Guilty Style: Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* and E.M. Forster's Legacy in the Age of Autofiction

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Abstract: This essay provides an example of Forster's contemporary literary legacy beyond explicit re-workings of his texts and life. Building on existing scholarship, it adopts the concepts of spectral legacy and dialogue as a framework for thinking of legacies that are not a matter of straight descent, but of a later work standing in a more oblique relation to its precursor. The essay reads Lauren Oyler's recent novel *Fake Accounts* (2021) as participating in such a spectral dialogue with *Howards End*. Forster's conflicted liberal humanism – committed to the ameliorative potential of culture, on the one hand, and painfully aware of the limited social and political efficacy of this commitment, on the other – offers a framework for understanding the formal qualities of autofiction, one of the most visible trends in contemporary literature. The essay posits guilt, one of the primary qualities of liberal thinking both in Forster's time and the present moment, as the core of this particular Forsterian legacy.

Keywords: E. M. Forster, Howards End, liberalism, style, Lauren Oyler, autofiction

Introduction

For the moment, E. M. Forster's legacy seems assured. Even though he might not enjoy the same intellectual and academic prestige as some of his peers, such as Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and T. S. Eliot, his life and work continues to attract the attention of contemporary artists working in different media and genres. Focusing only on literary works published after the millennium, one can point to a series of novels directly inspired by Forster's life and work: in *Closed Circle* (2004), Jonathan Coe adapts parts of the storylines of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *Howards End*; Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) updates the latter in a transatlantic and multicultural setting; *Sex and Vanity* (2020) by Kevin Kwan rewrites *A Room With a View* for the twenty-first century; William di Canzio's *Alec*

(2021) continues the story of Alec Scudder from *Maurice*; finally, at least three bio-fictional treatments of Forster's life have been published in the last decade: Bethan Roberts's *My Policeman* (2012), Damon Galgut's *Arctic Summer* (2014), and Haydn Middleton's *The Ballad of Syd and Morgan* (2018).[1]

All of these works explicitly adapt characters, plot structures, or themes from Forster's novels and stories (as well as real-life occurrences in the case of bio-fiction). While it makes sense to locate Forster's legacy in works that directly invoke him as a precursor, it also restricts the notion of legacy. Legacies are not only a matter of straight descent; a later work may also stand in a more oblique relation to its precursor, at a slight angle, so to speak. In response to this problem, Alberto Fernández Carbajal developed the concept of "spectral legacies" (2014, 18) with recourse to Jacques Derrida's work on hauntology. Such legacies refer to "forms of inheritance which exceed the most easily decodifiable and intelligible" and derive from an "internalized indebtedness, which is granted materiality wittingly or unwittingly" (19). Here I emphasize unwitting connections and supplement the idea of spectral legacies with what Fordoński calls dialogue. The latter's framework for categorizing Forster's legacies consists of three categories – adaptation, inspiration, dialogue – defined by their connection to an original. While an adaptation retains "the most direct and clearly visible presence of Forster's source material," inspiration offers a more "subtle" reworking of "motifs, places, and characters." Finally, dialogue occurs "when authors approach Forster's work in a creative way, responding to the ideas of the writer rather than adapting them" (2020, 15). I propose to open up the idea of dialogue in the spirit of spectral legacies and to extend it to contemporary texts unwittingly corresponding with Forster's oeuvre.

This essay reads Lauren Oyler's novel *Fake Accounts* (2021) as participating in a spectral dialogue with *Howards End*. Forster's liberal humanism and his defence of culture as socially relevant produces a narrow narrative purview that self-consciously disavows the social breadth of its formal precursors, the great realist novels of the nineteenth century. Forster's conflicted liberal humanism – committed to the ameliorative potential of culture in the vein of Matthew Arnold, on the one hand, and painfully aware of the limited social and political

1 I here rely on Krzysztof Fordoński's (2020) meticulous account of contemporary works inspired by and related to Forster's work in other ways. Aside from traditional literary examples, he also considers other media, such as the radio (18-20), theatre (20-23), television (23-25), film (25-28), various musical adaptations (28-30), and graphic novels (16).

application of this commitment in the present – offers a framework for understanding the formal qualities of one of the most visible trends in contemporary literature: autofiction or semi-autobiographical fiction not concerned with disguising its relation to the life of the author. The essay posits guilt, one of the primary qualities of liberal thinking both in Forster's time and the present moment, as the core of this particular Forsterian legacy; however, guilt is not to be understood as a feeling of wrong-doing, but as a heightened awareness of the limited nature of realism as well as that which it excludes. When I write of a guilty style, I mean to emphasize a morally motivated self-consciousness about the project of fiction that opens a literary-historical vista extending from 1910 to the present. Due to the scope of the paper, I will concentrate on elaborating what I call guilty style in both Forster and Oyler; that is, rather than analysing the nature of spectral legacies and dialogue, I focus on a possible application of these concepts to transperiodic literary history.

Guilty Style I: *Howards End*

The form of *Howards End* points to Forster's ambiguous position in literary history, combining "Victorian form" with "modernist, Edwardian" content (Weihl 2014, 444). Michael Levenson more generally remarks on "the heterogeneity of modes, the diversity of styles, tones and manners" (1991, 81). Virginia Woolf notices a similar tension and considers the novel a failure for not successfully integrating its divergent impulses. She attributes this failure of Forster's realism not to lacking descriptive power, but to a pedagogical instinct that leads the narrator to break into the realistically constructed world and thereby to undercut its imaginative power:

> [J]ust as we are yielding ourselves to the pleasures of the imagination, a little jerk rouses us. We are tapped on the shoulder. We are to notice this, to take heed of that. Margaret or Helen, we are made to understand, is not speaking simply as herself; her words have another and a larger meaning. (349)

Barbara Rosencrance complains that Forster too frequently "substitutes preachiness for the integrated imagery of a coherent position" (1998, 413). The mixed mode of *Howards End* and its "strikingly large amount of authorial reflection"

(Kermode 2009, 107), therefore, seems to derive from the tension between an essentially realist narration and a political vision that interrupts the former in the form of authorial commentary.

The nature of this commentary might contribute to the aesthetic failure of the novel, as many of the critics cited above believe, but it also represents a stylistic quality that characterizes a genre of contemporary fiction. The particular mixture of boldness and reticence that defines the narrative of *Howards End* is the style of a writer highly conscious of the tension between a liberal humanist apologia for culture – in the Arnoldian sense – and a realist genre whose political vigour has always been derived from a portrayal of exactly those spheres of society not traditionally concerned with culture and the arts. Forster's sense of guilt derives from the knowledge of what his novel excludes, but which he considers necessary to exclude in order to instantiate his vision; consequently, *Howards End* can be read as an example of guilty style.

It is, of course, problematic to talk about realism as a monolithic concept, but in the first decade of the twentieth century, realism remains closely connected to a broad representation of society. *Howards End*, for example, would not withstand the critical scrutiny George Eliot expends on the "social novels" (1883, 141) of her day in "The Natural History of German Life," one of the founding documents of literary realism. Aside from completely ignoring the lower classes, Forster seems to construct Leonard and Jacky Bast exactly as Eliot believes a novelist should not: from "the motives and influences which the moralist thinks *ought* to act" on them rather than seriously considering "what are the motives and influences which *do* act" on the couple (145, emphasis in original). Were he to focus solely on the aristocracy, his novel would not have to uphold Eliot's standards since "it is not so serious that we should have false ideas about … the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses" (146), but *Howards End* has a broader social scope. *Howards End* occupies an uncomfortable middle position: on the one hand, the novel's realist narration is an essential aspect of its claim to the social relevance of culture; Forster takes great care to construct recognizable urban, suburban, and rural settings in order to have his argument play out in the real world. On the other, he does not want to adopt the social breadth of the traditional realist novel because it would pull the rug out from under his Arnoldian vision of culture. He is left with an uneasy compromise: in refusing "the capaciousness of the great Victorians" (Levenson 1991, 86), Forster signals the limitations of his project; if he left it at that, however, it would not amount to

more than a perfunctory gesture, but Forster's novel persistently and relentlessly emphasizes the problem at the heart of cultured liberalism.

"We are not concerned with the very poor," the narrator states at the outset of chapter six. "They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet" (2000, 38). The exclusion of a certain group of people in the context of a novel is nothing remarkable given that it is an implicit quality of every novel, and the pronouncement that the poor are unthinkable might be less interesting as a symptom of Forster's unfamiliarity with people outside of his own class than as a reflection of his political agenda or, to be more precise, the aesthetic mode of his politics. In 1938, Forster would describe himself as "a liberal who has found liberalism crumbling beneath him" (Forster 1972c, 72), which Levenson reads in relation to the growing conviction among liberals that the belief in radical individualism was compatible with a new faith in the progressive transformation of society through governmental reform in the tradition of utilitarian thinking (1991, 87–88). Forster, following Matthew Arnold rather than Jeremy Bentham, sees the individual as the inviolable core of liberalism and defends the individual against governmental interference throughout his life.[2] This focus coupled with his concern for how the individual relates to culture produces the narrow focus of *Howards End*.

Both in the novel and in his non-fiction, Forster does not refrain from exposing the inherent partiality and elitism of liberal humanism, particularly its insistent faith in the social importance of culture. The "hungry and the homeless," he told the Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Culture in 1935 in no uncertain terms, "don't care about liberty any more than they care about cultural heritage. To pretend that they do is cant" (1996, 61). For Forster to pretend that culture is worthless because the hungry and homeless have more pressing needs to attend to, however, would be just as problematic. He considers poverty and disenfranchisement as the products of a society that ignores the very values and sensibilities culture transmits. To deny their importance, therefore, would be to abandon the hope of equality (or harmony, to use a key Arnoldian term). In *Howards End*, this attitude gives rise to the uncomfortable liberal dissociation of "culture from society while still considering it to have a crucial social function" (Widdowson 1977,

2 The history of liberalism and Forster's relation to it is of course a great deal more complex than such a reduction implies. Frederic Crews (1961: 19–36) still remains one of the best introductions into this history. The same applies to Forster's relationship to Arnold, which is covered in more detail by McGurk (1972) and Stone (1966, 235–77).

93). Margaret's panegyric to "Differences – eternal differences, planted by God in a single family, so that there may always be colour" is followed by her warning Helen not to grow destitute over Leonard's demise. "Don't drag in the personal" – her highest creed – "when it will not come." Leonard, for all his suffering, got an "adventure" out the events, and when Helen wonders if that was enough, Margaret retorts with finality: "Not for us. But for him" (Forster 2000, 288–89).

Aside from explicit reminders such as this one, the novel's imagery is deeply ambivalent. Water, for example, "is simultaneously (like the realm of spirit and mystery) a great authority and (like the realm of business mores, panic, and emptiness) a force of erosion and hopeless flux" (Graham 1988, 173). Similarly, Howards End as a symbol of Forster's vision of England is ambiguous, given how the "red rust" of London on the horizon encroaches on it at the close of the novel. By that point, Levenson points out, the house is threatened by the very civilization it is meant to represent: "Howards End, signifying England, is contained and threatened by England; the symbolic vehicle sputters; the house is now, again, merely a house, jeopardized by the appetite of suburbs and the smoke of cities" (1991, 95). The image of the sputtering vehicle elegantly invokes the Wilcoxian culture of the motor-car that undermines the loftier pretensions of the Schlegel philosophy while ultimately itself breaking down. The far from triumphant ending of the novel is only the final instance of Forster lifting the veil on his vision to reveal its problematic base, and it begins as early as the first sentence: "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister" (2000, 3). Even though any realist narrative is as subjective and selective as any other, to invoke the arbitrariness of the structure of a story is to disavow a claim to generality or comprehensiveness and to embrace partiality.

If one is inclined to read the opening sentence as a disingenuous and empty gesture, one would do well to recall that in Forster's liberal humanism, partiality is not the result of a lack of impartiality but a measure of healthy self-consciousness. In his most emphatic writing on this problem, mostly the essays and broadcasts of the 1930s, Forster repeatedly draws attention to the danger of moral superiority. In "Jew-Consciousness" (1939), he cautions his audience not to confuse the relative absence of antisemitism in England as opposed to Germany with an absence of racist and other discriminatory prejudices (1972b). In the speech of defence of culture mentioned above, he admonishes the English in the same terms about the danger of fascism. Even if this danger currently is "negligible," it would be wrong to suppose that similar processes are not

> working away behind the façade of constitutional forms, passing a little law (like the Sedition Act) here, endorsing a departmental tyranny there, emphasizing the national need of secrecy elsewhere, and whispering and cooing the so-called 'news' every evening over the wireless, until opposition is tamed and gulled. (1996, 62)

Much more than advocating scepticism towards a particular political ideology, Forster embraces the credo that "epistemological certainty is dangerous because of its will-to-power and its refusal to give difference its due" (Armstrong 2009, 286); and it is exactly this attitude that leads Zadie Smith to conclude that Forster was at his "most radical" when he was defending "his liberal humanism against fundamentalists from the right and left" (2010, 15).

Forster's self-conscious liberalism is on full display in *Howards End*. The novel unflaggingly performs its unease about the limited nature of the worldview it espouses. The disavowal of the poor, the constant reminders of the wealth on which the liberalism of the Schlegels is built, and an ending that questions the sustainability of the vision of Howards End as the England of the future all contribute to making the novel "the most comprehensive picture of liberal guilt" in its century (Born 1995, 135). The novel, however, mediates this guilt in a manner that prevents a sliding into inaction associated with the scepticism Forster advocates; that is, a scepticism that constantly turns inwards and demands self-evaluation.

Helen's swaying between her Schlegelian fervour for the inner life and her infatuation with the Wilcoxes at the beginning of the novel offers an example of the vulnerability of a liberalism as staunch as Forster's. If one is radically open to the opinions of others, one is also more likely to understand and to be convinced by them. Julie Ellison identifies this as the crux of modern liberal guilt:

> Liberals are thought to feel particularly malleable, always in danger of having their too-ready sympathy absorbed by someone else's agenda, or they are at least thought to worry more about this potential. Liberal guilt, then, is bound up with the feeling of being implicated in systems of domination and with the subsequent awareness of the emotional instability produced by this ambivalent position. (1996, 350)

The discriminations of *Howards End* shore up liberal consciousness against sympathetic dissolution, on the one hand, and they admonish readers not to read the novel as a purely political tract. "If we read the novelistic registration of the limits of politics" in *Howards End* "as the abandonment of politics," Amanda Anderson argues, "then we are asking literature to be something it isn't, something entirely coterminous with political theory or political action" (2016, 97–8). Forster neither ignores how problematic it is to build a worldview celebrating the rights and worthiness of the individual on a wilful blindness towards a large proportion of the population, nor does he present the novel as a blueprint for political action; rather, he is fully aware that the lack of blindness bears dangers of its own, as does the quietude derived from the knowledge of the limitations of the liberal humanist novel. As a result, he advocates a self-conscious, context-dependent blindness that still characterizes (non-defeatist) liberalism today: to defend culture against fascism even if the majority of a population might not care about culture is as little a reason to desist in one's efforts as to abandon the fight against climate change because the majority of the planet's population is engaged in much more basic struggles. To feel guilty about having the privilege to even see a problem is part of the bargain, and this bargain, considered in formal terms, represents one of the aspects of Forster's contemporary legacy.

Interlude: *On Beauty*

Before turning to Oyler's novel and the genre of autofiction, I want to briefly look at what still might be the most celebrated contemporary literary adaptation of Forster's work: Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*. Smith formally rejects the liberal problem Forster performs so elaborately in *Howards End*. Her narrator at no point excludes any group of people from the novel's purview, nor does the narrative voice self-consciously comment on the narration. On the contrary, in making her version of the Schlegels and Wilcoxes mixed race and Black, respectively, providing a much fuller account of the Leonard Bast figure in the young African American poet and rapper Carl Thomas, as well as including working-class Haitian immigrants in her narrative, Smith stakes a claim to the very social breadth which Forster's novel lacks. While she fulfils this claim in particular in the portrait of Carl Thomas, who is much more lifelike than Leonard (should Carl have gotten anyone pregnant, one would be hard-pressed to find readers who would attribute it to an umbrella), her sweeping social vision runs into the same problem as Forster's.

Carbajal, for example, points out that the one-dimensional portrayal of the Haitian community "effectively aligns the novel's ideological perspective with the bourgeoisie whom the novel aims to critique in the first place" (2013, 43). By adopting a Westernized view of Haitian history and mediating it through an adolescent consciousness of Levi Belsey, who is as susceptible to sympathy as Helen at the beginning of *Howards End*, Smith, according to Carbajal, fails to exploit the political potential of her vision. This, however, might be less a failing of Smith's imaginative powers than a failure of form – more specifically, Forster's form: "there are some implicit dangers in honouring the liberal, 'middling' line of Forster's writing. The Haitians in *On Beauty* remain as 'unthinkable' as the very poor in *Howards End*" (Carbajal 2013, 50). But to what extent does Smith honour Forster's middling line in stylistic terms?

On Beauty displaces liberal guilt from the narrator to its characters. In comparison to its literary forebear, Smith's novel does not perform its anxiety about what remains outside of its representational power. This lacking narratorial self-consciousness ultimately enables Carbajal's critique. Without the narrator's concessions about the limits of her project, Smith's novel adopts realism's claim to broad social representation, which in turn is the measure by which Carbajal identifies the novel's failure to adequately represent the members of the Haitian community. To put it differently, in not adopting Forster's guilty style, Smith's novel seems to speak from an authoritative position very much unlike that of *Howards End*. In this regard, *On Beauty* does not belong to the legacy of liberal guilt I am concerned with here. For that, one needs to look to a different contemporary genre.

Guilty Style II: *Fake Accounts*

Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* is narrated by an unnamed character who shares aspects of Oyler's biography: both spend time in New York City and Berlin; Oyler's career was facilitated through successful involvement with popular sites like *Bookslut*, *Vice*, and *Bookforum*, while her unnamed counterpart works as a "blogger" producing "two to three articles per day about 'culture'" for a website read by "millions of people" every month (2021, 66–67); both have a sizeable following on Twitter, although Oyler's currently is much higher – close to 30,000 while her narrator's count is somewhere in "the mid four figures" (66); finally, the description of the narrator's Twitter profile picture matches Oyler's at the time of writing this article.

The novel tells the story of the narrator's relationship with a man named Felix, whom she discovers to operate a popular Instagram account peddling alt-right conspiracy theories. Since Felix is not aware of her discovery, the narrator takes great pleasure in planning out the break-up, revelling in the prospect of fully indulging in the moral superiority afforded by the situation. Before she can carry out her plan, however, Felix dies in an accident. Although his death does not unsettle her greatly, she takes it as an occasion to leave behind her life in New York City and moves to Berlin, where the remaining plot takes place. The narrator gets a job as a babysitter and goes on various dates and attends other social occasions, for which she adopts a number of fake identities until a final plot twist not to be revealed here brings the story to a close. As this brief summary indicates, the novel primarily stages questions of authenticity in a world deeply shaped by online representation and interaction, but it not only does so in terms of its content. Its form suggests a preoccupation with the relationship between a new conception of authenticity propelled by social media and novelistic form.

Oyler considers the fictionalizing of the self that defines autofiction and semi-autobiographical writing as a response to the way we present ourselves online. In a conversation with Courtney Balestier on the *WMFA* podcast, Oyler links the popularity of autofiction to the advent of identities that are both fictional and non-fictional in reality TV and on social media:

> The novelist who is using their life in some way, or using themselves and putting themselves in a story that may or may not be true, is quite similar to the sort of Twitter user who is making bombastic declarations or publishing takes that aren't quite real. (Balestier 2021, 21: 17–21: 43)

In this perspective, autofictional narration can be understood as being more realistic than traditional realism. Oyler makes reference to Rachel Cusk's take on her own turn to autofiction as a disillusionment with traditional fiction, which began striking her as "fake and embarrassing." Cusk, who experienced a creative slump after publishing a semi-autobiographical account of her divorce, found that afterwards "the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seem[ed] utterly ridiculous" (Kellaway 2014). Even though Oyler does not endorse this statement on the podcast, she points out that traditional realist narratives seem more removed from life than autofiction, which simply

provides "an easier and more natural way to write." In this regard, autofiction is an aesthetic choice, but, crucially, it also is a more moral one.

"I see myself using myself as an example because that's what's at hand, and because it's really the only ethical way you can bring in the real world, to sacrifice yourself on the altar of truth (Balestier 2021, 34: 09–34: 26). With this in mind, autofiction can be understood as a genre that inherently performs the awareness of its own limitations. "Presenting the author as what he is, some guy who writes books that you may ignore or pay attention to as it suits you," Oyler argues elsewhere, "seems the most moral approach to novel writing one could take" (Oyler 2020b). It is increasingly difficult to defend a realism of sympathetic identification in the vein of George Eliot in the twenty-first century when "our awareness of others' lives is greater than ever before." If autofiction "may seem like the product of a self-obsessed culture that is incapable of imagining others' lives" (Oyler 2020b), it also functions as a critique of the presumptions of realism. Here one might turn back to *Howards End* and Forster's portrayal of Leonard Bast.

Daniel Born argues that Forster's treatment of Leonard both reveals his lacking familiarity with people like him and an essential problem of realism. The latter, Born argues, is

> always an illusion, its effect of objectivity achieved by excluding overt reference to the subjective vantage point and biases of the observer. Therefore, Forster's willingness to reveal his own position vis-à-vis Leonard Bast displays not ignorance of Bast, but in fact necessary recognition that 'realism' about Bast is problematic. (1995, 129)

As I argue above, to point out that realism is problematic does not alleviate the guilt of assuming a highly exclusive narrative, neither in Forster's nor in Oyler's case.

In a passage reminiscent of the opening of chapter six of *Howards End*, and repeatedly quoted in full or partially in reviews (Kitamura 2021; Marz 2021; Stern 2021), Oyler's narrator interrupts the flow of the story to declare:

> Usually when you have these sort of searching bourgeois-white-person narratives you have to offer a disclaimer, *I know my problems do not rank in comparison to the manifold sufferings of most of the world's*

> *people…but*, but this preamble isn't meant to be perfunctory, a tick on a checklist; I really mean it as a point to be made in itself. Nothing was wrong. I had no problems. And yet I had problems. (2021, 110; emphasis and ellipsis in original)

While this might not exactly be a proclamation of liberal guilt (although it can be read that way), it points to the uneasy humility of autofiction as a genre that does not claim the responsibility and breadth of the great realist novel. Oyler can safely assume that readers unfamiliar with her previous work and life will go online before or after they read the novel to uncover the similarities between her narrator and herself. This knowledge in turn feeds into the form of the novel, as it does not only signal the limitations of the narrative (some woman writing a book that you may pay attention to if you like), but also of the reader's position.

"Under the terms of popular, social-media-inflected criticism," Oyler writes, readers are "now judge and jury, examining works for their political content and assessing the moral goodness of the author in the process" (2020b). Autofiction, in this perspective, can be understood as a genre that pre-empts the charge most easily levelled against it. It flaunts its limitations in its form, which is to say it rejects any liberal guilt that might be read into it, faulting readers for their impulse to impose a feeling of guilt on authors who never set out to make sweeping claims about the world in the first place.

But the matter does not seem to be that simple. If the form alone were enough to prevent the stylistic self-consciousness I read as a form of liberal guilt, passages about the nature of one's pain in relation to that of others would not be necessary. Neither would it be required for authors of autofiction to temper their generalizations. Celebrated writers of autofiction like Karl Ove Knausgård, Ben Lerner, and Sheila Heti[3] "are prone to making grandiose observations about the meaning of life and art," Oyler states, but "they usually admit these observations were grandiose, through self-deprecation or comedic timing" (2020b). The cause

3 Tope Folarin argues that publishers and the literary establishment primarily associate autofiction with white authors, particularly these three as well as Cusk. He argues that writers like Knausgård, Lerner, Heti, and Cusk profit "from an ongoing, ever-recurring conversation about their work that constantly probes and redefines what they have accomplished and extends the lifecycle of their work beyond the typical book promotional time frame." At the same time, this valorization "also signals that certain lives are worthy of being transformed into literature regardless of how prosaic and boring they may be, while others are not" (Folarin 2021). This argument points at another aspect beyond the scope of this paper – namely, why autofiction might be considered a guilty style.

of such self-irony does not necessarily have to derive from guilt about one's ability to make grandiose claims, but it seems increasingly difficult not to read this self-consciousness in terms of writers' awareness of everything that is excluded by their texts and, therefore, makes them vulnerable to moral criticism. Because even if such criticism need not bother an author, and it does not seem to be on the fore of Oyler's mind, she does have an inherently moral conception of the novel as an art form.

Literary novels matter to Oyler, as much as they do to Forster, and if Forster is unwilling to abandon culture and the novel in the face of their social irrelevance, Oyler is unwilling to abandon the novel as a tool for meaningfully engaging with the world in the face of its limitations. "Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot," writes George Eliot (1883, 145). It seems unlikely that Oyler would ever indulge in such rhetoric; all the same, she is unwilling to relinquish the novel into the amoral wilds of aestheticism. She is reluctant to "say something about how serious literature 'helps us understand what it means to be human' or whatever," but then she concedes: "I do believe something to that effect," adding that "commercial literature" (Goldstein 2020) cannot provide the same effect as serious literature. Oyler is a critic who deploys "whatever," a word which might seem atypical for a someone whose critical language usually is highly acute, strategically (consider, for example, her review of Jia Tolentino's *Trick Mirror* (2020c)). In the passage just quoted, it perfectly encapsulates the attitude of guilty style: Oyler does not seem to be embarrassed to endorse what essentially is a liberal humanist conception of the novel, but she is painfully aware that doing so without performing her self-consciousness will make her an easy target of a moral critique that has no bearing on her argument. As a consequence, she is more preoccupied with critiquing contemporary novels that fail to live up to the novel's promise than she is in defending the form (which is one of many points at which she diverges from Forster).

Oyler's Forsterian belief in the novel's potential leads her to harshly criticize contemporary novels that merely "depict reality" rather than "respond to it, critique it, or engage with it" (Oyler 2020a). Oyler is sharply opposed to what she perceives as one stylistic trend in contemporary literature that seems to address the limited scope of the novel not through unhampered maximalism, but in a fragmented and cryptic minimalism that works primarily through suggestion rather than analysis. In *Fake Accounts*, the narrator listens to an interview with

a writer whose work resembles that of Jenny Offill in *Dept. of Speculation* (2014) and *Weather* (2020). But Offill's "aphoristic" fragments in paragraphs "set alone on the page, white space above and below" (Self 2014), which enthused reviewers, neither impresses the narrator nor Oyler.

The former finds this particular style "melodramatic, insinuating utmost meaning where there was only hollow prose" (2021, 164). What reviewers consider the style's greatest strength becomes a weakness in her eyes. "What's amazing about this structure," comments the narrator of *Fake Accounts*, "is that you can just dump any material you have in here and leave it up to the reader to connect it to the rest of the work" (180). In contrast, Roxane Gay, reviewing *Dept. of Speculation*, finds Offill's fragments highly suggestive:

> The narrator offers observations like: "The Buddhists say there are 121 states of consciousness. Of these, only three involve misery or suffering. Most of us spend our time moving back and forth between these three." There is gravity to the mere idea of Buddhism. We're supposed to do something with this information, right? There is meaning here, whether about marriage or love or life or all of the above, but the precise nature of that meaning is never fully revealed. (2014)

Oyler seems to take issue first and foremost with the position in which such writing places the reader, "who ends up searching for clues, chasing the narrative like a spy, or a conspiracy theorist" (2020a). If autofiction undermines the moral self-righteousness of readers by indicating the limited scope of its project, novels in the vein of Offill seem to tease the reader with the knowledge that the author is in fact providing meaningful commentary on a lot of topics – if only the reader did the necessary work. This achieves a reversal of Forster's guilty style: instead of signalling the restrictions of a given narrative, such novels constantly hint at commenting on a totality without doing so. Oyler, in contrast, belongs to a field of contemporary writers who negotiate their engagement with the world through the medium of autobiographical fiction in order to acknowledge partiality as a necessary quality of the novel.

For all the differences between *Howards End* and *Fake Accounts*, their authors' attitudes towards the project of realism connect them in a meaningful way. These attitudes produce a particular style, which is best understood in Susan

Sontag's terms, not as "knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgment)," but "the form or style of knowing something" (2009, 22). It is at the level of style that Forster enters a spectral dialogue with Oyler, who invites her readers, to quote Forster, to "put our heads together and consider for a moment our special problem, our special blessings, our special woes. No one need listen to us who does not want to. We whisper in the corner of a world which is full of other noises, and louder ones" (1972a, 102). The ethos of this passage – the belief in the importance of what is under discussion coupled with the performance of one's awareness of its limitations – prefigures Oyler's understanding of autofiction as a form, and in doing so it offers an example for understanding an aspect of Forster's contemporary legacy that has not yet received scholarly attention. This legacy is stylistic, as both *Howards End* and *Fake Accounts* allow their readers to experience a literary engagement with the world that is at once insistent on its social relevance and conscious of the vast unspoken-of reaches of the world it cannot but fail to address.

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