to 'conservative' models in her later work. This same notion that creativity is achieved through the interaction with limits further forms the basis of Chomsky's principle of Generative Grammar.

Wallace's close metrical analysis of rap's formal features seeks to demystify its cultural newness, revealing it to be made up of the same fundamental linguistic and formal ingredients as any other form of poetry, techniques and forms that are there for the taking. But this democratic view of rap as made from the same universal building blocks as any other art form, and therefore open to appreciation by anyone who can parse its verbal dexterity, is complicated by the notion of racial and cultural difference. Wallace's wholehearted enthusiasm for rap is repeatedly stalled by his awareness of it as '*by* urban blacks *about* same *to* and *from* same'

[45] David Foster Wallace and Mark Costello, *Signifying Rappers* (New York: Little Brown, 2013), x. Hereafter references to this edition will be given in-text.

(25). This paradox is best expressed through the essay's title, taken from the song, 'Signifying Rapper', by Philadelphia hip hop artist Schoolly D. Both titles play on the African American tradition of 'signifyin(g)', which is, as John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford define it in *Spoken Soul*, 'ritualized wordplay, a highly stylized lying, joking, and carrying on with such virtuosity as to inject one's message with metaphor and eloquence while elevating one's social status and parodying one's interlocutors or their attitudes or behaviours'.[46] This verbal tradition was theorized for literature in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey,* reference to which is one of *Signifying Rappers*' glaring omissions. In Gates's formulation African American texts are always 'double-voiced', produced simultaneously and self-consciously for a white and black audience while also 'signifyin(g)' on other African American texts, such that the 'language of Signifyin(g) functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition'.[47] Wallace's anxieties about rap do not demonstrate an awareness of the intricate tradition of 'doubleness' in African American art that Gates's theory provides. Instead, Wallace's interpretation of rap as a 'Closed System' circles back to the problem of postmodernism's ironic mode of self-reference that characterises so much of his early writing. As Clare Hayes-Brady notes, '[Wallace] struggles to decide whether rap merely represents the decocted-and-simplified desire of the Other, or whether it in fact represents the reality of the Other.'[48]

Wallace's emphasis on the rap's exclusion of the white spectator plays into the essay's broader positioning of Wallace and Costello as culturally marginal. Indeed, the essay almost fetishizes the incongruity of its authors' interest in the subject, provocatively naming its first section 'Entitlement', and continuously asking the question, 'What business have two white

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[46] John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 81.
[47] Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey,* xxv, xxi.
[48] Clare Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm neutral on the menstruation point": David Foster Wallace and Gender,' in *Critical Insights on David Foster Wallace*, 64.

yuppies trying to do a sampler on rap?' (21). The essay is filled with images of distance and division, frequently evoking the metaphor of the 'window' in order to emphasize their outsider position. In doing so, they cast their own appreciation for rap, and their 'ethnic distance' (22) from it, as somehow culturally transgressive, asking whether the 'unease and ambivalence with which the rare white at the window loves rap renders that love no less love. Is this perverse?' (32). Wallace's repeated formulation of his own positionality (Costello is more sociologically-minded in this sense) with regards to rap — although rarely the communities or people it emerges from — demonstrates that Wallace is less interested in how it might represent African American experience and instead how it manifests both aesthetic potential and isolation. More specifically, he is interested in how it excludes him. Kathleen Fitzpatrick identifies in Wallace's work a paradoxical anxiety about the 'unmarkedness' of the white male who bears the burden of universalism.[49] Wallace's desire to be alienated from the dominant cultural position, Fitzpatrick argues, is really a wish to renounce his responsibility as representative of 'the mainstream culture'.[50] Recalling a rap concert that he and Wallace attended, Costello describes Wallace's sheer disappointment when rather than being hassled, dissed, or confronted for being there, the pair are completely ignored by the other members of the predominantly African American audience. Wallace and Costello's configuration at their own invisibility, which Thompson and Tara Morrissey read as a coy reference to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* reveals their misguided exaggeration of the antithetical role of whiteness to rap's construction of blackness.[51] Wallace's affected marginality does not, however, bring him closer to an understanding of, and appreciation for, rap as an African American art form. Instead, he

[49] Fitzpatrick, *Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 208.
[50] Wallace, qtd. in ibid, 209.
[51] Tara Morrissey and Lucas Thompson, '"The Rare White at the Window": A Reappraisal of Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace's *Signifying Rappers*,' *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 1 (2015): 91.

expresses anxiety for rap's cultural inaccessibility, its 'closed' nature, and its refusal to communicate outside of its cultural context:

> What if the artists are not influencing or informing but rather just *reflecting* their audience, holding up a mirror their world can see itself as world in? [...] What if cutting-edge rap really *is* a closed music? Not even pretending it's promulgating anything controversial or even unfamiliar to its young mass audience? What if rap scares us because it's really just preaching to the converted?' (47).

Only when he reverts to an almost New Critical position on rap's linguistic innovation (using epigraphs from T.S. Eliot's 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' to frame his interpretation) does Wallace manage to dispel some of these anxieties about rap's self-reference. Wallace's hermetic appraisal of rap as formally and linguistically dexterous allows him to identify its political potential as civic exemplar: 'the same verbal skills and enthusiasms rap values (and values enough to let rap-dissing stand symbolically for fighting or killing) can obviously be applied in mainstream approved, "productive" ways — G.E.D.s, college, Standard Written English… perhaps someday even ad copywriting!' (114). Despite his caustic edge, Wallace's image of kids 'hunched over notebooks on their own time trying to put words together in striking and creative ways' (114-15) projects a genuine belief in the potential for culturally-specific forms of art to work towards bridging gaps between communities, even if this means ultimately subscribing to more homogenous, socially acceptable forms. Appealing to rap's linguistic elements, therefore, facilitates its cultural transfer into larger, and distinctly more homogenous, cultural institutions. The configuration of rap not as representative art form but as a linguistic-aesthetic mode is significant in understanding these early attempts to explore race in Wallace's writing. Indeed, the problems Wallace works through in *Signifying Rappers* precipitate a shift from 'emphasis' to 'erasure'. In his treatment of rap as linguistic experimentation, Wallace begins to consider how the problems of cultural exclusion might be rectified by the consideration and adoption of the linguistic practices of the other, namely how

cultural otherness might be rendered as merely a different grammatical system whose rules can be studied and mastered like any other foreign language.

Grammatical Empathy and 'Wardine'

Mark McGurl describes Wallace's endeavour in *Signifying Rappers* not as an embrace of racial otherness but, rather, as a mere 'nerdy command of detail', referencing Wallace and Costello's attempt to rationalise their 'entitlement' by arguing that 'this was all just data' (24).[52] While I have shown that Wallace's response in *Signifying Rappers* is more complicated than this, McGurl's conception of the 'nerdy command of detail' as an authorial position is an interesting starting point in considering Wallace's appropriation of linguistic difference in what I will call the 'Wardine section' of *Infinite Jest.*[53] This brief, early section of the novel has been either denounced or quietly ignored in appraisals of Wallace's magnum opus. Its stark contrast with the rest of the narrative is perplexing, particularly considering how Wallace's work overall generally favours white protagonists who speak either Wallace's trademark hyper-educated, zeitgeisty brand of standard English or, as Cohen has argued, dwell in trailer parks and speak in a mythologized, non-specific regional dialect. The Wardine section is narrated in black dialect through the consciousness of Clenette Henderson — who emerges later in the narrative as a janitor at the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) and a resident at Ennet House — and details the abuse of Clenette's friend, Wardine, at the hands of her mother and her mother's boyfriend, Roy Tony (who also later returns as member of a Narcotics Anonymous group). The section comes within the first 40 pages of the narrative and is exceptional not only in the fact that Wardine never reappears again throughout the rest of the novel, but also in its shift into

[52] Mark McGurl, 'The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace and the Program,' *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014), 50, n. 43.
[53] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 2012), 37-39. Hereafter all references to this edition will be given in-text.

the first person, which is otherwise reserved for the central protagonist, Hal.[54] This pivot into internal monologue, as Cohen argues, is a jarring break from the representation of other characters who would feasibly speak in non-standard English but who are only ever rendered through the narrator's distinctive voice.[55] Thompson shows that Wallace was particularly proud of and invested in the Wardine section, which, despite having very little bearing on the novel as a whole, was one of the first sections he wrote while still finishing his M.F.A. in 1986 — a revelation that suggests that the Wardine section predates *Signifying Rappers* and might be more closely aligned to the fictional project of *Girl with Curious Hair*.[56] Thompson recounts a letter from Wallace to his agent, Bonnie Nadel, prompting her to submit the story to the *New Yorker,* believing that their predominantly white readership would be shocked at its depiction of black poverty.[57] When the section appeared in *Infinite Jest* almost ten years later, the results were shocking indeed. Aside from the dialect being, as Cohen states, 'poorly (or even insultingly) done' the passage is uncomfortable in its stereotypical treatment of its small cast of black characters as poor, violent, and implausibly interconnected in their relationships.[58]

It is Wallace's attempt at black dialect, however, that has been most problematic for readers and critics alike. In the 1980s and 1990s there were significant debates about the role

[54] While the novel encompasses many different kinds of languages, ranging from pharmaceutical jargon to tennis commentary, by and large the novel is filtered through a Wallacean-voiced narrator whose prose moves in and out of the thought processes and colloquial register of its characters. Certain parts of the novel, such as the 'yrstruly' section are, like Wardine's, more directly and concretely inhabiting a different kind of voice. Other than this, however, these alternative voices enter the narrative only through character dialogue and the tension between internal monologue and omniscient narration. See Andrew Warren 'Modelling Community and Narrative in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*', in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014): 61-82; and David Hering, 'Form as Strategy in *Infinite Jest'* in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, pp. 128-43.
[55] Cohen, 'The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,' 236.
[56] Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 203.
[57] Ibid, 204.
[58] Cohen, 'The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,' 236; Jorge Araya extends this critique to *The Pale King*, which he argues contains considerably less ethnic diversity than *Infinite Jest*, highlighting in particular Wallace's inclusion of black characters receiving welfare, which plays into 1980s political cliché about the African-American 'underclass'. Araya, 'Why the Whiteness?,' 240.

of Ebonics (what is now AAVE) in public school education, both as a means of preventing students from progressing through the school system and a possible way forward to ensure their success. Its supporters claimed that black English was not merely a non-standard dialect of English but was instead derived from West African and Niger-Congo languages rather than from English.[59] Throughout these two decades, sociolinguistic research, which showed that black English had its own grammatical system and lexicon, was mounting and, with it, scholars were exposing the many ways in which language is intrinsically linked to institutional racial bias.[60] Inspired by Labov's work, teachers and linguists began to develop theories that advocated the instruction of standard English through vernacular languages such as AAVE.[61] In December 1996, the same year as the publication of *Infinite Jest,* the Oakland school board, presiding over a historically African American and Hispanic majority school district, passed a controversial resolution that recognized Ebonics as a language distinct from English and recommended that students' 'home language' be taken into account in assessing their knowledge of the standard. This decision was made as an extension of their Standard English Proficiency (SEP) programme, which would offer extra support to students who primarily spoke Ebonics (in the same way they would a student who spoke Spanish as a first language) While these measures were denounced as a validation of 'bad' or 'lazy' English, the School

[59] John Baugh, *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 21.

[60] Baugh describes the work of Robert Williams who coined the term 'Ebonics' in 1973 and who developed a method of standardized testing which 'translated' certain instructions into black syntax or vocabulary ('behind' was replaced with 'in back of', for example). The test, Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity (BITCH), which was controversial in its own form of racial bias, indeed showed a higher rate of success for black students proving that they were not in fact unintelligent, as many critics of the work suggested, but that they merely were engaging in a different language. It also demonstrated the relative ease with which racial bias could be incorporated into standardized testing. Ibid, 16.

[61] See John R. Rickford, 'Using the Vernacular to Teach the Standard' in *Ebonics: The Urban Education Debate*, eds. David Ramirez, Terrence Wiley, and Gerda Klerk (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2005).

Board's resolution represented an experimental pedagogical effort to achieve mastery of standard English without wiping out their students' 'home' languages.[62]

Wallace was undoubtedly aware of these debates. In 'Authority and American Usage' he describes at length an attempt to convince a black student of the merits of mastering standard English:

> I don't know whether anybody's told you this or not, but when you're in a college English class you're basically studying a foreign dialect. This dialect is called Standard Written English. From talking with you and reading your first couple of essays, I've concluded that your own primary dialect is [one of three variants of SBE (Standard Black English) common to our region] [...]. Some of these differences are grammatical — for example, double negatives are OK in Standard Black English, but not in SWE, and SBE and SWE conjugate certain verbs in totally different ways. [...] That's the good news — it's not that you're a bad writer, it's that you haven't learned the special rules of the dialect they want you to write in. Maybe that's not such good news, that they've been grading you down for mistakes in a foreign language you didn't even know was a foreign language. That they won't let you write in SBE. Maybe it seems unfair. If it does, you're probably not going to like this other news. I'm not going to let you write in SBE either. In my class, you have to learn and write in SWE. […] In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It Is […] And [STUDENT'S NAME] you're going to learn to use it, too, because I am going to make you.[63]

Wallace's implicit engagement with Ebonics debates here demonstrates some of the tensions which made it such a controversial subject in the late-1990s. Firstly, earlier in the essay, Wallace acknowledges a multitude of different dialects in American culture while still placing Standard Written English (what, as Wallace notes in the same speech, 'we might as well call "Standard White English"') at the centre invariably because 'SWE is the dialect our nation uses to speak to itself'.[64] Wallace's linking of whiteness to structures of 'education and intelligence

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[62] Baugh, *Beyond Ebonics,* 20.
[63] Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 108-9.
[64] Ibid*,* 109.

and power and prestige', albeit qualified as 'unfair', is nevertheless troubling and foreshadows what I will discuss later as his problematic turn to 'universal' forms at the expense of cultural difference. However, by acknowledging that his student is indeed learning a foreign language and recognizing the student's 'mistakes' as acceptable AAVE grammar, Wallace is clearly engaging with the educational practices advocated by supporters of Ebonics in the 1990s.[65]

While 'Authority and American Usage' suggests a more mature engagement with the debates surrounding the Ebonics controversy, the Wardine section is decidedly more cursory. As Cohen observes, the dialect in this section is 'badly done in a particularly simplistic way, [the] repetition of "Wardine be cry", refusal to use a pronoun when a proper name can be repeated and its largely unpunctuated parataxis' make for an uncomfortable read.[66] Cohen is right to identify the refrain of 'Wardine be cry' as a point of contention in Wallace's rendering of black dialect. In fact, it is this phrase which most directly demonstrates his engagement with, but misunderstanding of, AAVE as an autonomous linguistic system. Analyses of Ebonics in newspapers and cultural commentary in the 1980s and 1990s tended to centre on distinctions in verb conjugations, most notably of the verb 'be'. As Rickford and Rickford state,

> the invariant and habitual *be* is probably the best-known but least understood of AAVE's grammatical signposts. Many outsiders to Spoken Soul [black dialect] believe that black folk replace Standard English *is* and *are* with invariant *be* all the time, as in, "He *be* talkin' to her right now." But AAVE is actually more discriminating. For one thing, invariant habitual *be*

[65] Wallace's enforcement of SWE may also be a reaction against what Mark McGurl describes as the 'romanticisation of [...] unique ethnic voices' in the '70s and '80s. Wallace's conflicted attitude to identity politics, which Fitzpatrick describes as a feeling of being 'excluded from a culture of exclusion', is conceived of in linguistic terms in 'Authority and American Usage'. Lamenting the descriptivist turn of the 1970s 'via "freewriting, "brainstorming, "journaling"— a view of writing as self-exploratory and -expressive rather than as communicative, an abandonment of systematic grammar, usage, semantics, rhetoric, etymology' ('Authority and American Usage', 81) Wallace equates the privileging of 'voice' (undeniably synonymous with the 'ethnic' or 'minority' voice) in post-war American writing with problems of solipsism and political miscommunication. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009), 258; Fitzpatrick, *Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 209.

[66] Cohen, 'The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,' 236.

> describes only an event that is performed regularly or habitually, as in "He *be* talkin' with his lady every day." Contrast this habitual sense with "He Ø talkin' to her right now".[67]

Wallace's unfortunate 'Wardine be cry' is therefore a mis-conjugation of the AAVE 'be' tense. The section narrates a specific incident as remembered by Clenette, therefore making the use of the *be* form, in the first place, incorrect; if Clenette had seen Wardine crying every day then *be* would be appropriate. In addition, Wallace presumes the use of the infinitive 'cry' after *be,* whereas in AAVE the correct form is 'crying', just as in the standard conjugation 'Wardine was crying'. The correct conjugation would, therefore, be to omit the *be* form altogether, 'Wardine crying' or the use of the intensified continuative form *steady* ('she steady crying') which is non-habitual but allows an action to be stressed.[68] When Clenette uses the *be* form to describe Roy Tony's persistent abuse it is appropriate but, again, conjugated in the first person present rather than the continuous: 'Saw Wardine momma man Roy Tony be want to lie down with Wardine. Be give Wardine candy and 5s. Be stand in her way in Wardine face and he aint let her pass without he all the time touching her' (37). Wallace's use of the negative form here is also incorrect, subscribing to the more common dialect convention of 'aint'; as Rickford states, the correct negation of the verb *be* is *don't:* 'and he don't be letting her pass'.[69]

Wallace was undoubtedly fascinated by the linguistic possibilities of how moving between dialects might achieve inclusivity and belonging. In 'Authority and American Usage' he designates the ability to shift between linguistic codes as the pinnacle of emotional intelligence and social power. This view was shared by advocates for the integration of Ebonics into public education. As both Cohen and Fitzpatrick note, Wallace was ever in pursuit of 'the Universal', a common denominator which removes the problems surrounding communication.

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[67] Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*, 113. In linguistic notation, the symbol Ø signals an omission. It may point to the absence of a grammatical feature which is usually included or expected to be included.
[68] Ibid, 114.
[69] Ibid.

Grammar could be this universal medium. If black English was a system with its own rules, a social construct, then could its rules not be learned to gain access to the group it represented? By learning how to speak black English, could one not tap into a kind of empathy that transcends the cultural issues of race, class, and gender? Following this logic, personal interaction with black communities and culture is hardly a necessary prerequisite for learning their language. Could one not learn the rules first, learn to communicate and then the door would open? And while it seems strange that a self-professed SNOOT would make such glaring mistakes when it comes to AAVE, it is clear that Wallace's engagement with these grammatical concepts was, at this point in his career, still quite cursory and superficial. But this is not to say that Wallace's interest in black dialect was merely, as his biographer D.T. Max claims of *Signifying Rappers,* the product of 'a very smart kid slumming it'.[70] Wallace's interest in the mastery of dialect as a means of tapping into a broader form of empathy, which I have argued is central to these early considerations of race in his fiction, is later subsumed, in 'Authority and American Usage' into an all-encompassing belief in standard English as a politically necessary *lingua franca* for Wallace's imagined American audience. Wallace refused to relinquish English as the 'Closed System' that postmodernism believed it to be, placing faith in the recovery of communication through a consideration of the relationship between grammar and fiction.

'Syntactic Integrity' in *Infinite Jest*

While Wallace's attempt to render dialect in the Wardine section is an anomaly in his work as a whole, its inclusion in the opening sections of *Infinite Jest* serves to foreground language as one of the novel's central concerns. The narrative is predominantly split between the institutional settings of Ennet House, a drug and alcohol recovery facility, and the Enfield

[70] D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Penguin, 2013), 122.

Tennis Academy (E.T.A). These institutions play host to a large array of characters, some moving briefly in and out of the story (as Clenette and Wardine do) and others taking on more central roles. Aside from providing elite athletic training, E.T.A. also provides a rigorous academic programme centred around a 'triad of required grammars' (154) consisting of 'Prescriptive Grammar (Grade 10), Descriptive Grammar (11), Grammar and Meaning (12)' (996, en.54). While this 'triad' appears somewhat obliquely in one of Wallace's endnotes, its specific juxtaposition of prescriptivism and descriptivism, a binary that would become the structuring metaphor for Wallace's political vision in 'Authority and American Usage', is undoubtedly of considerable importance to the novel's world view. A number of critics have noted the compendious nature of Wallace's magnum opus, the way in which, as Marshall Boswell states, it 'employs an intricate and insular mock argot of coined terms and made-up slang, engages directly and learnedly with such arcane subjects as theoretical math and lens technology and computer science, and concludes with a hundred pages of endnotes'.[71] The Wardine section shows that Wallace's close attention to grammar central to his construction of these competing vernaculars.

Critical responses to *Infinite Jest* have tried to theorize the novel's unique balancing of voice with its vast narratological structure. Adam Kelly places *Infinite Jest* within the Bakhtinian tradition of the 'polyphonic novel', suggesting that Wallace's 'uncanny ear for American speech [...] often allows him to undermine the habituation of his characteristic prose rhythms'.[72] Toon Staes further observes that 'there seems to be no discrete narrative voice that dominates the novel. What we get instead are fictional minds corrupted by the debris of others.'[73] This narrative technique is literalized in the appearance of the 'Wraith', a ghostly

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[71] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 118.
[72] Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas' in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing*", 5.
[73] Toon Staes, 'Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach' in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing*", 34.

presence who infiltrates the 'brain voice' of Don Gately, interjecting in his thoughts with complex vocabulary, and committing what is described as 'lexical rape' (832). Wallace's commitment to absorbing different dialects and speech patterns and setting them alongside a compendium of technical languages, ranging from pharmacological jargon to AA cliché, speaks to a descriptive impulse to collect and categorize the multiform ways language is used. This imposed linguistic instability generated by the interaction of these linguistic types seems at every point to resist the traditional novelistic relationship between reader and writer. Indeed, as Frank Cioffi suggests, the novel 'is constantly interrupting itself, breaking comfortable routines it has set up and, in many cases, syntactically reinventing the English language'.[74] In Cioffi's assessment Wallace's aesthetic disruption is not just narratological, it is also profoundly grammatical, seeking to 'reinven[t]' the syntax through which communication occurs, drawing the reader into, in Boswell's words, 'a community where meaning is made'.[75] Andrew Warren shows that Wallace's strategies for mediating these competing languages and narrative techniques helps not only to build models of community within the narrative structure but between the novel and its readers. The diversity of linguistic structures within the novel, however, present a considerable challenge to the narrative unity as its characters 'struggle not merely against one another but, more generally, against its narrative structure even as that structure struggles to encompass them'.[76] In this way Wallace creates 'a model of narration that perpetually works to create and undo community'.[77]

While these critical accounts offer valuable keys to understanding Wallace's narrative strategies, viewing the novel through the binary of grammatical descriptivism and prescriptivism not only provides insight into how Wallace negotiates the pull between

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[74] Frank Louis Cioffi, '"An Anguish Become Thing": Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest,' *Narrative* 8, no. 2 (2000), 162.
[75] Ibid; Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace,*121.
[76] Andrew Warren, 'Modelling Community*,*' in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing",* 80.
[77] Ibid.

representation and didacticism in his work more generally, but also demonstrates how central grammar is to Wallace's conceptualization of community. I have already discussed, in my analysis of the Wardine section, one of the ways in which Wallace (problematically) tries to pursue a descriptivist philosophy in his novel writing. While descriptivism encompasses the novel's narrative structure as a whole Wallace is more thematically concerned with how prescriptivism, on a linguistic level, can map onto wider models of social and political community. Through the novel's oscillation between these two linguistic and aesthetic values, Wallace attempts to address how language can form the basis for broader systems of communication and response, working through the elusive relationship between 'Grammar and Meaning'.

Prescriptivism, as both a linguistic and social model, enters the novel in two main ways: firstly, in the grammatical obsession of Avril Incandenza, 'Dean of Academic Affairs' (521) at E.T.A., and her son Hal, the novel's chief protagonist, and, secondly, in the novel's specifically linguistic treatment of AA as a shared language. Wallace's critique of prescriptivism comes most clearly in his portrayal of the Incandenza family, whose grammatical and linguistic rigor is intricately tied to their dysfunctionality. Avril's character and unique positioning at E.T.A. blurs the boundary between family and institution. The obsessive prescriptive impulse Avril imposes on the student body at E.T.A. manifests in more destructive ways when applied to the Incandenzas' fraught family dynamics. Indeed, Avril comes to represent one of the centres of authority in *Infinite Jest* but one which is constructed as ideologically dogmatic. The reader is told that Avril is a leader of the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts, described by the narrator as a 'syntactic-integrity PAC' (1021, en.91). Her obsessive compulsive behaviour, however, serves to cast her quest for grammatical purity as a kind of mental disorder. Avril launches campaigns against supermarket solecisms and, despite her wide-reaching control over the workings of E.T.A., still finds covert ways to assert her (grammatical) authority over the

daily lives of the students — in the E.T.A. dining hall a sign stating that 'MILK IS FILLING, DRINK WHAT YOU TAKE' has been quietly semi-colonized 'by the insertion of a blue dot by a fairly obvious person' (631).[78]

While Avril's pedantry serves to add a greater comedic dynamic to the institutional structure of E.T.A., her grammatical authority comes to be associated with sexual deviance, as the reader learns of her affair with E.T.A. student John Wayne — as well as everyone else 'with a Y-chromosome' (791). The explicit linking of Avril's obsessive compulsion to her grammatical pedantry serves to undercut both Avril's authority and the specific form of linguistic prescriptivism she represents. Hayes-Brady identifies a tendency across Wallace's work to associate the female body with 'the body of language'.[79] Indeed, it seems significant that female characters not only stand in for linguistic concepts (for example, Gramma in *Broom of the System*) but also signal the emergence of language problems. This occurs, as we have seen, in the Wardine section but also in the linguistic stunting of Lenore Beadsman or the presumably female 'Q.' in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). In *Infinite Jest,* Avril's obsessiveness with grammar and her problematic sexual behaviour are directly associated with the breakdown of the Incandenza family. On a weekend visit to the Incandenza home, Joelle, a resident at Ennet House who was at one time both Jim Incandenza's muse and Orin Incandenza's girlfriend, observes that Avril acts as the central mediator for the family. This manifests in such an extreme sense that any communication which occurs between Hal and Orin (who presents a latent oedipal obsession with Avril that only adds to her sexual dysfunction) and their father is channelled through her. In this sense Avril's familial role

[78] Wallace's characterisation of Avril's pedantic enforcement of linguistic norms corresponds with his descriptions of his own childhood. In 'Authority and American Usage' he recounts playing a grammar-based game over family dinner: 'if one of us children made a usage error, Mom would pretend to have a coughing fit that would go on and on until the relevant child had identified the relevant error and corrected it'. Wallace's mother is an author of grammar textbooks. Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 71.

[79] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 186.

becomes a metaphor for grammar itself, which mediates and orders language into socially communicable forms.

Wallace's representation of prescriptive grammar as an extension of Avril's dysfunctional behaviour serves to critique an overtly corrective attitude to language that is so controlled and mediated it stunts communication entirely. These problems of both language and authority play out most explicitly in Hal's linguistic attitude. A so-called 'lexical prodigy' (155), Hal experiences language largely through a kind of photographic retention, 'a kind of mental Xerox' (797), of dictionary definitions. It is significant that while Hal's 'instincts concerning syntax and mechanics' (12) are repeatedly hailed as exceptional, his fundamental interest is lexicography, a study of individual words rather than how these words link together to form larger systems. Hal's etymological digressions, which frequently interrupt his interior monologue, can also be viewed as attempts to uncover the historical significance of a given word, removing layers of signification to get back to some essential meaning.

In the novel's opening (which is also its chronological endpoint) Hal is undergoing a college admissions interview. The panel discusses his nine 'over-academic' admissions essays, some of which are 'nearly monograph-length' and are notably described by the Director of Composition as both 'lapidary' and 'effete' (7).[80] This combination of overwrought elegance and stasis seems indicative of Hal's position throughout the narrative whereby his largely unnecessary encyclopaedic knowledge of dictionary definitions precipitates an entirely internal intellectual life that manifests externally in Hal's secret drug addiction. The suggestion that this stasis begins with Hal's use of language is a compelling one, as though the obsessive definition of vocabulary from various lexicographic sources actually prevents the expansion of words

[80] One of which is titled 'Neoclassical Assumptions in Contemporary Prescriptive Grammar' and another 'Montague Grammar and the Semantics of Physical Modality'. The latter bears a striking similarity to Wallace's undergraduate philosophy thesis, 'Richard Taylor's Fatalism and the Semantics of Physical Modality', which was later published as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010).

into more meaningful semantic units, instead merely rehashing their denotative identities without any real connection to tangible reality.

Hal's repeated failure to reconcile word and world is foregrounded in a scene where the E.T.A. students are discussing a recent 'prescriptive grammar exam' that contained a quotation from Tolstoy. An E.T.A. student named Troeltsch is soliloquizing at length about the meaning of the sentence — the scene beginning *in media res* — before he is interrupted by another student. Hal responds to Troeltsch's interpretation by stating, 'The exam was talking about the syntax of Tolstoy's sentence, not about real unhappy families' (95).[81] Hal's dismissal of meaning and content in favour of a mechanical analysis of syntax is significant in light of his more general attitude to language and communication. The prescriptive focus on the exam (presumably set by Avril) not only obscures the apparent theme of 'unhappy families' — both in Tolstoy's novel and as a wider motif in *Infinite Jest* — but perpetuates a model of linguistic attention that is disaffected and closed. Hal uses grammar as an escape from real-world consequences, seeking to break down semantic units into smaller and smaller grammatical pieces, a kind of dismantling of meaning.

Hal's isolated lexicographical interests speak to his issues with communication more generally, the tragic result of which is dramatised in the novel's opening scene. Hal's problems with communication are pervasive throughout his childhood, undoubtedly a condition of Avril's overbearing mediation of family relations. Hal recalls his father masquerading as a 'professional conversationalist' (28) in order to remedy his son's perpetual silence, which is reciprocally perceived by Hal as a defect on his father's part: '[He] had had this delusion of silence when I spoke: I believed I was speaking and he believed I was not speaking' (899). Throughout the novel Hal is frequently called upon by other characters to provide definitions

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[81] The sentence in question is the first line of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina:* 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina,* trans. Marina Carr (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 1.

of certain terms. Instead of partaking in dialogue with other characters, Hal retreats into an interior process of lexicography prompted by the language of others. A prominent example occurs late in the novel. In the wake of a snowstorm, one of the E.T.A. students asks Hal what exactly counted as a 'blizzard'. Hal ignores the question, answering his classmate with over a minute of silence, while Hal's interior monologue returns to his family history. After about a paragraph, however, Hal notes that 'The etymology of the term *blizzard* is essentially unknown' (898) but as the passage continues, various definitions of *blizzard,* and their dictionary sources, begin to intrude on his consciousness:

> The *North American Collegiate Dictionary* claimed that 'any heavy' snowstorm with 'high winds' qualified as a blizzard. (899)
>
> The condensed *O.E.D.,* in a rare bit of florid imprecision, defined *blizzard* as 'A furious blast of frost-wind and blinding snow in which man and beast frequently perish', claiming the word was either a neologism or a corruption of the French *blesser,* coined in English by a reporter for Iowa's *Northern Vindicator* in B.S. 1864. (899)[82]
>
> If you want prescriptive specificity you go to a hard-ass: Stiney and Schneewind's *Dictionary of Environmental Sciences* required 12cm./house of continuous snowfall, minimum winds of 60kph., and visibility of less than 500 meters; and only if these conditions obtained for more than three hours was it a blizzard; less than three hours was 'C-IV Squall'. (900)

Hal's definitions not only grow more and more specific but each of the entries on *blizzard* serves a different end. The *North American Collegiate Dictionary* is relatively imprecise, while the *O.E.D.* definition not only contains historic etymological information, but also has a literary bent. Finally, the *Dictionary of Environmental Sciences* provides the specific technical conditions which constitute a blizzard. It is this hyper-precision that fatigues Hal: 'the

[82] Although this definition may sound fictional, it is, in fact, one of the earliest examples given in the OED for the term 'blizzard'. *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), s.v. 'blizzard, n.', http://www.oed.com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/20321?rskey=Hp1YyC&result=1&isAdvanced=false.

dedication and sustained energy that go into true perspicacity and expertise were exhausting even to think about' (900).

While Hal's broad lexicographical knowledge allows him to demonstrate a wide-ranging knowledge base on any number of subjects, Hal's engagement with them is limited to these superficial definitions, the information for which is compiled through someone else's expertise and research. Hal encounters and consumes the end-product of deliberations over what a word really means, expecting it to be objective in some way. But despite the promise of 'definition', multiple competing versions and meanings of a word coexist and fight to be considered authoritative. Hal experiences language through these competing etymologies, meanings, and derivations of words, such that he becomes paralysed (linguistically, and, eventually, physically) by lexicography's simultaneous precision and ineffectiveness. Notably, Hal does not enlighten his classmate as to the definitions of *blizzard.* Although he possesses the information Hal does not communicate what he knows, his extensive definition of the word limited to his closed consciousness. As the novel progresses, just as Hal's internal life becomes increasingly separated from his external expression, his definitions of words become more varied and contingent. His lexicographic studies, which seek to fix language into a singular, precise meaning via authoritative texts like dictionaries, are shown to be fracturing under the weight of different types of usage at the exact moment where Hal loses the ability to communicate. Hal's descriptive collection of etymology and lexicography is challenged by the linguistic relativism that these completing definitions portray. Just at the moment when these meanings seem to diverge into greater technical specificity Hal loses the ability to connect his inner life to his external relations. Hal is paralysed by his mediation of the world through language, leaving him, by the end of the novel, quite literally unable to communicate at all.

Generative Communities

While Hal and Avril manifest the problems of linguistic prescriptivism on an individual level, the novel also explores the way language participates in the construction of different forms of community. Commenting on Wallace's frequent use of institutional settings in his work, Mark McGurl claims that because the institution maintains an intermediary position between interiority and exteriority, 'a kind of turnstile where one is continually converted into or meshed with the other', it is perfectly poised to facilitate the kinds of community building Wallace sees as being central to the role of the novelist.[83] The institution also constructs and enforces its own normative values, working prescriptively to shape the individual in its collective mould. At E.T.A. this institutional practice is literalized in the physical conditioning of its students into elite tennis players through a daily programme of drills and restricted diets. As the scene where Troeltsch and Hal discuss Tolstoy's 'unhappy families' suggests, E.T.A.'s rigid academic focus on prescriptive grammar further inhibits any possibility of individual expression, as Troeltsch's interpretation of the text is cut short by Hal's reduction of its meaning to syntactic structure.

The students at E.T.A. live through gruelling shared routine, the specific conditions of which alienate them from all other means of ordinary experience. These heightened conditions, dictated and maintained by the structure of the institution of which they are a part, require the development of a shared language. The need for an alternative mode of expression arises from the students' feeling that existing words and phrases do not accurately represent their lived experience. Following Troeltsch and Hal's disagreement about Tolstoy in the locker room, the boys debate the efficacy of the word 'tired' which the students deem utterly inadequate to signify their fatigue. As Pemulis states, he is '[s]o tired it's out of tired's word range […] Tired just doesn't do it' (100). Jim Struck attempts to come up with a series of synonyms, none of

[83] McGurl, 'Institution of Nothing', 36.

which satisfy their condition, ‘None even come close, the words’ (100). The boys argue that previous generations were happy to use phrases like ‘tuckered out’, but for them, these words have ceased to truly express their reality, precipitating the need for ‘whole new words and terms’ (100).

In light of this, another student, Stice, suggests the need for ‘Word-inflation’, something ‘Bigger and better. Good greater greatest totally great. Hyperbolic and hyperbolicker. Like grade-inflation’ (100). As Severs suggests, the economic associations of this metaphor encourages the reader to consider ‘language as currency’ whose value, in this case, is depreciated by Stice’s abandonment of an accumulation of synonyms in favour of ‘superlatives’, resulting in a system of ‘comparative valuation’.[84] Stice’s comparison of ‘word-inflation’ to ‘grade-inflation’ roots it in the context of E.T.A., suggesting the construction of an institutionally-specific shared language that is closed off to those outside it. ‘Word-inflation’ requires a communal shift in the meaning of the word ‘tired’ such that it transforms the individual and subjective physical state of tiredness in accordance with the shared language’s new and improved meaning. But Troelstsch proposes a more radical evolution of Stice’s theory of hyperbolization, suggesting not merely a shift in words but in ‘[p]hrases and clauses and models and structures [...] an inflation-generative grammar’ (100). The invocation of Chomksy’s theory of generative grammar advocates a more pervasive shift in the whole language system, rather than just in its lexicon. Inflating grammar as well as words not only changes the relationship between word and referent but between word and word, making all forms of communication inherently amplified.

Severs argues that the juxtaposition of inflation with Chomsky’s theory of generative grammar is inherently tautological, given that Chomsky’s theory already accounts for the

[84] Severs, *Wallace’s Balancing Books*, 130.

‘never-ending expansion in the mind of possible word combinations’.[85] But Severs’ analysis does not take into account the contrasting directionality of these inflationary and generative models. While inflation entails a one-way escalation (towards an inevitable crash), generative grammar offers the possibility of recombination, a redistribution of linguistic resources. Troeltsch’s juxtaposition of these two concepts effectively maps the uneasy meeting point between individual and shared language, one (inflation) treating language as transactional currency and the other (generative) as an evolving internal system that facilitates endless change. If the word ‘tired’ has to inflate because the group demands a more heightened means of expression, generative grammar allows the internal linguistic system to shift to accommodate this new mode of collective feeling.

The novel’s exploration of AA provides an alternative perspective on the interaction between institution and shared language and their ability to generate a sense of community. In an inversion of the E.T.A. students’ desire to inflate language, AA’s reversion to slogan and cliché, and its eschewal of the kind of ‘analysis-paralysis’ (1002, en.90) that causes linguistic inflation in the first place, seeks to work with language within its own strict limitations. Throughout the novel, the language of AA emerges as a possible solution to these problems of communication identified elsewhere in the novel and in Wallace’s work more generally. Operating through a series of set phrases the language of AA works as exactly the kind of ‘closed system’ that Wallace abhorred in other mediums. More than this, subscription to the AA lexicon demands a subscription to a linguistic system that ignores the complex philosophical frameworks for understanding language that so firmly shaped Wallace’s outlook. Despite Wallace’s ultimately sympathetic presentation of the programme in the novel, Timothy

[85] Ibid, 131.

Aubry notes that AA's 'Keep it Simple' mantra is one wholly at odds with Wallace's 'displays of cleverness, irony, sophistication, and self-referentiality' that 'crowd every page'.[86]

It is through AA that Wallace's complex attitude towards prescriptivism most comes to the fore. Whereas Avril and Hal's isolated commitment to grammar and lexicography severely limits their world view, Wallace's presentation of AA explores how linguistic constraints can be used for therapeutic ends. The model of prescriptivism that AA provides is a particularly extreme one, requiring its followers to subscribe to it in, as Lee Konstantinou notes, a 'pseudo-religious' way.[87] Don Gately, the novel's everyman, recalls the advice given to him when he first entered the programme: 'the old guys say it doesn't matter what you believe or don't believe, Just Do It they say, and like a shock-trained organism without any kind of independent human will you do exactly like you're told.' (350)[88] This structure is didactic, operating through a process of mentorship and self-discovery. At the same time, however, its tone is not only coercive but infantilizing, requiring a complete suspension of free will, a sentiment which is reinforced by the narrator's ominous final word on the AA ethos: 'It's all optional; do it or die' (357). This phrase most directly addresses the conflicting portrayals of AA's prescriptivism as both a chosen way of life and, in a comparison that recurs at a number of points throughout the novel, as a form of quiet coercion. AA, like Avril's total authority at E.T.A., is frequently associated with totalitarianism, most clearly through the objections of Geoffrey Day who deduces something profoundly 'un-American' (1003, en.90) about it. Indeed, Wallace's

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[86] Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 109.

[87] Lee Konstantinou, 'No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief,' in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, eds. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 86.

[88] AA's 'fake it till you make it' approach is critiqued in 'Good Old Neon' whereby, despite Neal's imitation of various specialised languages as a means of gaining access to various groups, he only finds himself even more incapable of this type of belief. Wallace's advocation of standard English in 'Authority and American Usage' provides a middle ground between AA's 'blind faith' model and Neal's crippling scepticism, instead pursuing a shared language that is not just *de facto* accepted but is carefully considered, modified, and amended by all its users.

criticisms levelled against AA — ventriloquised through Day — contrast sharply with the distinctly American characterisation of standard English Wallace adopts in 'Authority and American Usage'. The complex interaction between AA as moral code and AA as totalitarian system plays out most directly in its configuration as a linguistic formula, which, if adhered to, will lead its followers to a more stable way of life.

These tensions play out in a scene in the novel featuring a Boston AA meeting. The description intersperses explanations of AA's practices and ideologies with fragments of a speaker's traumatic testimony. As the passage progresses, it becomes clear that the speaker's account is acting merely as an exemplar for the narrator's running precis of how the AA confession functions as a ritual rather than as a narrative in and of itself. The narrator's interjections highlight the many horrific permutations that might be slotted into each predictable section of the speaker's painful statement: '— then more Losses [...] — then less mild seizures [...] — then unbelievable psychic pain [...] — then vocational ultimatums, unemployability, financial ruin, pancreatitis' (346). The reduction of personal suffering to formula likens the AA confessional to a fixed syntactic structure, where certain grammatical units need to piece together in specific combinations in order to make meaning. Unlike the 'inflation-generative grammar' of E.T.A., which allows for readjustment to give greater expression to new types of pain, the AA formula replicates a set grammatical syntax, facilitating the substitution of nouns and verbs but retaining a strict, systematic order. Pain is, therefore, pared back to a singular definition, with no one experience being worse or better than the next. This exchange is illustrative of the logic of AA more generally, which decentres individual experience in favour of rigid discipline and communal understanding. Subscription to the AA sentence implicates you not only in a shared language but a communal way of perceiving your internal self.

AA's stark, stylistic simplicity stands directly opposed to the recursive, paratactical syntax of the over-thinking addict. In a passage detailing Gately's movement through the programme, the mundanity of his recovery is set against the restlessness of his addiction in a sprawling multi-page sentence laden with parataxis, repetition, and digressions that shift their subject mid-clause:

> And so you Hang In and stay sober and straight, and out of sheer hand-burned-on-hot-stove terror you heed the improbable-sounding warnings not to stop pounding out the nightly meetings even after the Substance-cravings have left and you feel like you've got a grip on the thing at last and can now go it alone, you still don't try to go it alone, you heed the improbable warnings because by now you have no faith in your own sense of what's really improbable and what isn't, since AA seems improbably enough to be working [...]. (350)

The breathless quality of this sentence seems to continuously propel the reader forward while at the same time the frequent repetition causes it to loop back on itself, returning again and again to its starting point. The paratactical pull of the sentence and its elastic expansion of clauses charts Gately's psychological state as it transforms from the never-ending deferral of gratification that characterises addiction to the perpetual struggle to maintain sobriety. In this way, the progressive, non-teleological process of recovery is represented through a resistance to grammatical closure. Gradually, the rhythms of Gately's syntax become more regular:

> you do exactly like you're told, you keep coming and coming, nightly, and now you take pains not to get booted out of the squalid halfway house you'd at first tried so hard to get discharged from, you Hang In and Hang In, meeting after meeting, warm day after cold day…; and not only does the urge to get high stay more or less away, but more general life-quality-type things — just as improbably promised, at first, when you'd Come In — things seem to get progressively somehow better, inside, for a while, then worse, then even better, then for a while worse in a way that's still somehow better, realer, you feel weirdly unblinded, which is good, even though a lot you now see about yourself and how you've lived are horrible to have to see — and by this time the whole thing is so improbable and unparsable that you're so flummoxed you're convinced you're maybe brain-damaged [...] (350-51).

The repetition that characterised circuity in the previous passage here begins to generate an incantatory rhythm. The evocation of 'keep coming and coming' and 'Hang In and Hang In' not only represent the infiltration of AA vocabulary into Gately's lexicon but also the transfiguration of addictive behaviours into the patterns of daily life. Even Gately's description of the emotionally turbulent experience of getting clean ('then worse, then even better, then for a while worse') are mitigated by the oscillation between 'better' and 'worse', whose lexical simplicity, in a direct inversion of E.T.A.'s word-inflation, de-escalates the psychological effect of getting clean. The tortured language of Gately's recovery is placed in direct syntactic comparison to the 'older guys' at AA who 'will tell you in terse simple imperative clauses exactly what to do, and where and when to do it (though never How or Why)' (351). This comparison forecasts grammatical simplicity as the desired endpoint of the AA process. These sentences are not only corrective and didactic but disarmingly basic, implying a kind of moral clarity. Despite this, these imperatives remain opaque, they require not logical understanding but 'Blind Faith'. As Chodat argues, Wallace's description of AA begins to explore the 'need to overlook our continual disappointment with our shared criteria', a sentiment he would develop further in 'Authority and American Usage'.[89] But the notion of subscribing to the kind of ethical model AA represents, one whose effects are 'unparsable', speaks to an experience that is both rigorous and complete, and dubiously non-transparent.

The purpose of the public AA testimony is not to provide absolution for the speaker but is merely a ritual action designed to evoke empathy is its audience: 'Everybody in the audience is aiming for total empathy with the speaker; that way they'll be able to receive the AA message he's here to carry. Empathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification' (345). The explanation is inherently didactic, providing a definition of 'Identify': 'Again, *Identify* means empathize' (345). Personal testimony is appropriated, it becomes 'identified' and shared, dissolving the

[89] Chodat, *Matter of High Words*, 258.

boundaries between self and other as both are absorbed into the wider community. Unsurprisingly this communicative model, which looks for universal structures of pain and atonement at the expense of individual experience, is one that is largely at odds with notions of racial or gender difference. Indeed, the AA directive to 'identify' is complicated when considered in relation to notions of 'identity' and 'identity politics'. 'Identify' can mean both to recognize, label, or categorize (if we take it, as the narrator of *Infinite Jest* says of Joelle's racially suspect observations, 'in a neutral sociological way' [1054, en.294]), or in the sense of 'to regard or treat as identical', that is, to erase difference. [90]

These dual associations come to the fore in a scene in which Joelle witnesses the testimony of an African American man at a Cocaine Anonymous (CA) meeting. The scene not only serves to work through the question of racial difference but, in fact, compounds matters by revealing Joelle's racist attitude. In much the same way that Araya claims that race often arises in Wallace's work merely to 'emphasize difference', Joelle's initial impression of the man explicitly and disdainfully highlights his race; frequently lapsing into racial slurs, she classifies him as 'yellowish colored', his eyes a 'tannin-brown' (707) and notes that his story is 'full of colored idioms and those annoying little hand-motions and gestures' (708). Despite her problematic racial commentary Joelle is profoundly affected by the speaker who inspires her to 'keep straight no matter what it means facing' (710). In another problematic, although characteristically AA turn, the speaker's experience seems to be included solely as a means of facilitating Joelle's epiphany. While his testimony is rendered in the third person, the narrative voice absorbs his speech patterns adopting slang and phrases specific to his character. As the passage progresses, however, the narrative voice begins to affiliate with Joelle. While the narrative remains focused on recounting the trials of the CA speaker, his story is peppered with

[90] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), s.v. 'identify, v.' http://www.oed.com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/90999?redirectedFrom=identify.

Joelle's outmoded racial vocabulary, most evident in her frequent use of the word 'colored', as though she herself was telling it. At just this moment when the linguistic and narratological boundaries between Joelle and the speaker begin to dissolve, Joelle imagines the visual dissolution of the speaker's identity, his face losing its 'color, shape, everything distinctive' (710).

This eradication of personal identity is indicative of the AA model, of the universalising of experience through the subsumption of personal testimony into linguistic formula. What is significant, however, is how this breaking down of individual identity also necessitates a dissolution of racial difference. Joel Roberts and Edward Jackson read this scene as indicative of a 'violent process of "bleaching" that [the speaker] must undergo in order to access the "universal" realm of subjectivity'.[91] While this analysis is a convincing one, I have shown that this same kind of homogenization is built into the prescriptive philosophy of AA itself. As such, I propose that what occurs in this scene is not so much a 'violent process of "bleaching"' but, as Thompson puts forward, the same kind of 'utter erasure of difference' Wallace felt in reading Cynthia Ozick.[92] Staging this process between representatives of both racial and gender difference serves only to underscore the powerful empathetic properties this model affords. This kind of erasure is not unproblematic, and indeed, the fact that this transfer occurs so clearly in the context of racial difference only compounds matters. Much like the final scene in 'Lyndon', the empathetic vision of racial understanding presented here harbours uncomfortable aspects of appropriation and marginalization. Crucial to Wallace's political vision, however, the kind of cultural homogenization which occurs in this scene in *Infinite Jest* is precisely the eradication of the boundaries which prevent cultural and personal exchange. The racialized characteristics of the speaker, which are, at the opening of the passage, obstacles to Joelle's

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[91] Joel Roberts and Edward Jackson, 'White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest's* New Sincerity,' *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 1 (2017), https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.182.
[92] Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 197.

attention and therefore to her empathy, become incorporated through the shared language of AA into a means of understanding. When, at the opening of the section the reader is told 'Joelle can Identify' (708) it refers to her ability and tendency to recognize, label, and categorise along racial lines. By the end she is able to 'identify' in the way AA intends, 'to regard or treat as identical'.

'Technically Good or Bad': Technical Language vs. Non-Standard Dialects

A number of critics have noted the vast array of technical languages present in *Infinite Jest*, a narrative technique which gives the novel its encyclopaedic qualities. As Andrew Warren states, one of the key narrative structures Wallace employs throughout *Infinite Jest* is the so-called 'Jargony Argot model', which entails 'slipping between narrative registers' in order to 'demonstrate what sorts of human being are formed by/within those discourses'.[93] Both Warren and Hayes-Brady argue that through these technical languages characters are brought into a constellation of communities; two characters from vastly different backgrounds, for example, might reference the same pharmacological definition for a drug they are taking. As Hayes-Brady notes, '[e]stablishing a common vocabulary between subjects fosters a metacognitive network between them, a tactic Wallace used frequently to establish rapport with readers of his nonfiction'.[94] Indeed, Wallace's ability to parrot these technical languages and vocabularies, like his mimicry of postmodern style in *Girl with Curious Hair,* serves to expose the faults in the forms authority and expertise these kinds of technical languages provide. Moreover, Wallace's use of technical languages in *Infinite Jest,* in particular, works to explore the complex position of technical languages within the prescriptive-descriptive binary.

As Robert Connors outlines, the earliest linguistic definitions of technical writing stated that it was determined by 'the effort of the author to convey one meaning and only one meaning

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[93] Warren, 'Modelling Community,' 65.
[94] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 132.

in what he says'.[95] Technical writing, or 'technicity' as John Guillory terms it, which emerged simultaneously out of the rise of the post-war professional-managerial classes and the widespread availability of domestic DIY products requiring detailed instruction manuals, not only seeks to precisely and exhaustively describe its given subject, but also to lay out the correct way of doing so for its reader.[96] But as Guillory notes, 'technicity'

> produces a tension within the field of modern writing between the domain of expertise and the laity. For the layperson, the technical language or jargon of the professions and the sciences produces an effect of opacity, an impediment to communication.[97]

While the hyper-precision promised by the use of technical languages, in theory, offers the possibility of achieving the same kind of communicative certainty that Wallace found in abstract mathematical proofs, the linguistic opacity of discourses like 'academese' and medical jargon serve only to ensure the linguistic exclusion of his characters. As David Letzler states, Wallace undermines this authority in acknowledging that much of this technical text means little to readers, and actually adds very little to the narrative, with the reader being continuously sent to the endnotes for opaque definitions and explanations: 'Knoll Laboratories' good old Dilaudid — $666.00/g. Wholesale and $5/mg. Street at Y.W.-Q.M.D. valuations' (1078). Letzler designates these technical interjections as 'cruft', a hacker term, which designates the superfluous code or 'junk text' that in *Infinite Jest* serves to 'test and even alter the way we process data'.[98]

The presence of technical languages serves as a kind of challenge to the reader's attention, an objective that would crystallise in Wallace's use of the tax code in *The Pale King,*

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[95] Robert Connors, 'The Rise of Technical Writing Instruction in America,' in *Three Keys to the Past: The History of Technical Communication*, ed. Teresa C. Kynell and Michael G. Moral (Stamford: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1999), 188.
[96] John Guillory, 'The Memo and Modernity,' *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (2004), 130.
[97] Ibid.
[98] David Letzler, 'Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: Infinite Jest's Endnotes,' in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, 131, 134.

I believe that technical languages play a more integral role in the linguistic make-up of the novel, in particular, as a counterpoint to the compendium of non-standard English dialects present through its myriad cast of characters. In this way, technical languages which are directly representative of certain institutions and disciplines are diametrically opposed to languages which, by their very definition as 'non-standard', lie outside of institutional reach. While I have previously shown in this chapter the link between these non-standard dialects and the racial politics of the Culture Wars, technical languages may offer an alternative political reality, which is in direct tension with identity politics.

Mark McGurl's opposition of the post-war literary tendencies of 'high cultural pluralism', which he defines as a market interest in the 'ethnically or racially marked writer', and 'technomodernism', a re-terming of postmodernism, are useful here in teasing out the linguistic interactions between the technical and the non-standard.[99] McGurl presents technomodernism, which he views as the combination of modernist experimentation or *techne* (craft) with an awareness of ubiquitous media technology, as predominantly coded white.[100] Although Wallace's work might be placed in this category, his well-known and complex critique of his postmodern forebearers seems to puts him at odds with this literary grouping. As I outlined in my discussion of the Wardine section, Wallace was profoundly aware not only of the literary capital of high cultural pluralism, which involves the 'rhetorical performance of cultural group membership', but also the way in which the field of linguistics was responding to, and heavily involved in, the racial debates of the Culture Wars.[101] As Fitzpatrick argues, Wallace felt alienated from both positions, unable to claim membership to a 'cultural group' and unwilling to fully align himself with the aesthetic terms of postmodernism/

[99] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 283.
[100] Ibid, 42. Severs also concludes that Wallace's pursuit of the technocratic refers not to the 'techno' of the postmodernists but to '*techne*'. Severs, *Wallace's Balancing Books*, 247.
[101] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 283; 56

technomodernism. McGurl's opposition of these terms, however, does not represent them as entirely culturally distinct, instead each 'contains, in latent form, the other's primary term'.[102] Technomodernism, therefore, represents the 'unmarked dialectical reversal' of high cultural pluralism, one which breeds its own 'paradoxically non-ethnic ethnicity'.[103] Borrowing the term from Guillory, McGurl calls this anti-identity, 'technicity', which in turn evokes Fitzpatrick's reading of Wallace's negative-racializing of whiteness as 'unmarked'.[104] The tension between technicity as white identity politics which is in and of itself a response to high cultural pluralism, and, technicity as a linguistic phenomenon connected to expertise is central to Wallace's presentation of language, race, politics and aesthetics in *Infinite Jest* and across his oeuvre more broadly.

Throughout the novel, the technical discourse, which seeks to perpetuate a kind of linguistic uniformity that is inherently institutional, is repeatedly undermined by a frequent destabilizing use of slang terms and colloquial phrases which enter the narrative as decidedly non-standard and anti-institutional. But Wallace's mastery of technical languages, much like his mimicry of aesthetic styles in *Girl with Curious Hair* and his attempts (some successful and some not) to capture the rhythms of ethnic and regional voice, can also be viewed as an aspiration both to authority, in the sense of a demonstration of both research and intelligence, and to a descriptive impulse. For Wallace, both technical languages and non-standard languages were versions of the same phenomena. As he outlines at length in 'Authority and American Usage', these languages are constitutive of various stratified 'Group Identit[ies]'.[105] One's inclusion or exclusion from various identity groups is, therefore, dependent on one's mastery of these multiform dialects, such as 'Latino English', East-Texas Bayou', 'Boston Blue

[102] Ibid, 62.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Fitzpatrick, *Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 209.
[105] Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 107.

Collar', 'Medical-School English', and 'Twelve-Year-Old-Males-Whose-Worldview-is-Deeply-Informed-by-*South-Park* English'.[106] The delineation of the charged term 'identity' into distinct and infinitely sub-dividable linguistic groups allows Wallace to present the problem of national communication as one which can be overcome through the process of language-learning. This position is not a far cry from Wallace's appropriation of AAVE as a means of overcoming cultural difference; that is, his notion that if you learn 'their' language you can be accepted into 'their' group.

In *Infinite Jest* the 'Jargony Argot' model also articulates the reader's linguistic struggle with the text, a struggle which is dramatised in the competing discourses of race, class, and technicity, all of which come to the fore in a late scene in the novel in which Gately, incapacitated in the hospital, attempts to refuse medication from a Pakistani doctor. Due to his injuries, Gately is unable to speak, and can only write brief (and painful) responses on a notepad. Gately's racial intolerance, which had been held at bay while he worked at Ennet House, is unleashed as he is put under strain. The scene involves a number of linguistic layers. Firstly, Gately's consciousness, which has also, in turn, been colonised by the Wraith, is at odds with his inability to express himself verbally, and his difficulty in doing so textually. Secondly, the doctor's high-level medical jargon is juxtaposed by his relatively poor command of English. The doctor's mingling of professional discourse with the jumbled syntax of a non-native speaker is disorientating: 'Grade-two toxemia. Synovial inflammation. The pain of the trauma is very much worse today, yes?' (886). The pharmacological speak is overwhelming to the reader and, the reader might presume, to Gately, who is fervently trying to refuse medication through his hieroglyphic scribbles on the notepad. The medical discourse operates as a kind of information overload, which entices Gately to, as the doctor states, 'Surrender your courageous fear of dependence and let us do our profession, young sir' (888), the use of

[106] Ibid, 98.

surrender offering a clever play on the AA mantra of 'surrender' and evoking a scene of Puritan temptation. Gately has already surrendered to one system, a language of simplicity, and now is being asked to do so to another, one of technical professionalism where he must put his fate in the hands of someone who knows better. But Gately internally counters the doctor's advances through a translation of the latter's pharmacological terms into the terminology of the drug abuser. When the doctor recommends 'Oramorph SR, for an instance. Very safe, very much relief. Fast relief' (886), the narrative notes, 'This is just morphine sulfate with a fancy corporate name. Gately knows' (886). The revelation that 'Gately knows' dispels the enchantment of the doctor's medicalese. As Severs observes of the Ken Erdedy section, drug abuse is professionalized, instilled with the 'discipline' of the Protestant work ethic.[107] Similarly, here, Gately's addiction serves as a qualification; he understands the pharmacological jargon of prescription drugs, and translates them from their opaque technical designations into layman's terms, trading in medical prescriptivism for a deeply internal exercise of self-restraint. Therefore, while *Infinite Jest* explores the pitfalls and benefits of both descriptive and prescriptive models, this scene with Gately reveals a more distinctive move towards the kind of outlook Wallace would later develop in 'Authority and American Usage'. Gately's self-reliant rejection of various forms of prescriptivism in this scene represents a refusal to conform to the lot that society has dealt for him. Instead, his decision to painfully and slowly work his way through these prescriptions, with a view to his overarching moral aspirations, speaks to the kind of honest, civic work Wallace advocates in his proposal for a 'democratic' reconstruction of standard English.

[107] Severs, *Wallace's Balancing Books*, 98.

From Technical to Technocratic: 'Authority and American Usage' and *The Pale King*

The triumph of Gately's lay-terms over the doctor's medical jargon speaks to a broader concern in Wallace's writing: a desire to connect words not only to referents but also to moral precepts. In 'Up Simba', his essay on then-Republican primary candidate John McCain, Wallace questions what it would mean to ask what words 'like "service" and "sacrifice" and "honor" might really refer to, like whether the words actually *stand* for something'.[108] Wallace's turn to standard English as a remedy for cultural and political fracture represents a shift towards a more prescriptive moral and political vision, one which we can see beginning to emerge also in *The Pale King* in an undeniably more homogenous form. Given how Wallace grappled with the pulls of descriptivism and prescriptivism throughout his career and with issues of race, why does his final and most politically ambitious novel actively erase almost all measure of difference from its worldview? Araya interprets the absence of racial diversity in *The Pale King* as the problematic removal of 'a complicating dimension': 'In this way, he is better able to point out the unresolved conflicts between individualism and responsibility to society that still exist in the absence of that dimension and that underlie the US' social malaises'.[109] Examining Wallace's justification of standard English as a process of removing the 'complicating dimension' of linguistic, and thereby cultural, difference, shines light on the civic vision of *The Pale King* as one that continues to grapple with the questions of universality and difference that I outlined at the outset of the chapter.

Wallace's advocacy for standard English in 'Authority and American Usage' not only represents the uneasy resolution of the forces of prescriptivism and descriptivism but also comprises an attempt to recuperate and actively construct an overarching 'grammar', which he believed could be truly and universally shared. While Wallace acknowledges (and pre-empts) criticisms of standard English ('SWE is the dialect of the American elite. That it was invented,

[108] Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 166.
[109] Araya, 'Why the Whiteness?,' 249.

codified, and promulgated by Privileged WASP Males and is perpetuated as "Standard" by the same' [107]), he claims his argument for maintaining it centres on its 'utility rather than as some sort of prophet of its innate superiority' (107). Indeed, Wallace advances the line that since standard English is, even if superficially and unfairly, considered to be 'Standard', why not improve it rather than reject it outright? He argues that '[g]rammar and usage conventions are, as it happens, a lot more like ethical principles than like scientific theories' (89). As an ethical concept, grammar is malleable, debatable, and subject to redefinition, but it is also integral both to visions of progress as well as a sense of tradition. This same tension between revisionism and traditionalism is present in Wallace's discussion of 'norms', which seem to echo Lydia Davis and Stanley Cavell; norms, he attests, 'aren't quite the same as rules, but they're close. A norm can be defined here simply as something people have agreed on as the optimal way to do things for certain purposes' (89). All norms, but specifically linguistic ones, therefore, are fundamentally necessary in establishing communication within a given community. Moreover, Wallace views these norms as predicated on consensus, on a mutual agreement between members of a community.[110] 'The whole point of establishing norms,' Wallace argues, 'is to help us evaluate our actions (including our utterances) according to what we as a community have decided our real interests and purposes are' (90).

Central to this reasoning is Wallace's concept of 'usage-as-inclusion' (101). At the outset of the essay this term describes a means of linguistic power and social currency, designating one's ability to switch linguistic dialects and registers so as to move between and

[110] Wallace is coy but clearly very aware of the dense linguistic and theoretical debates surrounding language use, as I have shown he was aware of Chomskyan theory and sociolinguistics. Throughout the essay he gestures towards ideas of structuralism and post-structuralism ('the uptown term for this is "the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign"' [91]). Elsewhere in the essay Wallace is also cursory about Derrida, a profound influence in his early writing. Therefore, it appears that it is not that Wallace necessarily disagrees with this theoretical foundation of his argument but that he sees it as rather incidental to his ultimate goal of recuperating what he sees as the productive, normative culture of standard English. While many of these linguistic theories contradict his overall project, subscription to a kind of universal dialect requires a willing and informed suspension of belief on other matters of language.

gain membership to different social groups. As Wallace states, however, 'a Group's identity depends as much on exclusion as inclusion' (103). By presenting standard English as a remedy to this stratification, Wallace envisages a system that expands to incorporate elements it previously kept out. Rather than needing the language to get in, the language actively absorbs everything around it, synthesizing it and generating a malleable yet complete grammar. While this model appears to provide a synthesis of marginal languages into the standard, Wallace acknowledges the obvious pitfalls to this process: 'it's incredibly hard to arrive at norms and to keep them at least minimally fair or sometimes even to agree on what they are (see e.g. today's Culture Wars)' (90). Despite this, Wallace's advice to his black student that 'this is just How It Is' (109) suggests that a subscription to these normative values is remains a crucial social necessity.

Wallace presents the notion of 'technocratic authority' as a way to mitigate and diffuse these moral hazards. His description of Garner assigns him the qualities of 'passionate devotion, reason and accountability [...] experience [...] exhaustive and tech-savvy research [...] an even and judicious temperament' (123-4). This brand of authority (with a little *a*) becomes a central concern for his later fiction. In his 2007 essay 'Deciderization' Wallace positions the non-fiction writer as the 'Decider', taking up the role of mediator, between the 'Total Noise' of daily experience and the reader, performing the 'basic absorption, organization and triage' required of 'an educated adult, a.k.a. an informed citizen'.[111] This likening of the writer to a kind of bureaucrat, someone who absorbs the vast myriad of languages, cultures, information systems, and political concerns and processes them into a single, unified structure designed to facilitate and work for all, represents, for Wallace, a democratic synthesis of descriptive and prescriptive impulses. Severs likens this presentation of technocracy to 'a competent human cashier or accountant' who acts as a symbol 'of the adjudication of moral transactions always

[111] Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not* (Penguin: London, 2013), 303, 302, 301.

occurring in human life and language'.[112] The concept of *techne*, or craft, allows Wallace to intricately link this theory to the enterprise of writing. The ethical, measured character of the technocrat prevents the encroachment of any thorny political and moral interests. 'After all', Wallace argues, 'do we call a doctor or a lawyer "elitist" when he presumes to tell us what we should eat or how we should do our taxes?' (122).

But Wallace's valorisation of Garner as ideal embodiment of 'modern technocratic authority' (123) comes at the price of any autonomous identity. While he avoids the 'elitism and anality' common to usage experts, Wallace marvels at the fact that Garner does not exhibit 'any sort of verbal style at all' (119). Garner is 'bland', his 'personality is oddly effaced, neturalized', such that,

> [I]t struck me that I had no idea whether Bryan A. Garner was black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Dittohead. What was even more striking was that I hadn't once wondered about any of this up to now; something about Garner's lexical persona kept me from ever asking where the guy was coming from or what particular agendas or ideologies were informing what he had admitted right up front were 'value judgements' [about grammar and language]. (119)

Here, what Wallace values as Garner's judicious and civic character is directly related to the effacement of any kind of specific cultural or ethnic identity. The ideal model of 'authority' is therefore conceptualised as politically transparent and universal. Wallace's formulation of Garner's cultural invisibility is indicative of the complex problems inherent in his social vision as a whole, which seems to require the sublimation of racial, sexual, and gender difference in favour of a 'universal' consensus. At the same time, however, Garner's model of 'blandness' also becomes a blank canvas on which difference can be mapped out, a democratic middle ground which is continuously evolving to accommodate new norms and civic values.

[112] Severs, *Wallace's Balancing Books*, 247.

Wallace's characterisation of Garner becomes a prototype for the character of Glendenning in *The Pale King,* a high level IRS agent who is described as 'slightly unapproachable' but 'took his job very seriously' and 'thought about [his employees] both as human beings and as parts of a larger mechanism whose efficient function was his responsibility'.[113] If someone had a concern he would openly listen to it but 'how he would *act* on what you said would depend on reflection, input from other sources, and larger considerations he was required to balance'.[114] Indeed, this kind of authority is associated with the rhetorical and political 'blandness' Wallace ascribes to Garner which erases any awareness of the authority's identity or ideological leanings. It is plausible to read this idealized 'blandness' as a possible answer to the problematic 'paleness' of *The Pale King,* but even though the novel is lacking in racial diversity — which, as Cohen argues, 'may of course perfectly reflect its 1980s-IRS-office-in-Peoria setting'— it never fully endorses its own homogenous vision.[115] In §19, a scene which most clearly expresses the novel's interest in civics, responsibility, technocracy, and the 'Democratic Spirit', Glendenning and two other characters — one who is referred to only as X — carry out a debate in an elevator. Adam Kelly reveals how the dialogue is structured so as to obscure or confuse 'individual characteristics of those articulating the ideas and towards the broader significance of the ideas themselves'.[116] Despite this more open, dialogic mode, the character of X seems to function to undermine the broad claims being made by Glendenning, focalised in his valorisation of the Founding Fathers. As X points out, the Founding Fathers established a system entirely governed by 'An educated

[113] David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2011), 436.
[114] Ibid. Emphasis in the original.
[115] The question raised by Cohen, Thompson, Araya and others is, if Wallace wanted to remove race as a 'complicating dimension', why bother including racial markers at all, considering these characters are only ever on the margins of the novel's key scenes. While we can speculate that some of this may have been worked through had Wallace completed the novel, the drafts show no evidence of introducing more complex or central characters of colour. Cohen, 'The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,' 237.
[116] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas,' 14.

landowning *white male* electorate, we should keep in mind'.[117] When Glendenning argues that 'They believed in rationality — they believed that persons of privilege, literacy, education, and moral sophistication would be able to emulate them, to make judicious and self-disciplined decisions for the good of the nation and not just advance their own interests' (136), X admits that 'It's certainly an imaginative and ingenious rationalization of racism and male chauvinism, that's for sure' (136). X's criticism haunts Glendenning's utopian nostalgia for a 'purer' national community, just as the silent presence of non-white figures haunt the novel from its margins. As Kelly suggests, the elevator scene models 'what an informed and open conversation about American political and intellectual history might look like'.[118]

More than this, however, the dialogic mode of the elevator scene, employed throughout Wallace's work, speaks of a latent scepticism Wallace held for the very kind of authority he was so fervently advocating. As John Jeremiah Sullivan wrote of Wallace's style,

> He looked at the plain style and saw that the impetus of it, in the end, is to sell the reader something. Not in a crass sense, but in a rhetorical sense. The well-tempered magazine feature, for all its pleasures, is a kind of fascist wedge that seeks to make you forget its problems, half-truths, and arbitrary decisions, and swallow its nonexistent imprimatur.[119]

This tension is also visible in the structure of 'Authority and American Usage' which portrays a rhetorical pull between the essayist who wants to believe and the intellectual who — through endless qualifying footnotes, definitions, and apologies — can't. It is this tension which Hayes-Brady describes as 'Wallace's perfectionist resistance to ending', his ultimate mistrust of conclusions in favour of 'process', which leads him to embrace a kind of 'muddy bothness'.[120]

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[117] Wallace, *The Pale King*, 135.
[118] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas,' 15.
[119] John Jeremiah Sullivan, 'Too Much Information,' *GQ Magazine*, March 31, 2011, https://www.gq.com/story/david-foster-wallace-the-pale-king-john-jeremiah-sullivan.
[120] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 31.

It seems appropriate to end by acknowledging that, despite Wallace's frequent engagement with grammar and linguistics across his *oeuvre,* grammatical themes are, like race, decidedly absent from *The Pale King.* That these two omissions are linked is, I hope evident, from this chapter. Throughout the novel, acts of reading are repeatedly subsumed into numerical accounting operations or equations: for example, Sylvanshine's inability to read on the plane due to an 'inner ear thing', forcing him instead to recall the 'core accounting equation A=L+E' which has the ability to 'be dissolved and reshuffled' into new formulas and meanings; or, Chris Fogle's peculiar affliction where he forgets how to read, entertaining himself instead by counting the number of words in each book.[121] But despite this, one might be tempted to read Wallace's interest in the tax code as an institutional and political iteration of a kind of universal grammar: a vast and, to many, unknowable system of formal relations linking together everyone in the nation regardless of identity or political affiliation. In this externalization of grammar, Wallace places a universal system under even greater strain with the practicalities and specifics of everyday life, not to arrive resoundingly at 'the language our nation uses to talk to itself' but to present a problem to be '*worked out* instead of merely found' (72).

[121] Wallace, *The Pale King*, 7; 162.

Conclusion: Tense Present

In the opening sections of Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School* (2019), the novel's central protagonist Adam Gordon observes his high school debate partner take the floor in competitive 'extemp':

> For a few seconds it sounds more or less like oratory, but soon she accelerates to nearly unintelligible speed, pitch and volume rising […] she is attempting to 'spread' their opponents, as her opponents will attempt to spread them in turn—that is, to make more arguments, marshal more evidence than the other team can respond to within the allotted time, the rule among serious debaters being that a 'dropped argument,' no matter its quality, its content, is conceded.[1]

The 'spread' represents a fundamental subversion of the purpose of debate, a technique that tries to actively obscure communication, instead aiming to overwhelm one's opponent with a flood of language. Debaters prepare for this dizzying rhetorical performance not only with elaborate speed drills but also by 'reading evidence backward so as to uncouple the physical act of vocalization from the effort to comprehend, which slows one down.'[2] This practice serves simultaneously to accumulate arguments and render them meaningless, producing rhetoric that actively tries to stifle its opponents' response. While this use of language is described as profoundly disconnected from the 'real world', Lerner's narrator points to its ubiquity both in the present day and the 1990s when the novel is set: 'Even before the twenty-four-hour news cycle, Twitter storms, algorithmic trading, spreadsheets, the DDoS attack, Americans were getting "spread" in their daily lives; meanwhile, their politicians went on speaking slowly, slowly about values utterly disconnected from their policies.'[3] These two modes of discourse – the slow, empty drawl of traditional political speech and the frenzied assault of the 'spread'–

[1] Ben Lerner, *The Topeka School* (London: Granta, 2019), 22.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid, 24.

separate the language from responsibility, peddling rhetoric that tries to effect maximum impact with minimal accountability (as Lerner's narrator suggests, the 'spread' is also the language of the corporate 'fine print' and risk disclaimers). A radical digression from Wallace's technocratic reconstruction of standard English, this kind of grammar relies on older authoritative forms and structures to carry absent meaning, relegating language from an act of communication to 'glossolalic ritual'.[4]

While Lerner describes this linguistic mystification as right-wing tool for obscuring both conservative and market 'values', Sean McCann and Michael Szalay diagnose a reciprocal move on the left towards a model of 'redemptive "glossolalia".'[5] This shift, which can be seen in novels like Don DeLillo's *The Names* (1982), seeks linguistic purity through a detraction of language from communication, a kind of 'babbling' where 'people are not talking to each other, but speaking in glorious isolation.'[6] In the view of McCann and Szalay, American literature after 1967 moved distinctively away from a view of art as an instrument of political action and towards a 'mystification' that envisaged 'a necessary relation between self-realisation and revolutionary social transformation'.[7] Alongside DeLillo, McCann and Szalay locate this turn to linguistic mysticism in Toni Morrison's Nobel Lecture, in which the author of *Beloved* contrasts dead 'statist language' which is only interested in preserving 'its own exclusivity and dominance' with a transcendental 'unmolested language', that is 'like a cry without an alphabet'.[8] This conscious divorcing of language from the realm of 'meaning' (i.e. tangible ideological positions) becomes a political act in and of itself. This is the intellectual context within which Gertrude Stein's experimentalism was reappraised in the 1980s; as I have shown,

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[4] Ibid, 23.
[5] Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, 'Do You Believe in Magic?: Literary Thinking after the New Left,' *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 450.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid, 445.
[8] Toni Morrison, 'Nobel Lecture,' (speech, Stockholm, Sweden December 7, 1993), https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/.

Stein's illegibility became synonymous with a form of political radicalism that is in fact far more vexed and complicated than it appeared to critics at the time. Accusations of linguistic obscurity and mysticism, derived from a division between 'symbolic' and 'real' politics, remain prevalent in critiques of the contemporary left. In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, George Packer chastised the left's 'anti-populist' lexicon, whereby shifts in accepted language 'happen by ambush—suddenly and irrevocably, with no visible trail of discussion and decision, and with quick condemnation of holdouts—which gives them a powerful mystique.'[9]

The three authors I have examined in this thesis actively work against this mystifying impulse through an intense attention to the workings of grammar. Each are fascinated by grammar's ability to contain a multitude of different positions, to mean entirely diverse things depending on who is asked, and to be put to use in the service of completely opposing agendas. In doing so, their treatment of grammar not only looks, as Gertrude Stein would say, 'forward and back' but also left and right. In many ways Gertrude Stein, Lydia Davis, and David Foster Wallace are each profoundly engaged with the problems of political language — and the ways in which they propose to resolve these issues are not always popular or easy to understand. David Foster Wallace's early work grapples with the division between 'symbolic' and 'real' politics that he inherits from postmodernism, and ultimately goes against the grain in a reversion to a traditional view of grammar that is both technocratic and civic-minded. Although Lydia Davis's work might be read similarly in terms of its turn away from the political realm, I have shown that her elusive and suggestive prose is not concerned with an 'unmolested language' but is instead fascinated by the quotidian corruption of our everyday grammar. Meanwhile, the tension between experimentalism and communication, as well as between form and content, that arises in Stein's work in some way anticipates the condition of post-1960s art

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[9] George Packer, 'The Left Needs a Language Potent Enough to Counter Trump,' *The Atlantic,* August 6, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/language-trump-era/595570/.

that McCann and Szalay describe. Stein's work exemplifies the ways in which language implicitly and, at all times, holds opposing impulses in continuous tension.

As each of my chapters has shown, to look closely at grammar invariably means to work through the many complex political dimensions grammar contains. We are reminded, once again, of Stein's declaration that 'grammar is a folder', a diverse and indiscriminating compendium, and of her characterisation of the 'grammarian', 'who stands', not unlike Wallace's 'Decider', at the centre of it all facing up to its manifold possibilities even though she might be 'afraid'.[10] The final scene of *The Topeka School* concludes with a similar image, as present day Adam Gordan attends a political protest in New York with his wife and daughter. At the behest of one of the demonstration's organisers the crowd becomes a 'human microphone', where members of the crowd repeat and pass along the words of the speaker to avoid the use of 'permit-requiring equipment'.[11] Describing his participation in this crowd formation, Adam notes, 'It embarrassed me, it always had, but I forced myself to participate, to be part of a tiny public speaking, a public learning slowly how to speak again, in the middle of the spread.'[12] Lerner's model re-grounds Davis's impulse to work 'word to word, sentence to sentence' in the bodily reality of each of its participants.[13] Positioning the writer not as literary authority but as an instrument of 'public learning', Lerner presents a communal effort to re-learn how to speak and how to write.

Although it seems that much of today's political fracture starts, in George Orwell's words, 'at the verbal end', it is unsurprising that a return to grammar should feel like a version of the same kind of political evasion that McCann and Szalay describe. As Katy Waldman laments in a recent review of Benjamin Dreyer's *Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide*

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[10] Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 110.
[11] Lerner, *The Topeka School,* 282.
[12] Ibid*,* 282.
[13] Lydia Davis, interviewed by Francine Prose, 'Lydia Davis,' *BOMB Magazine* 60 (Summer 1997), n.p. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/lydia-davis/.

to Clarity and Style (2019): 'What's the point of grammar and style if violating all of their writs might win you the Presidency?'[14] But what I hope I have elucidated in my discussions of Stein, Davis, and Wallace is that grammar will always matter precisely because of its ubiquity and its irrevocable governance of all forms of communication. Their diverse aesthetics is predicated on paying close attention to language, not only to the words and grammatical structures we use, but the ways these connect with larger political, cultural, and historical structures. In this way, Stein, Davis, and Wallace offer us a form of writing that is persistently turned outward, inviting the reader to puzzle through their own assumptions about language, to read grammatically both on the level of the sentence and across political and social spheres.

[14] Katy Waldman, 'The Hedonic Appeal of "Dreyer's English",' *The New Yorker,* January 30, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-hedonic-appeal-of-dreyers-english.

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