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## From the Editor

The whole editorial board of the *Polish Journal of English Studies* would like to welcome you wholeheartedly to our first issue in 2021. The current volume offers – as always – a selection of greatly varied papers on English and American literature. We begin chronologically with William Shakespeare as Amira Aloui discusses “the rotten state of Denmark” in her paper dealing with the discourse of reason of state in *Hamlet*. Dorota Osińska takes a closer look at Victorian popular press and the way it depicted spiritualism. Michał Palmowski deals with a particularly poignant topic in the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic: the representation of a polio epidemic in Philip Roth’s novel *Nemesis*. The fourth paper we have prepared for this issue, written by Ewa Kowal, discusses the issues of racial tensions as presented in Benjamin Markovits’ recent novel *You Don’t Have to Live Like This*. We close this issue with two reports on recent conferences, including our own PASE conference, which took place in Lublin.

The work of our editorial board stops now but only briefly as we are already well advanced in the preparation of the second 2021 issue, which will be dedicated to E. M. Forster. Our plans go even further, so in 2022 you can expect a special issue commemorating the centenary of the publication of *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, and *Jacob’s Room*, three major works of English Modern literature. A call for papers for the issue will appear later this year, so make sure to follow us on social media and check our website.

The year 2021, so difficult for most of us in many respects, has proven quite fortunate for our journal. We have been included in Directory of Open Access Journals DOAJ – where you can now find all the published papers – and in ERIH Plus. In recognition of these developments, our journal has also been included in the register of academic journals of the Polish Ministry of Education and Science. We all hope that these developments will help us make our journal even more attractive and accessible both for readers and for authors. Last but not least, we would like to thank Professor Jacek Fabiszak, who has recently stepped down as the co-editor-in-chief of our journal, for the six years of work together.

Krzysztof Fordoński

Editor-in-chief of the *Polish Journal of English Studies*



## **“The Rotten State of Denmark”: The Discourse of Reason of State in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet***

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University of Szeged

**Abstract:** Early modern politics displayed a transition from civil reason to Reason of State. An extensive body on the new political discourse of Reason of State in continental Europe started to emerge, outlining a new grammar for the state, politics, and princes. The latter had undermined the traditional humanist Christian discourse of politics. This paper will address how Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* debates Reason of State onstage—an issue that has been little dealt with in the early modern scholarship of Shakespeare, or, at best, dismissed as marginalia. The protagonist’s famous delay and his political and philosophical reflections can be read in the light of contemporary political discourses to which Reason of State had become so central. Despite Hamlet’s resistance, the play ends with the triumph of political realism introduced mainly by Giovanni Botero in his oeuvre *Ragion di Stato*. *Hamlet* is not the exception in this regard. Reason of State became one of the focal subjects of early modern tragedy as I will be showing in this paper.

**Keywords:** Reason of State, civil reason, politics, transition, Hamlet, delay

The argument of this paper is centred on the politico-philosophical concept of *Raison d’État* in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. I will discuss how radical political theory pervades Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, while the ending seems to, unwillingly, conform to the political discourse of political realism introduced mainly by Giovanni Botero. The play portrays a disintegrated prince in a disintegrated state which is very similar to the context of contemporary England. The early modern era can be described as that of transitions; from feudalism to nascent capitalism; and from medievalism to an early modern world view. Transitions always bring about tension and crisis between old and new leading to the birth of a third space—that of indecisions such as those in the text under study. Politics underwent an important transition marking a shift from medievalism. Early modern political philosophy introduced what came, then, to be known as reason of state, making it the key word of its time.

My primary goal in this paper is to address not only representations and negotiations of Reason of State onstage but to emphasize how central it is to the understanding of early modern texts, that have not been widely dealt with in the early modern scholarship of Shakespeare, or, at best, dismissed as marginalia. Reason of State is central to the sixteenth-century political philosophy in continental Europe. An extensive body of political literature on ways to govern, rule, and discipline started to emerge under the rubric *Raison d'État* which ended with or rather led to what was later known as Contractarianism. Different editions, translations, and circulation of pamphlets and political manifestos on this new political theory provide a solid ground to further understand it as I will be showing in this paper. However, as Peter Burke argues, “for the colouring we have to turn elsewhere, to the arts, and especially to the drama,” (Burke 2008, 488) and that it would be “scarcely an exaggeration to claim that the true subject of these plays is reason of state” (Burke 2008, 488). The term reason of state is, nonetheless, problematic to some extent. In this paper, I will be drawing an identikit picture (Burke 2008, 481) of the theory and then turn to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to show how the stage appropriates and represents it.

### **Early modern Political Thought: Reason of State**

Reason of state was the key word of sixteenth-century continental politics. Early modern political philosophers developed a new conception of politics that broke with the early humanist understanding of politics based on the Ciceronian-Aristotelian moral framework. Reason of State came to eclipse the long-established tradition of civil reason. Protagonists of the new theory brought radical innovations that mainly freed politics from the looming moral and ethical aspect and presented, instead, new political dogmas or reflections including, *inter alia*, utility or the *uso dictum* and the authorization of cruelty for instance for, presumably, the common good. However, reason of state did not succeed at totally breaking with the humanist political framework that preceded it. Transition, in this regard, would be the right term to use to describe the move or shift from civil reason to reason of state as I will be showing in this paper.

Before moving further, it is necessary to define the term “Reason of State” in both historiography and as its contemporaries defined it. Reason of state was *de rigueur* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries political philosophy in Europe,

or at least in Italy, Spain, England, and France. The idea of the state started to occupy the thought of political theorists, philosophers, princes, and playwrights, leading to the emergence of an extensive body of political literature on the state, its reason, secrets or in the language of reason of state theorists, *arcana imperii* outlining a new grammar for politics and ways to govern. It is no surprise that in the age of absolute monarchs, reason of state became so central to political thought. The political lexicon started to change. A new political language started to emerge as Quentin Skinner shows:

The clearest sign that a society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is, I take it, that a new vocabulary comes to be generated, in terms of which the concept is then articulated and discussed. So I treat it as a decisive confirmation of my central thesis that by the end of the sixteenth century, at least in England or France, we find the words “State” and l’État beginning to be used for the first time in their modern sense. (Skinner 1987, x)

An analysis of historical semantics, instead of simply history, becomes necessary as Skinner argues. This new vocabulary started to enter not only the political language spoken in courts, but also, the one spoken by commoners. Andras Kiséry in *Hamlet’s Moment* discusses how reason of state, a recent politico-philosophical concept, was then discussed at taverns and coffee houses, emblematic of the public sphere. The latter became involved in the “culture of news, as a setting for an often raucous and scandalous discussion of the secrets of politics, of the reason of state” (Kiséry 2016, 13). Giovanni Botero, the first theorist to use the locution reason of state in his *Ragion di Stato*, defines it in simple terms:

State is a stable ruler over a people and Reason of State is the knowledge of the means by which such a dominion may be founded, preserved and extended. Yet, although in the widest sense the term includes all these, it is concerned most nearly with extension than with foundation; for Reason of State assumes a ruler and a State (the one as artificer, the other as his material) whereas they are not assumed – indeed they are preceded – by foundation entirely and in part by extension. (Botero 1956, 3)

Despite its nuanced nature, Botero's definition of the term is tenable by all contemporaries. Reason of State in simple terms, hence, can be defined as the preservation of the state. Many early modern theorists of the concept include first and foremost Niccolò Machiavelli, Justus Lipsius, Francesco Guicciardini, Michel de Montaigne, Jean Bodin, and George Buchanan. However, they did not write on Reason of State *ex nihilo*. They relied on writings of classical authors including mainly Cornelius Tacitus, inspiring, hence, the rise of early modern Tacitism. Reason of state can be, *grosso modo*, defined as the means rulers employ so as to preserve the state, to put it in a very neutral way. The state, in this regard, becomes the highest of all goods.

Reviving the works and philosophy of Cornelius Tacitus marks a shift from the Ciceronian-Aristotelian understanding of politics. The pre-Reason of State discourse, *viz.* the humanist Christian discourse refers to the art of governing that is based on justice, equality, and the rules of nature. The ruler should always act as a good Christian prince, even at the expense of the common good of the state, the people, or the realm. In Ciceronian political philosophy, law is not a human creation, but rather, derives its origin from nature and is based on the principle of equity. Tacitism is very relevant to the politics of sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries England. During the age of absolute monarchs, Ciceronian politics could no longer be a reference, and, hence, the Tacitean alternative. Francesco Guicciardini, one of the proponents of Reason of State in its most radical forms, argues in his *Maxims and Reflections* that monarchs or rulers in general can read in Cornelius Tacitus the last conversations of the dying Augustus with Tiberius<sup>1</sup> if they want to know how tyrants think (Guicciardini 1965, 44). Tacitus' works are revived and presented as the ideal guidelines for princes on how to rule. However, it is important to note that Tacitism does not refer to the works of Tacitus *per se*. Rather, it refers to, as Ferenc Hörcher puts it, the early modern late humanist intellectual "fashion." Tacitus' name is used as an argument for authority or to replace the ominous word "Machiavellianism" (Hörcher 2021, 196). The works of theorists of Reason of State appropriated Tacitism to a certain extent.

In order to dissect the political "genre" contemporary to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is worth discussing its poetics. Theorists started to collect advice for rulers,

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1 "If You want to know what the thoughts of tyrants are, read in Cornelius Tacitus the last conversations of the dying Augustus with Tiberius" and that Tacitus "teaches those who live under tyrants how to live and act prudently; just as he teaches tyrants ways to secure their tyranny" (Guicciardini 1965, 44; 45).

and, hence, the generic name “advice-for-rulers.” These reflections on Reason of State came in the form of lapidary reflections of what was, then, known as *Furstenspiegel*, meaning advice to a ruler. It can, also, be translated as mirror for princes — a metaphor that has been employed in the play-within-play in *Hamlet* that I will return to later. These *Furstenspiegel* came in the form of essays, by Montaigne, who introduced the essay genre, and Bacon, who re-appropriated it later, *ricordi* or observations, maxims, or reflections, or books dedicated to princes and rulers as in Lipsius, Bodin, and Guicciardini, or dialogues à la Aristotle as in George Buchanan’s *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos; A Dialogue Concerning the Rights of the Crown in Scotland*.

However, it would be wrong to assume that Reason of State is one homogeneous theory, whereby all theorists tended to produce similar ideas. Reason of state, as I have pointed out, is a radical political theory in the sense that it broke with the ideals of civil reason and the Ciceronian-Aristotelian framework. However, theorists of the state and its reason have disagreed on various issues including forms and types of government. These disagreements are not minor. Guicciardini and Lipsius may have, for instance, perpetuated Tacitism and absolutism. Other theorists including Giovanni Botero denounced the latter:

Among the things that I have observed, I have been greatly astonished to find reason of state a constant subject of discussion and to hear the opinions of Niccolò Machiavelli and Cornelius Tacitus frequently quoted: the former for his precepts relating to the rule and governments of peoples, the latter for his live description of the arts employed by the Emperor Tiberius in acquiring and retaining the imperial title of Rome... I was amazed that so impious an author and so wicked a tyrant should be held in such esteem that they are thought to provide ideal examples of the methods by which states be governed and administered; and I was moved to indignation rather amazement to find that this barbarous mode of government had won such acceptance. (Botero 1956, xiii)

Botero does not reject Reason of State altogether. Rather, he tries to revise it within the Christian Humanist context. Maurizio Viroli eloquently articulates the complexity of the theory by asking the question “which reason is reason of state” (Viroli 1998, 67). By posing the question, Viroli mainly refers to the di-

chotomy of Reason of State versus civil reason and concludes by problematizing the shift even further when asking whether Reason of State is a degeneration from politics of the ancients or a progressive transition that frees political science from the tyranny of moralism (Viroli 1998, 73). He adds:

If we go back to the question that I raised at the outset of this paper, namely why political philosophers constructed and put into use the locution ‘ragione di state’, we can answer that they did it because they needed a new concept of reason apt to excuse derogations from moral and civil law imposed by the necessity to preserve or expand states understood as *dominions*... It marked the beginnings of what has been aptly called ‘the politics of the moderns’ as opposed to ‘the politics of the ancients’, that is the view that politics is simply the art of pursuing, securing, expanding power, not, as the ancients and their naive humanist followers seemed (or pretended) to believe, the art of founding and preserving a republic. Whether the transition from the former to the latter conception of politics should be regarded as an intellectual progress or as a decay is a highly contested matter, but it cannot be denied that the transition, did indeed take place; and it began when those two words, reason and state were put together. (Viroli 1998, 73)

I would like to address the question differently by pointing to the heterogeneity of the theory of Reason of State *per se*. The first innovation theorists of Reason of State introduced is “freeing” the political discourse from its moral and ethical aspects. Whether the shift is seen as progressive or regressive haunts the protagonist of the play who resists it altogether. Morality is, instead, replaced with new dicta including the principle of utility. The harsh proponents of the latter are Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, Justus Lipsius, and to some extent Jean Bodin. Giovanni Botero, on the other hand, tried to redirect the discourse of Reason of State to its Christian and humanist roots. Political realism was introduced by Giovanni Botero who re-situated the new political language in a traditional framework to which the play under study subscribes to despite the radical, almost anarchical, and philosophical reflections of its protagonist. *Hamlet* advances radical and almost anarchic views, which reverberate with radical theories of tyrannicide contemporary to the play, particularly that of George

Buchanan, on the state and its reason, while rejecting the rigid discourse of Reason of State à la Guicciardini. The ending, however, offers the moderate alternative of Giovanni Botero, that of political realism. The play does not exalt the discourse of political realism as such but offers it as an unescapable fate, mourning or, rather, the realization of the loss of liberties first enjoyed by men in their a-political state and later theorized later by Contractarianism. According to the Reason of State discourse, the state or ruler sees the citizens as conquered enemies and not equal citizens with rights. George Buchanan denounces the discourse of Reason of State altogether and provides instead new theories that see the ruler and subjects as equals before the law. Even further, Buchanan insists that the law, and, hence, both the state and the ruler, derive their legitimacy from the people. In the next part, I will be arguing how the play does not subscribe to the political discourse of Reason of State. It offers, instead, the theories negotiated by Buchanan as ideal to finally submit, involuntarily, to the more moderate politico-philosophical discourse of Giovanni Botero that brings the two discourses together and revises the theory of Reason of State.

### Princes and Reason of State

Giovanni Botero argues that preservation of the state depends on the tranquillity and peace of its subjects (Botero 1956, 12), an element that seems to be completely absent in the state of Denmark. The play opens with a sense of unrest with Bernardo’s, one of the guards, famous line “who’s there?” (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 1) to which he later replies “Long live the King” (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 3). The play sets the tone for the context of Reason of State in its opening lines. It is no coincidence that the first scene starts with guards whose job is literally to guard and *preserve* the state. However, the sense of tranquillity is absent from the very beginning of the play. The ghost of the dead king, emblemizing the past, comes back to haunt the citizens and the son Hamlet who according to the *lex terrae* law is supposed to inherit the throne. After the probable *coup d’État* attempted by the new king Claudius and his father’s death followed by feasts and wedding celebrations, the artificial festivity in the court leads to intensifying the state of denial and indecisiveness of its protagonist. The play introduces three princes and neither of them succeeds in preserving the state. Hamlet the father in the first scene, is described as the chivalrous ruler who rather relies on the power of arms and sword. The ghost of the dead king inspires “fear and

wonder" (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 43) in a "fair and warlike form/ In which the majesty of buried Denmark/ Did sometimes march" (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 46-48) and in "the very armour he had on/ When he the ambitious Norway combated" (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 59-60). From the way the buried king of Denmark is described, the contemporary audience can understand that he belonged to the older tradition of civil reason whereby the prince inspires admiration and love by his excellence. Botero remarks that

Wherein lies the difference between affection and admiration? Both are inspired by excellent qualities, but admiration demands supreme excellence... if this esteem is founded upon piety and religious feeling it is called reverence, if upon political and military ability it is called admiration. What inspires love more than justice does? (Botero 1956, 13)

King Hamlet seems to emblemise the older tradition of civil reason celebrated in, and seems to be gone with, the city republics that seek to preserve justice and equity and where subjects seem to be able to keep their individual liberties to some extent. Before the *coup d'État*, the state of Denmark under the rule of King Hamlet offered justice, liberty, and, therefore, tranquillity to its subjects. Claudius, the antithesis of his brother, is the perfect sixteenth-century ruler described in theories of Reason of State. He relies on diplomacy rather than on the power of arms and martial arts. Neither of the two princes succeed in keeping and preserving the state, be it legitimate or not.

Hamlet, on the other hand, shows an awareness of the stark contrast between the two kings and the transition that is taking place in contemporary politics, that is sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. The hero of the play is always already delaying his revenge, producing philosophical abstractions, "words, words, words" (Shakespeare 2019, II. 2. 191), and brooding onstage making the play all the more problematic. Instead of being a mystery, Hamlet's delay can be viewed as a cynical rejection of the two political orders imposed on him as the future prince, who should take revenge and overthrow the tyrannical and illegitimate king in order to take his place. The old order of civil reason fails to ensure its perpetuity, while the new order proves to be inadequate and unacceptable. Hamlet's indecisiveness becomes all the more problematic with the illegitimate rule of Claudius.

In his description of the prince, Botero provides what the prince should not be. He starts with age, arguing that “vehement passions make young men unfit to govern; he who cannot rule himself will be unable to rule others” (Botero 1956, 23) making Hamlet unsuitable for rule all at once. Princes, argues Botero, should avoid delay at all costs: “When you have completed preparations for some undertaking, do not waste time before acting, for delay is likely to upset your plans. *Nocuit semper differ paratis*” (Botero 1956, 43-4). All the delay, minute study of plans, and all actions that the protagonist seems to be taking throughout the whole play, always end in failure. Hamlet, a scholar, is a man of words rather than swords. He fails to be like his father and rejects to be like his uncle. Even when he tried to “be cruel only to be kind” (Shakespeare 2019, 3. 4. 199), a clear articulation of Reason of State theory, he fails to overcome his indecisiveness. Instead, Hamlet keeps on articulating radical abstractions from contemporary political philosophy.

### **Hamlet’s Political Philosophy: Mirror for Princes**

Hamlet’s delay prevents him from taking any action throughout the whole play but, instead, makes him continue philosophizing. His political and philosophical reflections on the state can be seen as radical and almost anarchical as I will be showing in this part. Following Botero’s advice to rulers to read history as it provides them with stories of tyrants, rulers, and their mistakes so as to avoid them, Hamlet decides to stage a play:

A far greater field of study is provided by the writings of those are already dead, for they cover the entire history of the world, in all its parts. History is the most pleasant theatre imaginable: for there a man learns for himself at the expense of others, there he can see shipwrecks without fear, war without danger, the customs and institutions of many nations with expense. There he learns the origins, means and ends, and the causes of the growth and downfall of empires, there he learns why some princes reign in tranquillity and others are burdened with many troubles, some flourish through the arts of peace. (Botero 1956, 37)

Hamlet stages a play to hold the mirror up to princes, thereby hinting at the political genre mirror-for-princes. The self-reflexive motif of the play-within-

play introduces the political subtext of early modern drama. Hamlet describes his play as the abstract and brief and chronicle of time (Shakespeare 2019, II. 2. 462-463) to which Claudius' conscience is unveiled. As Botero argues, there Hamlet learns of his uncle's deed, there he sees the means and ends and the downfall of an empire, the rotten state of Denmark.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* categorizes theatre next to the mirror-for-princes genre and becomes part of what can be termed as a tragedy of the state<sup>2</sup>. As I have mentioned at the beginning of the paper, early modern dramas in general discuss Reason of State onstage and that, as Burke argues, it could scarcely be an exaggeration to claim that the true subject of these plays is Reason of State. Hamlet's delay seems to be so important in this regard. The main action<sup>3</sup> that takes place in the play is Hamlet not taking any action. Exploring his philosophical reflections in the light of the contemporary political debates, however, is very relevant. *Hamlet* starts and ends on the same note. It is circular; it starts in *media res* and its ending resists closure; or rather ends where it starts. Hadfield describes the play as "a neatly circular work, with its end and its beginning" (Hadfield 2005, 7). The delay and inaction of Hamlet can be read otherwise in this regard. It can be seen as a resistance to the tyranny of politics that seems to impose itself. Hamlet becomes erased not only by his thoughts but by the new order. He resists yielding to the new political dogma and seems to voice the radicalism of other theorists who reject the notion of Reason of State altogether. After accidentally killing Polonius, Hamlet cynically addresses Claudius by saying that Polonius is at supper:

A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service – two dishes, but one table. That's the end. . . . A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of the worm. . . . how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (Shakespeare 2019, IV. 3. 19-31)

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2 Lever argues that "[s]tate for the Jacobean dramatists was not the embodiment of a sacrosanct, God-ordained authority. Nor was it merely the instrument of this or that ruling class. Though entrenched in a system of privilege and oppression, it was recognized as an autonomous, self-perpetuating entity, with its own breed of agents and informers" (Lever 1971, xx).

3 For an understanding of in/action in *Hamlet* in economic terms, see Halpern 2017.

The royal assembly and progress become a convocation of politic worms. Hamlet’s philosophical answer totally undermines the Reason of State philosophical discourse. Hamlet becomes the observer. He notices the tyranny of his times and chooses not to be part of it; neither by obeying a tyrant<sup>4</sup> nor by becoming a ruler. By showing how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar, Hamlet concludes how the king is not above his subjects. It would be interesting, in this regard, to pose the question whether Hamlet is simply reflecting on political and philosophical theories in general or going further by alluding to tyrannicide. In both cases, his reflections reverberate with George Buchanan’s theory of the *avant la lettre* social contract that places the ruler and ‘subjects’ on an equal footing. In his *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos*, Buchanan talks about “the mutual rights of our kings and their subjects,” sketches his political theories about the limits of monarchy, and advances his theory of popular sovereignty. In Buchanan’s philosophy, “the mutual quarrels of the people had introduced the necessity of creating kings, so the injuries done by kings to their subjects occasioned the desire for laws” (Buchanan 2016, 19) which contrary to Reason of State, make the king the servant of the people rather than their master. The king is not above the law but is subject to the law, that derives its legitimacy from the people: “The king was created for the maintenance of civil society... it was their duty to administer justice to every man according to the direction of the law.” He adds:

M. – By considering that a king is not intended for restraining the law, but the law for restraining the king; and it is from the law that a king derives his quality of royalty; since without it he would be a tyrant.

B. – The law then is paramount to the king, and serves to direct and moderate his passions and actions.

M. – That is a concession already made.

B. – Is not then the voice of the people and of the law the same?

M. – The same.

B. – Which is the more powerful, the people or the law?

M. – The whole people, I imagine. (Buchanan 2016, 67)

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4 “Whenever a country falls into the bands of a tyrant, I think it is the duty of good citizens to try to cooperate with him and to use their influence to do good and avoid evil. Certainly it is in the interests of the city to have good men in positions of authority at all times” (Guicciardini 1965, 98).

Buchanan's espousal of the radical political theory of popular sovereignty seems to be accepted and appropriated by Hamlet, and, hence his delay. His inaction does not derive from his inability to act *per se*. It can be seen as a resistance to the immorality of Reason of State and the new contemporary political discourse that seems to infiltrate the court and undermine the traditional discourse of civil reason. The play, therefore, ends with a foreign invasion by Fortinbras, the perfect prince in Botero's theory of Reason of State. He is valiant, excellent in martial arts, and hence, the play on words "fort in bras,"<sup>5</sup> and scholar, who, unlike Hamlet, is neither speculative, nor melancholic. Fortinbras is not introduced as the tyrant of Reason of State theory. The play, hence, ends with the triumph of Giovanni Botero's political realism that becomes the unescapable alternative—the perpetuity of the state. However, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the play subscribes to the political realism of Reason of State and Giovanni Botero. The play "ends" openly on a pessimistic tone, or at least a tone of undecidability—like that of its protagonist. Its circularity resists a final closure. The political transition is unfinished business and so is the play.

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5 French for strong in arms

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# Bringing Ghosts Down to Earth: Depictions of Spiritualism in the Victorian Popular Press<sup>6</sup>

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**Abstract:** The tradition of communicating with ghosts is deeply rooted in various belief systems around the world. The motif of supernatural encounters recurs in numerous myths, legends, and ballads, functioning as one of the human universals, embraced among all kinds of communities. Ghosts were believed to have a profound impact on the realm of the living not only in terms of action but also feelings; their appearance evoked a wide array of sensations: fear, moroseness, or apprehension, but also comfort and an uncanny sense of protection. Yet, numerous nineteenth-century sceptics pointed out the potential dangers of spiritualism, concentrating on the emerging spiritualist subculture.

The article aims to explore the way spiritualism in Victorian Britain was described by the contemporary media. By looking at the textual and pictorial excerpts from the press, I argue that nineteenth-century spiritualism, commonly associated with the haunting imagery of spectral encounters, cautionary tales, or even romantic stories of reunions, was formed mostly by the proponents of the movement. By examining Victorian mainstream visual culture and articles from magazines, I trace the media's critical responses to the issue of alleged spiritual meetings. Such an analysis of sources may provide a fuller and deeper understanding of the portrayal of spiritualism, especially among Victorian opponents of the movement.

**Keywords:** spiritualism, Victorian Britain, occult, C19, medium

## Introduction

In 1863, an Australian newspaper *The Mercury* pointed out that Victorian spirits drastically differed from their traditional counterparts; conventional ghosts had

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6 The following article is based on my MA research on the cultural history of the supernatural, focusing on the critical approaches to spiritualism in nineteenth-century Great Britain. The MA thesis was submitted at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw.

been replaced by a “well-behaved, steady, regular, and respectable [ones], going through a prescribed round of duties, punctual to a minute,” while the old ones used to be rendered as “ordinary, (...) appearing in the midnight hours to people with weak digestion, haunting graveyards and old country mansions” (“The Patent Ghost” 1863). Such a distinction implied that the otherworldly phenomena, uncontrollable and unruly by their nature, transformed into a tamed affair; they may even be artificially created on a personal whim. As the newspaper maintains, there seemed to be an illustrious drive to domesticate the supernatural and make it more attainable for humans. People craved psychic encounters and, haunted by the prospect of contacting their loved ones, resorted to mediums. Accordingly, the need for spiritual meetings allowed mediums to exploit their clients’ grief for profit, making spirit séances a fad and a popular pastime.

Investigating spiritualism is a continuing concern within Victorian cultural studies. However, numerous articles concentrate not on analysing historical evidence of nineteenth-century British spiritualism and its cultural manifestations but rather on the theatricality of séances (Natale 2011), scientific exploration of spirit phenomena (Oppenheim 1985; Noakes 2012), feminist readings (Owen 2004) or neo-Victorian rewritings of the phenomenon (Good 2012). This article attempts to offer a detailed examination of how the spiritualist movement in Great Britain, between the 1860s and early 1910s, was illustrated by contemporary popular writings, both in graphic and written form. The perception of Victorian spiritualism, presently associated with haunting imagery of spectral contacts, cautionary tales or romantic stories of reunions, was formed by the proponents of the movement, not the public imagination shaped by the press. Victorian popular writings and images reveal that séances and mediums were, in fact, derided and laughed at. By examining excerpts from the Victorian mainstream visual culture and articles, I trace the media’s responses to the aforementioned issues. The analysed texts will be approached not only as verbal or textual evidence but it takes into consideration “the sociology of text,” a framework developed by D. F. McKenzie. He sees a text not only in terms of linguistic signs but also visual representations, treating texts as both the expression of the material culture and taking into account their performative role in society (1999, 15). Due to practical constraints, this article cannot provide a comprehensive review of the scientific discourse on spiritualism that occurred in the press. By excluding contemporary popular science, the reader should bear in mind that the study is based on sources that relied on enhanced satire and parody in portraying spiritualism.

## A Brief History of Ghosts

Why have people been drawn to the idea of ghosts? What seems so captivating about them? The liminal and ambiguous character of spirits has been seen as attractive throughout the centuries, making them almost universal entities in various cultures and belief systems. Ghosts have been functioning as borderline figures who linger neither in the realm of living nor that of the dead; neither located in the present nor precisely in the past; neither on earth nor outside of material reality.

Defining ghosts remains a challenging task as the term itself encompasses a variety of distinctive and frequently conflicting features. According to Rosemary Guiley, numerous names might denote ghosts: phantoms, phantasms, spectres, the walking dead, revenants, and apparitions, but many of them are not used anymore due to historical changes (2008, 20). As a basic term, a ghost indicates “the disembodied spirit or image of a deceased person, appearing to be alive” but it should not be associated with “the apparition of the living” (Melton 1996, 635). Unfortunately, such a framework does not exhaust the issue and seems to be too broad since it does not account for further subdivisions of ghosts. Owen Davies proposes alternative and more practical categories of supernatural entities. He contends that the term “ghost” is commonly used in order “to describe the manifestation of the souls of the dead” (Davies 2006, 13). Simultaneously, Davies suggests a separate notion – an apparition – that signifies only a visual representation of a ghost. That is to say, while all apparitions serve as visual manifestations of ghosts, not all ghosts can be treated as apparitions (2006, 13). Similarly, Rosemary Guiley highlights the sensory perception of ghosts, defining a ghost as “[t]he spirit, image, or presence of the dead.... Ghosts are experienced with all the senses, though often they manifest via one or two sensory phenomena, such as sounds and smells” (2009, 188).

Another major issue that requires a mention is why ghosts returned to earth. One of the motives lies in the fact that they had unfinished business or unresolved problems that had to be dealt with – it was of either a personal or professional nature. Very often, ghosts appeared to give advice or warn the living against misfortunes. For example, in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the ghost of old Hamlet returns to the living and delivers a crucial message to the protagonists. After fulfilling his duty, the ghost immediately fades away. In other cases, the deceased person did not have a proper burial. Therefore, the spirit haunted

the living and urgently demanded a right funeral. Rosemary Guiley provides a compelling example of the ghost who cried for a proper burial. She recalls the story of Athenodorus, a Greek philosopher who lived in a haunted house; the ghost led Athenodorus and pointed to the precise spot where the body could be found. After the incident and a proper burial, the house was no longer haunted (Guiley 2008, 26). However, ghosts usually manifest themselves because they have pleaded guilty to some crime. The arrival of spirits who desired to repent or had to face a severe penalty is illustrated in the Polish classic poetic drama *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), where spirits are summoned during an ancient ritual, recalling the origin of their otherworldly misery. The reader discovers a wide array of characters who did not experience an earthly life—the spirit of a cruel landowner, the ghosts of children who never suffered, or the spirit of a young girl who constantly rejected all her suitors. With such histories, these ghosts could not feel at peace, thus they haunted the living and sought solace.

Ghosts materialised in a variety of ways and different settings. Their presence is marked by “recurrent apparitions” called hauntings. Originally, spirits were thought to be relatively harmless for the living but they evoked “a sense of sadness and moroseness” (Moreman 2010, 196). On the other hand, the apparition itself tends to appear rather occasionally, performing “benign activities,” accompanied by “the sounds of footsteps or furniture being moved” (Moreman 2010, 196–197). Sensational memories containing howls, shrieks, and moans were relatively rare, signifying that one deals with poltergeists. “Poltergeists,” from the German compound *poltern* “to knock” and *Geist* “spirit,” played a significant role, especially in the nineteenth-century literary depictions of ghostly meetings. Poltergeists are malevolent spirits of unknown origin that mainly haunt houses or old buildings, making the lives of dwellers insufferable. Oscar Wilde’s gothic novella “The Canterville Ghost” offers a compelling example of a poltergeist in which he portrays the story of an American family who moves into a haunted house. Initially, the poltergeist destroys the family bliss by constantly ruining the household but such actions were provoked by the hopeless attempts to find peace.

Ghosts also choose the place and time of hauntings. Predominantly, spirits tend to visit solitary and remote places, away from the hustle and bustle of the community. As a result, seeing a ghost was considered a profoundly individual experience. That could also generate the source of disbelief in the phenomenon as nobody could confirm the presence of the ghost. The time of haunting becomes symptomatic too since ghosts prefer to appear in the dead of night. For

instance, the ghost from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens materialises particularly in these circumstances – alone, in the dark, in private. Owen Davies claims that traditionally the night has been the most suitable time “for the devils, fairies and evil spirits to emerge from the depths of hell,” (Davies 2006, 13) thus creating the association of ghosts with devilry.

Even though ghosts might be classified as devilish creatures, Davies explains that they are also believed to possess “luminescent quality” and present themselves as a pale beam of light that, to some extent, corresponded to “the tradition of death lights or corpse candles” (Roud 2003, 113). Ghosts are described as blue lights marking the route from a cemetery to the house of a deceased person, and the presence of the death light was considered to be a sign that the soul was at peace (Roud 2003, 113). This interpretation denotes ghosts’ paradoxical qualities since depicting them as translucent entities indicates a Christian tradition that aligns light with God, angels, and saints (Davies 2006, 13–29). Despite the differences in delineating and categorising, ghosts have one thing in common: their unpredictability and mutability evoked fear and moroseness in the living. Nonetheless, the hesitation and perplexity with regards to ghosts did not discourage people from seeking a dialogue with them.

### **Textual Exploration of Spiritualism in Victorian Popular Press**

The mainstream Victorian press was inundated with strange stories of contacting spirits, recollections of mystical clairvoyants, and descriptions of mediums’ uncontrollable behaviour. Anecdotes about ghosts and their peculiar connection with the living attracted the Victorian sensibility; some Victorians treated these encounters as a fad, or even more bluntly, approached them with derision (MacGregor 1998, 18), but some hoped that these contacts might be explained by employing empirical methods. Both science and popular culture could not resist the temptation to investigate the supernatural, to explain its effects on reality, and to re-evaluate its significance within certain communities. Paradoxically, the possibility of such communication, along with the occult revival in nineteenth-century Britain, seems to have been simultaneously fascinating and troubling for the Victorians. On the one hand, a growing religious ambiguity and widespread recognition of materialist philosophy conquered the intellectual circles of mostly middle-class thinkers. On the other hand, the contemporaries responded to that issue with the evangelical revival within the

Church of England and more personal exploration of modern spirituality and the occult (Luckhurst 2014). Consequently, undermining the focus on mysticism that had appeared within scientific discourse led to the re-emergence of religious thinking in popular circles.

Meanwhile, the clash between spiritualism and science sparked extensive debates in Victorian newspapers and periodicals. The contemporary press did not only play a crucial role in providing information about the current state of the economy and politics. It also shaped people's sensibilities, tastes, and sense of humour, creating a platform for contending voices and arguments even within journals. The circulation of newspapers of various kinds grew exponentially due to several factors, the most important being the mechanisation of the printing process. It meant that it was cheaper and faster to publish quality press regularly. Significantly, the distribution of newspapers became much easier due to the development of the railway, which enabled the spread of information on an unprecedented scale. Another substantial component in the development of the press was a growing literacy among all groups of Victorian society (Mitchell 2009, 237). People read voraciously and eagerly – not only the Bible but also novels, satires, pamphlets, or magazines, and they did so for pleasure. As Sally Mitchell indicates, reading in the nineteenth century transformed into a communal experience that was shared by families and friends. Thus, the development of extensive reading affected not only the overall format of modern newspapers and periodicals but also their content as well as social implications of reading (Mitchell 2009, 239). Since literature and the popular press became a form of entertainment and a source of financial profit, writers and editors infused their work with social and political agendas. It also included widespread propagation of science together with the harmful effects of pseudoscience or spiritualist activity.

The leading title that dealt with the commentary on spiritualism was *Punch, or the London Charivari*, a British weekly magazine, established in 1841 in London.<sup>7</sup> Primarily, *Punch* aimed to sarcastically discuss contemporary events and the most popular public personas. They managed to do it by making extensive use of caricatures and cartoonish representations of real-life characters and situations. Likewise, the editors frequently applied situational humour, a bit-

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<sup>7</sup> *Charivari* is a term which denoted the folk tradition of ridiculing people who somehow breached the long-established rules within the community. The so-called rough music was a way of disapproving the violation of the community norms, for instance when a widow or widower wanted to remarry too early for the standards of the group (Zemon Davis 1975, 106).

ing satire, absurd and stark contrasts, witty allusions to literature, art, gossip, or the latest affairs which could be identified easily by the audience. Although *Punch* mocked almost everyone and everything, regardless of social class, the editors had great respect for knowledge and openly expressed their belief in the credibility and authority of science (Noakes 2002, 92–96). For that reason, *Punch* detected and ridiculed all instances of humbugs, pseudo-sciences, and frauds, including spiritualism.

*Punch* was one of the most predominant magazines that attacked mediums and séances, yet it did so with tongue-in-cheek humour. One of the early articles from September 1860 titled “Terrors of Table-Turning” indicates that the editors sarcastically commented that due to the growing “Spirit-moving mania,” members of households should avoid buying “haunted furniture” (“Terrors of Table-Turning” 1860). Such wording allows the contributors to combine two distinctive features. Firstly, the use of the word “haunted” demonstrates that one dealt with the traditional poltergeists that moved objects, made insufferable noise, and destroyed the household life of the attacked family. Taking into account Victorian’s notion of the home as a sacred place (Mitchell 2009: 145), these hauntings imply that the powers of the occult are able to invade the sacred space of the house. Secondly, in “Terrors of Table-Turning,” *Punch* sneers at spiritualism by attributing otherworldly capacity to everyday objects. The editors laugh at the idea that “wardrobes [manifested] signs of the most lively emotions” or “sofas [were endowed] with tumultuous energy” (“Terrors of Table-Turning” 1860), and show that, given these circumstances, everybody should have been affected by the spirit mania and should brace themselves for confrontation with spirits. Ultimately, the writers mock the reputation of spiritualism simply by clashing two separate spheres with each other: the noble idea of spiritual presence is juxtaposed with prosaic everyday objects that nobody pays any particular attention to.

The light-hearted humour of *Punch* slightly faded as the séances’ popularity was in full bloom; instead, the editors focused on the scientific explanation of what happens during the séance. In the article published in 1873 “A Smash for the Spiritists,” the author admits that the spiritualists had created a subculture that was not an exclusive one; everyone could attend the séance and personally see for themselves whether the phenomenon could be treated as genuine. The contributor notes that a regular, daily séance included “wonders in the way of rapping, ringing, rope-tying, table-raising and the rest of it” and was conducted, perhaps surprisingly, in broad daylight (“A Smash for the Spiritists” 1873). While identifying

the techniques used during the spirit show, the *Punch* writer observes that the so-called “spirit movings” were nothing but the “feats of muscles” (“A Smash for the Spiritists” 1873). By viewing séances in such a manner, he makes a clear reference to the scientific theories proposed by Michael Faraday and William Benjamin Carpenter about the way the body responded to the alleged spirit influence through an involuntary movement of muscles. The contributor remarks that the occult forces did not exist and the supernatural occurrences might be reduced to human physiology. Concomitantly, spiritualist believers—called sarcastically “simpletons”—were merely lied to and taken advantage of.

Similarly to *Punch*, Charles Dickens’s *Household Words* extended the criticism of the spiritualist craze. Not only does he satire and publicly laugh at mediums but he also links these notions with broader social and even consumer criticism. Dickens, taking advantage of a dramatic satire, merges a commentary of spiritualism with that of social vices. In one of his short stories, “Well-Authenticated Rappings” (1858), Dickens questioned the validity of spirit communication, making the story satirical throughout. Symptomatically, the article appeared ten years after the Fox Sisters’ famous alleged contact in the United States. As Dickens’s writer mentions at the beginning:

THE writer, who is about to record three spiritual experiences of his own in the present truthful article, deems it essential to state that, down to the time of his being favored therewith, he had not been a believer in rappings, or tippings. His vulgar notions of the spiritual world, represented its inhabitants as probably advanced, even beyond the intellectual supremacy of Peckham or New York. (Dickens 1858, 217)

Apart from distinguishing the sources of the spiritualist furore and his disbelief in spiritualism, the narrator identifies the techniques that mediums extensively employ during the séances, namely “tippings” and “rappings.” Interestingly, the use of the term “tipping” implies not only the movement of chairs and tables but also the financial side of séances. In other words, tipping is nothing but a payment for the service, bringing the otherworldly phenomenon under the scrutiny of earthly economic laws.

Dickens’s cross-genre story involves funny twists and turns. Throughout the story, the narrator sneers at spiritualists who made fools of themselves

as they summoned ghosts that turned out only “to gratify mankind with bad spelling” (Dickens 1858, 217). Yet, the narrator is a writer himself, acting almost as a medium who talks to his aching head and hungry stomach. Such a framing of the main character who parallels his spiritual encounters with hangover reveals the common incoherence of the Victorians. On the one hand, they were desperately searching for any supernatural evidence and referring to the occult in everyday life. However, what strikes in the narrative is the absurdity of magical debates. These exchanges involve extremely trivial subjects such as bad service (“the young lady [who was serving the narrator] proved to be a powerful Medium”), poor quality of food and drink, having constipation (“to send him [the narrator] by Bearer ... genuine blue pill and a genuine black draught of corresponding power” (Dickens 1858, 218–220)) or even a hangover after a New Year’s Day celebration:

The circumstances under which the revelation was made to him on the second day of January in the present year were these: He had recovered from the effects of the previous remarkable visitation, and had again been partaking of the compliments of the season. (Dickens 1858, 220)

The conversation with the spirit does not embrace the search for profound knowledge needed to achieve intellectual enlightenment. It all comes down to an incredibly nonsensical chat about petty matters and mundane struggles. Ultimately, the story of spiritualism in Dickens’s article reveals that spiritual encounters, as advertised by mediums and their proponents, function as a cheap version of the occult that operates on the verge of nonsense and an easy commodity.

The amalgamation of negatively charged ideas associated with spiritualism is revealed in the article “A Spiritualist Alphabet,” published in *Fun* magazine in 1862. Similarly to *Punch*, *Fun* published parodies, cartoons, and political caricatures to provide a humorous commentary on contemporary events, gossip, and trends. As the editors eloquently explain themselves, they “scorn, sheltering [themselves] under the anonymous,” (“Introduction which the reader is required not to skip” 1861) making their nicknames based on Shakespeare’s characters. Employing such pseudonyms as Satyr, Pan, and Yorick further assumes the readership of the magazine – educated, interested in theatre, literature, and politics.

As the title suggests, “A Spiritualist Alphabet” is an extensive list of grievances against spiritualism. The author enumerates how belief in spirit communication could have developed by associating it with common character traits among believers; for example, that the “Credulity ... gives him his fling” as well as “Fashion and Folly, by which he’s caressed.” He calls blind believers “Ninnies” and “Jackasses [donkeys]” (“A Spiritualist Alphabet” 1862). Nevertheless, the majority of accusations against the movement focuses on its material fixation; séances operate mostly for profit in a quite manipulative way. The writer discusses openly the financial aspect of the séances, that is “Guinea you pay to be cheated” or “Money he [i.e. the medium] flinches from the fools” or even “Pick-Pocket Place he was nursed in” (“A Spiritualist Alphabet” 1862), indicating that greed and deception remain ever-present under the veil of noble spirit contact. Additionally, one may trace a clear connection to Byrstone Street, one of the early focal points on the spiritualist map in London that functioned as a headquarters of the infamous Victorian medium Daniel D. Home (Houghton 1882, 145). Overall, a very short quasi-alphabet assembles all charges against spiritualism in one textual space, referring not only to the psychological and social profile of spiritualist proponents but also to the cultural and economic side of séances.

Apart from the snarky commentary on mediums in *Punch and Fun*, the judgement on spiritualism softened and séances were treated rather with gentle mockery, not with vicious contempt. In *London in the Sixties*, a recollection of Victorian life in London, the author seems to be partially understanding towards the spiritualist subculture. One of the chapters provides a social context of spiritualism, trying to examine how it constituted a crucial part of its practitioners’ lives. The author claims that attending spiritual meetings primarily functions as a way to escape boredom. High-class elderly ladies, with nothing productive to do, would participate in séances to seek not only consolation but also entertainment. He asserts that:

old ladies would form tea parties and sit all day and a half through the night at round tables with their knotty old mittened thumbs pressed convulsively against those of their neighbours waiting for the moving of the waters. (One Of The Old Brigade 1908)

Here, the author insists that attempts to contact spirits would transform into long-lasting parties during which nothing extraordinary ever happened. Instead, the séance became a social event where the company drank tea, exchanged gos-

sip or “devoured pamphlets.” However empathetic the author may seem at the beginning, he displays a certain degree of criticism. In the first sentence of his recollection, he compares spiritualism to “trash connected with the occult sciences,” implying that séances act as a silly way of wasting time that could be devoted to something beneficial for society. Furthermore, because he uses expressions such as “fashionable twaddle ... in highly-fashionable district” or “the inspired old humbug,” he insinuates that séances are exclusively an upper-class way of spending time, as only the rich could afford to have so much free time at their disposal for such entertainment (One of the Old Brigade 1908).

Given the instances from the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the newspapers approached spiritualism with mockery, which, perhaps surprisingly, was not extremely harsh. Rather, the articles centre on ridiculing fraudulent mediums, laughing at alleged table movements, and calling out the social circumstances of spiritualism. Of course, the judgement was present but without severe condemnation. What calls for attention is the purely economic aspect of criticism in magazines. The contemporary press functioned as a rising star in the dissemination of news; thus, on the one hand, the newspapers aimed to provide information, to comment on the latest fashions, and to shape the opinions of the public. On the other hand, the assessment of trends could not be entirely critical for financial reasons. Excessively direct and stigmatising denunciation might have done more harm than good because the publishers would lose their readership. If they lost their readers, they would also lose profits. Taking that into account, the newspapers had to hide behind gentle humour and satire to scrutinise the spiritual industry, refraining from outright vilification.

### **Visual Depictions of Spiritualism in Cartoons**

As the majority of academic Victorian discussions about spiritualism addressed the debate between science and religion, the popular comic press took a different path. Victorian cartoons and contemporary pictorial reinterpretations of spiritualism commented on the phenomenon from various perspectives, ranging from a severe condemnation of the movement to presenting it in a light-hearted, more witty way. Apart from articles in the newspapers or short stories, Victorian visual culture broached the subject by continuing the long-standing tradition of eighteenth-century satirical pictures about politics and society. The editors of satirical magazines, especially *Punch*, followed in George Cruikshank’s and

James Gillray's footsteps, creating the caricature of everyday life, exaggerating vices and blowing simple situations out of proportion. In a similar vein, spiritualism was subjected to the ridiculously wry humour of cartoonists who pinpointed mediums' techniques and social context or consequences of séances.

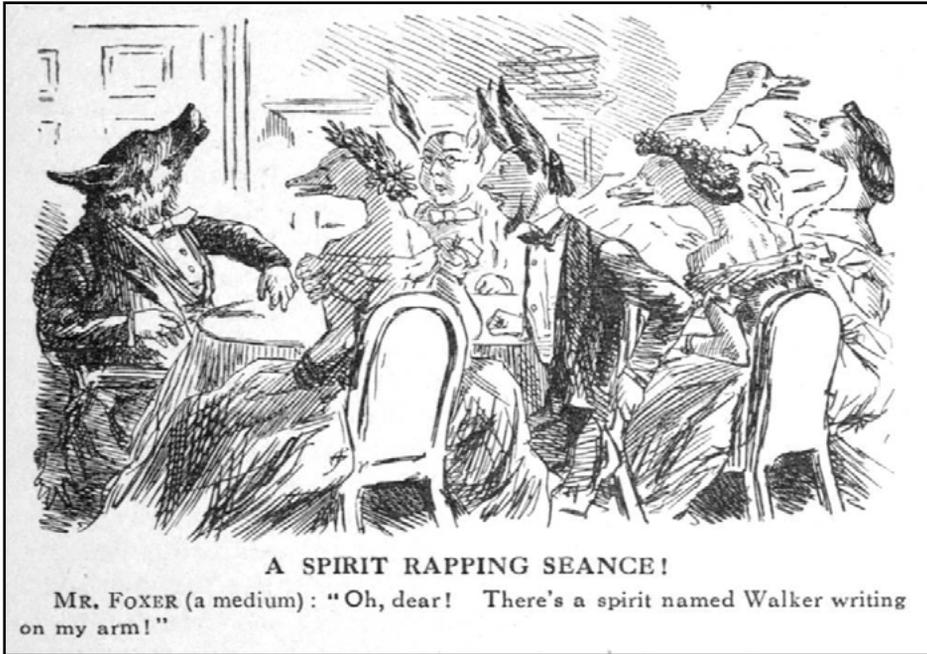


Fig. 1 "A Spirit Rapping Séance" Punch (1862)

In one of the early cartoons titled "A Spirit Rapping Séance" (1862), the editors portray attitudes that were quite common, especially among the Victorian rich. In this particular drawing, the author resorts to the Aesop-like technique of presenting people as animals, indicating the underlying moralistic social critique of the characters. The medium, called Mr. Foxer, proudly announces to the public that the spirit is writing on his arm, alluding to a phenomenon of automatic writing, a recognised technique during séances. And indeed, the participants are astounded by the talents of the deceitful medium (as hinted by his name). Notably, the participants of the event resemble particular animals. The portrayal of ladies as geese echoes a popular simile *as gullible as geese* (Sommer 2013, 235), which suggests that these women would be persuaded easily, without any effort to critically evaluate facts and new trends. The gentlemen en-

gaged in the séance are depicted as donkeys, foolish creatures whose obstinacy made them believe that they had witnessed a genuine spiritual encounter and thus that spirit communication is a fact. Despite their fancy clothes and elegant manners, aristocrats who had unrestricted access to education fell prey to the trickery of the medium. As the caption indicates, one simple sentence seems to be enough to coax the public and convince them that the presence of the ghost was real. Ultimately, they gave their consent to be deceived and taken advantage of. Perhaps the authors of the cartoon alluded to Michael Faraday's argument against spiritualism that he voiced in a series of public lectures called *Observations on Mental Education*. According to Faraday, what makes people easy targets of fraud is their lack of critical thinking and proper education that would teach people to diligently evaluate reality (1854, 41). Furthermore, the cartoon discloses a spiteful social commentary, highlighting that the aristocrats who had access to extensive education should not have been infected by spirit mania and should have assessed the spiritual movements rationally and sensibly.

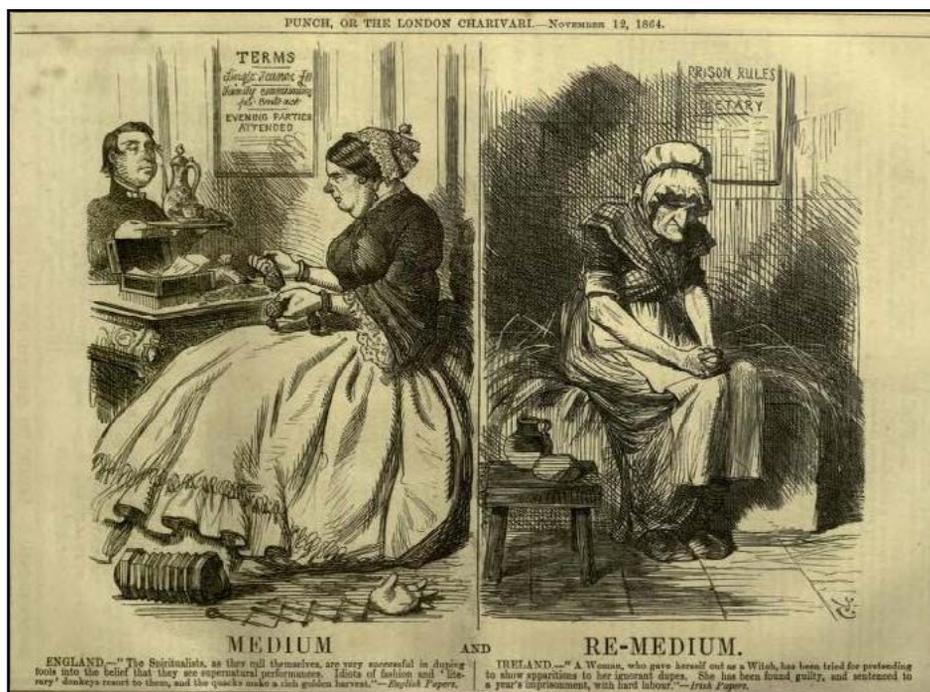


Fig. 2 “Medium and Re-Medium” Punch (1864)

In the 1850s and 1860s, *Punch* welcomed spiritualism with very mixed reviews. While the narratives on séances function both as comic relief and as gentle ridicule, the visual interpretations of the mediums emphasise social or even legal issues with spiritualism. The cartoon, published in 1864, entitled “Medium and Re-Medium” criticises the inadequacy of English law regarding fraudulent mediums and their position within Victorian society. The cartoon has two parts: the first one represents an English female medium who counts the money earned during a séance; the second part shows an old, haggard woman in Ireland, a medium, who was locked in prison for deceiving people. She is left destitute, without any money. Such division of the cartoon emphasises two main aspects: the perception of spiritualism as a business as well as the legal differences in dealing with fake clairvoyants.

The caption below the first part signals that mediumship is just another way of making money out of people’s naivety; the spiritualists master the art of “duping fools to believe that they see the supernatural performance” (“Medium and Re-Medium” 1864). Noteworthy, the English characterisation suggests that working as a medium becomes one of few jobs available for women, thus framing it as a business-like model for earning a living. Organising séances allowed women to profit financially, even at the price of deceit and exploitation. More so, the author of the illustration also concentrates on the participants. He does not mince his words in describing the attendees—he sees the spiritual audience as fools whom he compared to obstinate and thoughtless donkeys. In the second part, the woman-medium is accused of calling herself a witch and spreading superstition among the naïve. As the caption posits, the alleged witch was “sentenced to a year’s imprisonment, with hard labour” (“Medium and Re-Medium” 1864). In other words, *Punch*, by juxtaposing English and Irish mediums, indicates that spiritualism in the English version seems more financially and commercially based whereas the Irish one could be considered in terms of folk superstition. Hence, it may be argued that *Punch* paints almost a colonial picture of séances; contrary to Irish traditional mediums, *Punch* saw the English ones as professionals.

Indeed, the cartoon raises an intriguing issue since it reveals that the legal system did not know how to recognise the mediums’ status. On the one hand, English law did not forbid their practices and treated them almost as an entrepreneurial endeavour—earning money in exchange for services. On the other hand, the Irish “variant” of spiritualism was severely punished and treated as heresy, framing it as a deterrent or remedy (“re-medium”) to spiritualism.

This proves the existing double standards in assessing the movement. Both parts have the same underlying components, namely trickery and hoax; yet there were two different, out-of-proportion punishments for the same crime. Given that, the cartoon exposes both the pretences of the mediums and the lack of one ruling policy regarding a growing number of hoaxes.



Fig. 3 "Last News from the Spirit World" Punch (1876)

*Punch* was fixated on the question of mediums, séances and their attendees. The illustration from June 10, 1876, titled "Last News from the Spirit World," addresses another issue of spiritual encounters (Fig. 3). It depicts a typical séance during which the respectable aristocrats desire to contact their deceased relatives. Participants sit in a dark and gloomy little salon, in a circle, with their hands laying on the table, clearly alluding to the common setting of a séance. Their faces look either shocked, horrified or indifferent. It may baffle the readers

as to how to understand the scene, but a short dialogue underneath the illustration provides a funny twist to the rendition: the late husband is happier in hell than on earth with his now-bereaved wife. The event may be interpreted in two ways: obviously, it is a witty commentary upon nineteenth-century standards of marriage that were symptomatic of the Victorian prevalent hypocrisy. Simultaneously, the cartoon may have explored a much more profound notion, which is the belief that the sphere of the dead must be left alone and undisturbed by the caprice of the living. Such a pictorial representation displays a very basic argument voiced against spiritualism: the realms of the living and the dead remain too distant and too different. Therefore, any attempt to mix them will result in disappointment and profound disenchantment with the vision of the afterlife.



Fig. 4 George du Maurier "Spiritualism Made Useful" (1876)

A séance was illustrated by yet another cartoon but without the underlying philosophical component. "Spiritualism Made Useful," which appeared in *Punch's Almanack* in 1876, laughed at the growing popularity of the subculture which became a substantial part of fashionable society (Fig. 4). The drawing shows four people, probably two married couples, sitting at a round table, in a typical séance seating arrangement. However, instead of the old-fashioned table raps or tapping, the conjured spirits work as servants, assisting with wine and food during an exquisite dinner, and also as musicians who entertain and give a private concert to the company (Maurier 1876). Spirits, which traditionally provided the living with valuable information about the afterlife or brought comfort, are employed for mundane activities such as serving food or having fun. As before, *Punch* applies a typical satirical technique that is taking a grand idea like contact with the dead and colligating it in a very commonplace situation. By clashing two distinctive spheres that, in regular circumstances, could not be linked in any way, the comic effect is enhanced even more. Naturally, the editors do so not only to make the whole scene as humorous as possible but also to magnify the contrast between high and low, sacred and profane. Equally, the title of the cartoon, "Spiritualism Made Useful," demonstrates that spiritualism, in its common form, has no utility whatsoever. Since there is no practical value in spirit interaction, it should not have played an important role in Victorian society that highly valued efficacy (Mitchell 2009, 264). The spirit phenomenon might have become something widely accepted or even endorsed if only it had any application in everyday life.

The agenda presented in visual commentaries on spiritualism is obviously to mock the widespread popularity of séances. Yet, under that layer of absurd humour, there lies another issue. Shedding light onto spiritualist practices forced people to think carefully about new religious movements and social trends. Despite being primarily a comical magazine, *Punch* takes a decisive stance in the debate about the importance of science and strongly supported the scientific claims (Noakes 2002, 96). Ultimately, contemporary media, both visual and written, give an unequivocal assessment, labelling mediums as frauds and tricksters. Still, what calls for attention is that the majority of the cartoons do not directly discredit the spiritualists' basic beliefs and assumptions about the structure of the afterlife. They do not reject the possibility that spirits might exist. The criticism seems mostly directed at the overtly theatrical spectacles of the spiritualists,

which promised to console the participants, offering another séance in exchange for a fee. By taking advantage of comedy, the cartoonists uncover the potential dangers of the fraudulent mediums and the practices of their deliberate and preying manipulation.

### **Conclusion: Past and Present Intertwined?**

The popular culture of Victorian Britain peculiarly addressed the effects of spiritualism, mixing the critique with sarcastic humour. The activities of mediums during séances were commonly derided by contemporary cultural spheres, even though the fascination with the occult appears to be ubiquitous. The editors laugh at the spiritual industry, mocking both the participants and the hosts of the séances. The former are viewed as victims of mediums' lies; the latter remain skillful entrepreneurs. Indeed, such use of parody resonated in distinctive ways; under the layer of comedy, these press excerpts expose the potential perils of spiritual comen.

The nineteenth-century version of spiritualism represented in the media significantly diverged from traditional depictions of spirit communication. In its primarily economically driven form, Victorian appropriation of spiritualism resembles the late twentieth-century idea of hauntology. A philosophical term coined by Jacques Derrida in his *Spectres of Marx* (published in 1993) blends two words "haunt" and "ontology," which signify that the being—or in this case a moment of the encounters with spirits—is haunted by the past, which altogether makes it impossible to specify, describe and categorise. In his work, Derrida argues that the present exists primarily in relation to the past. That is to say, the present trends echo and subvert existing structures like past/present or dead/alive. These binary oppositions or the spectres of the past undergo deconstruction, leaving these polarities in a state of mutual but inconclusive influence. As Derrida states "a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back," (1994, 123) rendering ghosts and spectres not as figures of positive features but as symptoms of absence.

Mark Fisher proposes another reading that integrates the idea of hauntology and cultural manifestations. In his *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, he links Derrida's notion with the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia. As Fisher explains:

In Freud's terms, both mourning and melancholia are about loss. But whereas mourning is the slow, painful withdrawal of libido from the lost object, in melancholia, libido remains attached to what has disappeared. For mourning to properly begin, Derrida says in *Specters of Marx*, the dead must be conjured away: 'the conjuration has to make sure that the dead will not come back: quick, do whatever is needed to keep the cadaver localised, in a safe place, decomposing right where it was inhumed, or even embalmed as they liked to do in Moscow' (*Specters of Marx*, 120) But there are those who refuse to allow the body to be interred, just as there is a danger of (over)killing something to such an extent that it becomes a spectre, a pure virtuality. 'Capitalist societies,' Derrida writes, 'can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back.' (*Specters of Marx*, 123)

Such a comparison implies that even cultural and historical understanding of the haunting assumes the mutual refusal to let go of the dead and the living. The omnipresence of the past in the present bridges the gap between the dead and the living, constituting mourning a never-ending and never-complete process. Consequently, Derridian hauntology may offer a new path to investigate themes of loss, death, grief, and finding a way to tackle these issues. Paradoxically, transporting the notion of hauntology into the historical analysis of spiritualist séances confirms the traditional and well-established nature of ghosts – they always linger neither fully present nor fully absent; neither in the present time nor in the past.

Spiritualism not only influenced the way people thought in terms of religion and religious practices but also affected popular culture. When present-day readers visualise the conjuration of spirits, what they have in mind are essentially images from Victorian séances that haunt their consciousness, subsequently adapting them according to the neo-Victorian conventions. Victorian spiritualism already reframed the perception of the occult, rewriting the traditional conjurations and magical rites, spicing them up with financial gain and the promise of easy money. Therefore, the Victorian reinterpretation of spiritualism haunts the present in the same way as the ancient ghosts haunted the Victorians. In-

deed, assembling an extensive number of visuals and texts does not only serve as an example of how the past is recorded, as McKenzie argues. Since the word “text” comes from the Latin word “texere” which means “to weave,” discovering various texts reminds the readers that these verbal and pictorial representations do not exist in a void. Rather they echo the cultural phenomena in which they are fully immersed (McKenzie 1999, 14–15). Taking into account the visual, the written, and their social implication makes the understanding of spirit conjuration not only an interpretative process but a deconstructive one that merges grief with humour, sacred with profane, the earthly with the occult.

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## Postmodern Plague Narrative: The Representation of the Polio Epidemic in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*.

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**Abstract:** The article discusses Roth's use of the theme of the polio epidemic in his novel *Nemesis* (2010). Initially, *Nemesis* seems to comply with the tradition of plague writing, in which the material reality of the disease is largely ignored and the disease itself becomes "a figurative way of speaking of other things" (Gilman 2009, 4). The epidemic exposes a hidden weakness in the main protagonist, which is his inability to accept the imperfect world. One of the central themes in the novel becomes the problem of theodicy: the main protagonist is obsessed with the question of why God kills innocent children. The mythical and allegorical aspect of the narrative is reinforced by allusions to Oedipus and Job. However, a closer examination of the narrative mode employed by Roth reveals that the main concern of the text is typically postmodern: the story illustrates the impossibility of arriving at the objective truth. That is why eventually *Nemesis* will not yield a coherent allegorical meaning.

**Keywords:** polio, Roth, postmodern, epidemic, plague, allegory

### Introduction

Traditionally, plagues were conceptualized as divine intervention; their function was both punitive and therapeutic. Sinners were punished for their transgressions and those who deserved it were offered a chance for redemption (see Gilman 2009). In her *Illness as a Metaphor*, Susan Sontag challenged this traditional paradigm, which she believed to have persisted in an essentially unchanged form until the modern times, arguing that "illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (Sontag 1978, 3). The present article examines Philip Roth's treatment of the polio epidemic in his novel *Nemesis* (2010). Polio, similarly to the diseases discussed by Sontag (cancer and tuberculosis, and later

AIDS<sup>8</sup>), also has its own mythology. The question which will be addressed is to what extent Roth reproduces this mythology and complies with the tradition of plague writing, in which the material reality of the disease is largely ignored and the disease itself becomes “a figurative way of speaking of other things” (Gilman 2009, 4), and to what extent he redefines this paradigm.

### The history of polio in the USA

Before the invention of the vaccine in the 1950s, the United States suffered repeated outbreaks of polio, the largest one being that which hit New York in 1916 (to which Roth makes several references in *Nemesis*). In the decade preceding the mass vaccination (1944-1954), over 364,000 cases of polio were diagnosed in the United States (Silver 2007, 19). With little or no exaggeration, the narrator of *Nemesis* sums the 1940s up as the time when “the greatest menaces on earth were war, the atomic bomb, and polio” (Roth 2010, 245). Polio was a particularly dreaded disease, since its causes were still largely unknown and it attacked mostly children, either killing or crippling them for life (hence, the virus was dubbed “The Crippler”). Frequently, a perfectly healthy child became completely paralyzed, to the point that it could not even breathe or swallow, in a matter of days. Surviving polio victims were living proof and constant reminders of how dangerous polio was.

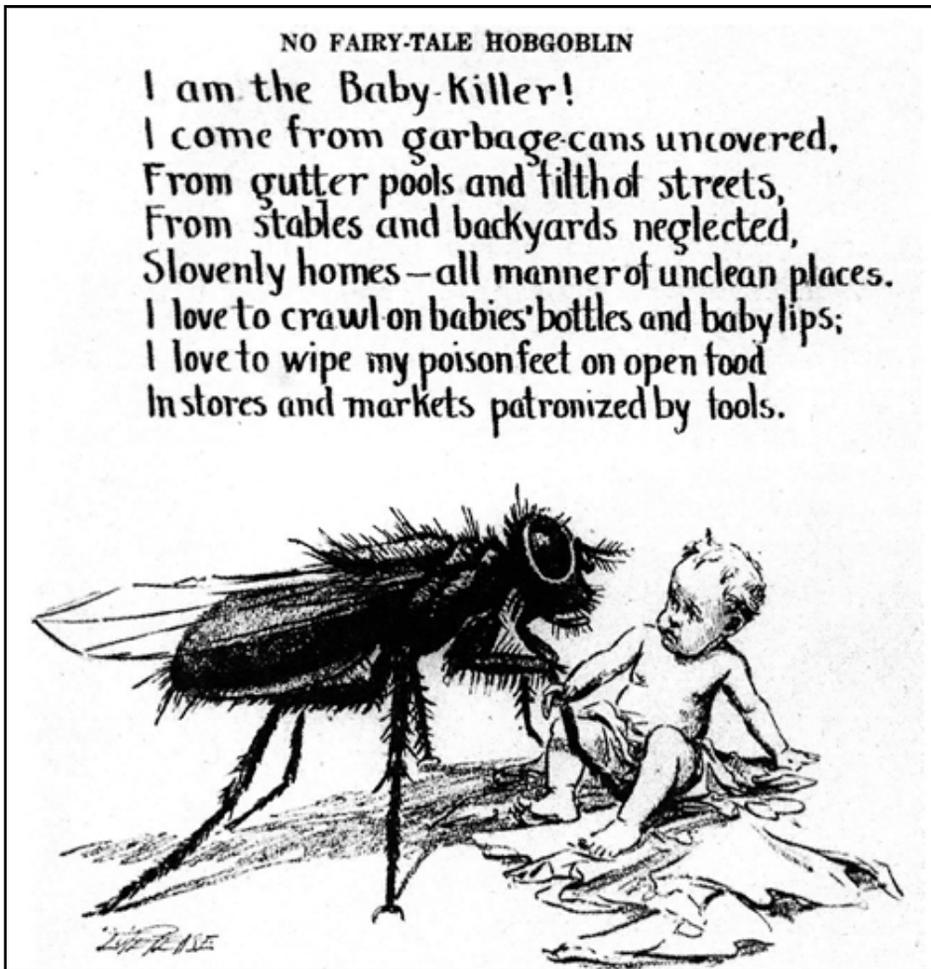
If that were not enough, polio's grip on the public imagination was further strengthened by various polio awareness ads, which, irrespective of their educational value, were truly horrifying, and as such they instilled even more fear in the American people. During the infamous 1916 epidemic, *Newark Evening News* published the following fly warning (on the next page). This conceptualization of the polio virus as an enormous evil fly about to devour an innocent baby was a reflection of the erroneous belief (which still persisted in the subsequent decades) that the virus is spread by insects, mostly by flies.

Another interesting example of re-imagining the virus is a short movie *The Crippler* (1948),<sup>9</sup> described by Wijdicks as “a children's ghost story” (2021, 83).

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8 See Susan Sontag *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989).

9 The movie was part of the Polio awareness-raising campaign; it was produced by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (commonly known as the March of Dimes). *The Crippler's* cultural significance is frequently stressed in books on the history of polio in the USA (see Oshinsky 2005; Dehner 2008, 301; Stolley 2018, 108; Wijdicks 2021, 83).



(Newark Evening News 1916, 10; after Cirillo 2016)

Against the backdrop of eerie music and ominous clouds, the virus delivers the following speech: “My name is virus poliomyelitis.... I consider myself quite an artist, a sort of sculptor. I specialize in grotesques, twisting and deforming human bodies. That’s why I am called The Crippler.” As he speaks, the clouds converge to form a sinister crooked figure, which casts its shadow on earth (Seavey 1998, 0:32:04 to 0:32:31). In the 1940s and early 1950s, children and their parents lived in this shadow. Interestingly enough, these two different images of polio, that of a brute beast and that of a sadistic artist, are combined in *Nemesis*, when Bucky declares God, the alleged creator of the virus, to be “an omnipotent being

who [is] a union not of three persons in one Godhead, as in Christianity, but of two—a sick fuck and an evil genius” (Roth 2010, 264-265).<sup>10</sup>

### The origins of *Nemesis*

Roth recognized the literary potential of the polio theme quite late. In a 2010 interview with NPR, he explained the origins of *Nemesis*:

On a yellow legal pad I began to write down all the subjects, the historical events that I've lived through that I've not dealt with in fiction. And there's some that I can write down and they're just not my subjects, no matter what I do with them but when I came to polio, it was a great revelation to me. That polio was even on the list. I never thought of it before as a subject. And then I remembered how frightening it was and how deadly it was and I thought, 'OK, try to write a book about polio.' (Roth 2010a, 0:04:25 to 0:04:59)

One might risk the question why polio happened to be the very last item on the long list of topics that Roth considered interesting enough to write about. Arguably, despite its obvious literary appeal and the fact that it was firmly rooted both in American and Roth's personal history, it was not an obvious choice for him because it yielded itself too easily to all manners of allegorical interpretations, consistent with the tradition of plague narratives. For the same reason for which plague was a favorite subject of mediaeval moralists, it may have been avoided by contemporary realist authors.

In his review of *Nemesis*, Coetzee notes that “the plague condition is simply a heightened state of the condition of being mortal” (2010). In Nina Gilden Seavey's documentary *A Paralyzing Fear. The Story of Polio in America* (1998), a polio victim confesses, “When I almost died and I had all that pain, I learned a lot of things about life, what's important and what isn't. Everybody learns it, but usually it takes a lifetime. I learned it in a period of days” (1:26:04 to 1:26:24). To a postmodern writer, the idea that some profound wisdom is bestowed upon those who venture close to death must seem suspicious.

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<sup>10</sup> To be more precise, these words are used by the narrator when he tries to reconstruct Bucky's perspective.

### *Nemesis* and the polio mythology

Another possible reason why Roth might have been initially reluctant to handle the topic of polio could be the fact that polio occupies a special place in American culture and mythology. It was very difficult to write about polio without bathos or sentimentality. Polio has become the story of the triumph of mind over matter, of the indomitable spirit which overcomes the imperfections of the body, best illustrated by the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who, after being struck by polio and rendered an invalid at the age of 39, became president, saved the nation from the Great Depression and led to the victory against the Nazis. The story of Franklin Delano Roosevelt is more than just a myth or an isolated incident. Jude Silver and Daniel Wilson in their book *POLIO VOICES: An Oral History from the American Polio Epidemics and Worldwide Eradication Efforts* argue that it reflects a certain general truth about polio survivors:

Polio survivors as a group have lived remarkably successful lives. Significant numbers of them finished their schooling, married, had children, and enjoyed successful careers. Many had taken to heart the Protestant work ethic reinforced during their polio rehabilitation: hard persistent effort pursued over a long time brought significant rewards. That ethic had carried polio survivors through painful therapies. Many polio survivors applied then that same principle to the challenges they faced in gaining an education, raising a family, and succeeding at work. Polio survivors pushed their bodies to enable them to succeed in spite of the obstacles. That was how they had beaten polio initially, and it was a lesson that stayed with them for a lifetime. (Silver 2007, 8)

*Nemesis*, Roth's story about a fictitious polio epidemic in Newark in 1944, does not seem to be a straightforward deconstruction of the tradition of plague narratives and the American polio mythology. Bucky, the main protagonist of *Nemesis*, has all the makings of a proper hero. His story should be another success story. He has a deeply ingrained sense of duty and an earnest desire to prove himself in the face of adversity. This desire is motivated by an inferiority complex; his father was a thief and a gambler and he himself is exempt from military service because of his poor eyesight, which Coetzee and Giannopoulou

(2016, 27) see as a direct reference to Oedipus. Bucky is a pillar of the local community, revered by the playground boys, who admire his athletic prowess and self-confidence, and respected by their parents. He may strike us as very different from Roth's usual characters. The narrator describes him as "endowed with little force of mind" (Roth 2010, 273), "largely a humorless person, articulate enough but with barely a trace of wit, who never in his life had spoken satirically or with irony, who rarely cracked a joke or spoke in jest" (Roth 2010, 273).

When the epidemic breaks out, he considers it his duty to continue his work at the playground and refuses the tempting job offer of a waterfront director at a summer camp where his girlfriend Marcia works, far from the city besieged by the epidemic. But when the offer is repeated, it catches him off guard. Engrossed in the vision of his future happiness with Marcia (her father has just blessed their prospective union), he quickly agrees, without giving it any serious thought. This baffling narrative development is presented in the following way:

'Tell him yes,' Mr. Cantor said, and he startled himself no less by what he'd just agreed to than he had done asking permission of Dr. Steinberg to become engaged to his daughter. 'Tell him I will,' he said. Yet he'd had every intention of taking his grandmother's suggestion and going to the shore for the weekend and marshaling his forces so as to return to his job rejuvenated. If Jake and Dave could parachute into Nazi-occupied France on D-Day and help to anchor the Allied beachhead by fighting their way into Cherbourg against the stiffest German opposition, then surely he could face the dangers of running the playground at Chancellor Avenue School in the midst of a polio epidemic. (Roth 2010: 54)

Accepting the job of a waterfront director at Indian Hill, Bucky prioritizes his own safety. The decision contradicts his firmly held belief that by supervising the playground at Chancellor Avenue School, he makes his own contribution to the war effort. Consequently, abandoning the playground in the midst of a polio epidemic means deserting his post in the time of danger.

After he arrives at Indian Hill, people start to get sick. Soon it turns out that the spreading disease is the dreaded polio. Bucky suspects that he has brought it to the camp from Newark, and indeed, the spinal tap confirms that he has the virus. Shortly afterwards, he develops symptoms of paralytic polio himself

and when he finally leaves the hospital he has a withered arm and leg. But the greatest damage has been done to his psyche. “You think it’s your body that’s deformed,” says Marcia, “but what’s truly deformed is your mind!” (Roth 2010, 260). Bucky blames his cowardice for the fact that children at Indian Hill contracted polio. At this point he might remind the reader of Oedipus (see Giannopoulou 2016). Bucky punishes himself by rejecting Marcia’s love, claiming that she deserves better than to be married to a cripple.

Thus, Bucky’s story is the very reversal of a typical polio survivor story, which the narrator openly states: “He was the very antithesis of the country’s greatest prototype of the polio victim, FDR, disease having led Bucky not to triumph but to defeat” (Roth 2010: 246). The epidemic exposes Bucky’s hidden weakness, which leads to his downfall. The same sense of responsibility which fueled the Protestant work ethic and saved a great many of polio victims is the reason of his unmaking. Unable to live up to his self-imposed high standards, Bucky gets mercilessly crushed by them. Dr. Steinberg’s warning, given to Bucky in the early days of the epidemic, turns out to be prophetic: “We can be severe judges of ourselves when it is in no way warranted. A misplaced sense of responsibility can be a debilitating thing” (Roth 2010, 102). The same harsh judgement is passed on Bucky by the narrator at the end of the novel: “Such a person is condemned. Nothing he does matches the ideal in him. He never knows where his responsibility ends” (Roth 2010, 273).

### **Nemesis as a tale with a moral**

The narrator is convinced that Bucky makes the greatest error not when he flees the city to the apparent security of Indian Hill but when, overwhelmed by shame and guilt, he cuts himself off from the outside world and chooses the life of a recluse, a gesture which also could be interpreted as a rebellion against the absurd world where innocent kids are sentenced to senseless suffering and death. When Bucky claims that his life is an interrupted series of calamities inflicted upon him by some higher power (his father is a thief, his mother dies at his birth, the kids that he is taking care of get sick and die, his friend dies in France, and he himself turns out to be the carrier of the virus), an analogy between him and Job becomes very clear (see Coetzee 2010; Aarons 2012, 10; Batnitzky 2014). In contrast to Job, Bucky eventually curses God and plunges into despair.

Following this line of thinking, Duban (2013) compares Bucky to Captain Ahab. Duban writes: "a defining quality of *Nemesis* is Arnold's characterization of Bucky's crazed, self-centered revenge as a phenomenon in which Bucky resembles Melville's Ahab, relentlessly haunting and hunting himself—his own White Whale, as it were" (2013, 72).

This suggests the surprising presence of a strong moralizing impulse in Roth's novel, an impulse which we would normally associate with the literature of previous epochs (as it is based on the belief in a clear-cut distinction between good and evil). Bucky's story might also remind us of Hawthorne's *Wakefield*, who one day leaves his wife on a strange whim, not realizing that he will not be able to return to her ever again. What was intended as a silly prank seals his fate forever. Hawthorne concludes,

Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like *Wakefield*, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe. (Hawthorne)

Bucky has also lost his place in the system and has become the Outcast of the Universe. His life used to be filled with other people, his students, their parents (when the children got sick, he remembered to phone their parents or visit them and pay his respects), his grandmother, Marcia. His contribution to the welfare of the community was universally appreciated. Now, he claims that he is "no much of a socializer" (Roth 2010, 269) and the narrator imagines him in his lonely flat, watching the news or eating a Portuguese meal:

I thought of him doing these things by himself and, like a love-sick swain, attempting on Sundays not to pine for Marcia Steinberg .... One would have predicted, remembering the young man he'd been, that he would have had the strength to battle through to something more than this. And then I thought of myself without my family, and wondered if I would have done any better or even as well. Movies and work and Sunday dinner out—it sounded awfully bleak to me. (Roth 2010, 269–270)

Read in this way, *Nemesis* differs surprisingly little from the mediaeval and renaissance plague narratives, in which plague usually reveals some hidden moral truths and is used as means of edification. One might argue that the story of Bucky's failure becomes a convenient vehicle for a moral lesson about the importance of recognizing one's limitations and accepting the verdicts of Fate with humility. The polio epidemic is a test which exposes a serious weakness in Bucky's character: his need to believe in some higher power according to whose will the events on earth unfold, which the narrator condemns as hubris:

I have to say that however much I might sympathize with the amassing of woes that had blighted his life, this is nothing more than stupid hubris, not the hubris of will or desire but the hubris of fantastical, childish religious interpretation. We have heard it all before and by now have heard enough of it, even from someone as profoundly decent as Bucky Cantor. (Roth 2010, 265–266)

### How narration problematizes narrative

However, what significantly complicates the matter is the unusual mode of narration employed by Roth (see Giannopoulou 2016, 19–25). Most of the story seems to be told by a third-person narrator with Bucky as a focalizer. The narrator relates to us the contents of Bucky's consciousness in what appears to be an unchanged form. What the narrator says about the outside world also seems to reflect Bucky's way of thinking. Yet at the very beginning of the story the narrator assumes the perspective of the communal "we"<sup>11</sup> (we the kids from the neighborhood), which is very difficult to reconcile with the fact that the story includes the details of Bucky's intimate conversations to which none has been privy. Finally, somewhere in the middle the narrator surprisingly reveals his identity as that of Arnie Mesnikoff, one of the playground kids that Bucky supervised: "Three more boys had come down with polio – Leo Feinswog, Paul Lippman, and me, Arnie Mesnikoff" (Roth 2010, 197). Interestingly enough, until Part III we learn next to nothing about Arnie; we remain oblivious as to what happened to him after he had been taken to hospital; the story focuses on Bucky

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11 Stangherlin observes that "[t]his form of narration, according to both Kaminsky (114) and Leah Hager Cohen, is evocative of the Greek chorus" (2016, 76).

alone. Arnie continues to describe Bucky's stay in Indian Hill, including his romantic rendezvous with Marcia, as if he were there himself and not in hospital, fighting for his life. When Arnie mentions his own name again, he does it as if he were talking about a stranger: "All Bucky could think of were their names, and all he could see were their faces: Billy Schizer. Ronald Graubard. Danny Kopferman. Myron Kopferman. Alan Michaels. Erwin Frankel. Herbie Steinmark. Leo Feinswog. Paul Lippman. Arnie Mesnikoff" (Roth 2010, 197).

In Part III, which takes place 27 years later, Bucky and Arnie, two polio victims, reunite and talk about that fateful summer of 1944 when they contracted the disease. Thus, the whole book turns out to be Arnie's reconstruction of those events from Bucky's perspective, on the basis of the conversations that they had in 1971. The questions asked by Coetzee in his review of *Nemesis* are most relevant: "If it seems unlikely that the prickly Bucky would have confided to the younger man the details of his lovemaking with Marcia, then is Arnie making up that part? And if he is, may there not be other parts of Bucky's story that he has left out, misinterpreted, or simply not been competent to represent?" (2010).

These questions cast doubt on the entire narrative. Does it tell about the events that have really happened or the events that Arnie imagines to have happened, events conjectured, second-guessed and hypothesized? One needs to remember that Arnie is the ideological opponent of Bucky, an atheist who undermines the validity of Bucky's religious outlook on life, who insists that polio is "pointless, contingent, preposterous, and tragic" (Roth 2010: 265) and ridicules Bucky's attempts to invest it with deeper meaning. Hence, it stands to reason that his bias might have influenced his supposedly objective narrative.

Arnie himself is an example of an extremely successful polio victim. Most likely modelled on architect Ron Mace, he is the co-owner of a popular firm "specializing in architectural modification for wheelchair accessibility" (Roth 2010, 242). His disability has not prevented him from becoming a happy husband and father. Ironically, he claims that he owes his success not to the Protestant work ethic but to pure luck, part of which was the fact that the disease struck him when he was too young to ask the question why. This might help him to win the reader's sympathy, but on the other hand the reader may be alienated by his harsh judgement of Bucky and such callous cynical remarks as: "A damaged man is sometimes very attractive to a certain type of woman" (Roth 2010, 255). When Arnie firmly establishes himself as a diegetic narrator, his per-

spective, which is clearly a product of his specific life circumstances, is bound to be questioned by the reader. To Arnie, Bucky must seem an allegory of the old world of grandiose but futile gestures. Arnie's possible misrepresentation of Bucky is psychologically very plausible. Inevitably, as we grow older our childhood heroes tend to shrink, and the events from the childhood acquire almost mythical proportions,<sup>12</sup> which is clearly shown by the last scene of the novel, Arnie's extremely vivid memory of Bucky throwing a javelin. This should warn us against accepting Arnie's story at its face value.

We might also see some palpable inconsistencies in Arnie's logic. Somewhat offhandedly, Arnie remarks that rejecting Marcia was for Bucky "his last opportunity to be a man of integrity" (Roth 2010, 262). Still, he criticizes Bucky for seizing this opportunity. He does not see Bucky as a modern day Lord Jim, who tries to redeem his honor, tainted by a similar act of cowardice, but as a pathetic fool.

To Arnie, Bucky's alleged guilt is a product of a hypersensitive conscience. He absolves Bucky from all responsibility, calling him "an unsuspected carrier" (Roth 2010, 249). Still, the facts incriminate Bucky. During an epidemic, it is a customary procedure to quarantine those who have had contact with the sick. The authorities were slow to act but eventually they did act, shutting the playgrounds down and quarantining the city. Even before those decisions were made, Bucky should have realized that, since the sick boys had attended his playground and he had had physical contact with them, he constituted a potential health hazard. When he leaves Newark for Indian Hill, he clearly puts his own well-being above the safety of others. Arnie's unwillingness to see this is a corollary of his unwillingness to recognize Bucky as a proper tragic hero. In Arnie's blatantly mechanistic vision of the universe, there seems to be no room for individual responsibility and heroism:

You got it like the rest of us unfortunate enough to get polio eleven years too soon for the vaccine. Twentieth-century medicine made its phenomenal progress just a little too slowly for us. Today childhood summers are as sublimely worry-free as they should be. The significance of polio has disappeared completely. (Roth 2010, 248-249)

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12 In the previously quoted interview with NPR, Roth claimed that a boy is most alive from the age of nine until twelve (Roth 2010a, 0:05:56 to 0:06:00).

However, contrary to what this passage might suggest, Arnie's vision can hardly be described as scientific or fully rational. He has his own hermeneutics of the plague with which Bucky's story, as it is told by Arnie, is consistent:

Sometimes you're lucky and sometimes you're not. Any biography is chance, and, beginning at conception, chance—the tyranny of contingency—is everything. Chance is what I believed Mr. Cantor meant when he was decrying what he called God. (Roth 2010, 242–243)

As Arnie would have it, polio is a cosmic force beyond human control and it strikes arbitrarily whomever it pleases. What people found extremely baffling was that children who contracted the disease usually lived in good sanitary conditions. Only later was it discovered that people who lived in unsanitary conditions usually developed immunity as a result of an early exposure to the virus. Ironically, in America polio epidemics were a side effect of increased sanitation.

Dr Steinberg, who is presented as a medical authority, declares, "Epidemics have a way of spontaneously running out of steam.... Polio is still a mysterious disease.... We don't know what kills polio germs. We don't know who or what carries polio germs" (Roth 2010, 104). He does not add, however, that what *was* perfectly well known was that it was a highly contagious disease. In the novel, in the areas struck by the disease, people still come and go, congregate, shake hands, pay social calls, routinely perform jobs requiring physical contact with people who might be infected or, to make matters even worse, with people who have actually been infected. The few characters who do raise concerns are described as hysterical. On the one hand, such a representation of the epidemic, although causing our disbelief, may be plausible because it needs to be remembered that in the 1940s polio was not an unusual thing. It was endemic and every summer some children came down with polio. People had to learn to live with it. That is why dr. Steinberg insists that "you don't evacuate two hundred and fifty kids because of one case of polio" (Roth 2010, 231). It was usually very difficult to say when exactly the number of cases reached the number warranting declaring the state of epidemic, closing schools and introducing quarantine. Public health officials had to balance the need for safety with the risk of causing a panic. As a result, they were frequently criticized both for acting too early and too late. On the other hand, such a representation of the epidemic may be the result of Arnie's desire to free Bucky from the responsibility for his actions.

## Conclusions

*Nemesis* can hardly be construed as a fully convincing picture of what might have happened had poliomyelitis struck Roth's home community in Weequahic in the summer of 1944. Since the events are revisited by the narrator after a period of 27 years and from the perspective of his childhood fan, the accuracy of the account of the epidemic is highly suspicious. In its attempts to present some kind of a moral that the epidemic supposedly reveals, *Nemesis* is antithetical to the modern plague writing as it was envisioned by Susan Sontag in her essay *Illness as a Metaphor*, where she argues that more attention should be paid to the physical reality of the disease (in *Nemesis* we get to know the facts of polio mostly from hearsay, newspaper articles and rumors circulated by people). Rather than on the disease itself, the narrative focuses on its influence on Bucky's inner life. Unlike a traditional allegory, *Nemesis* does not end with a straightforward message. Arnie's interpretation of the events, discussed extensively in Part III, may be questioned and even Arnie himself questions it at the very end of the book: "Maybe Bucky wasn't mistaken. Maybe he wasn't deluded by self-mistrust. Maybe his assertions weren't exaggerated and he hadn't drawn the wrong conclusion. Maybe he was the invisible arrow" (274–275). Thus *Nemesis* turns out to be a postmodern story about how imagination recreates the past and about the impossibility of arriving at the objective truth; the truth that it delivers is psychological and subjective.

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# No, We Can't: Racial Tensions and the Great Recession in Benjamin Markovits' "Obama-Era Novel" *You Don't Have to Live Like This*

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**Abstract:** The aims of the paper are twofold. Firstly, it analyses Benjamin Markovits' 2015 novel *You Don't Have to Live Like This* as an example of the nascent genre of the "Obama-era novel." Set in Detroit during Obama's supposedly post-racial presidency, Markovits' work offers a critical assessment of its legacy and addresses the problem of growing racial tensions reflecting both the beginnings of the Black Lives Matter movement and the most recent crisis of white masculinity. Secondly, the novel is read as a literary response to the economic aftermath of the Great Recession following the 2008 global financial crisis. The novel's depiction of a fictitious corporate-run scheme attempting Detroit's urban revitalisation is interpreted as a critique of the "Yes, we can" culture about to be replaced by the "Trump-era," which the novel anticipates. Finally, the novel is compared to other examples of "crash fiction"; it is argued that Markovits' work is a rare example of literature's deeper and direct engagement with the recent economic crisis.

**Keywords:** Barack Obama, Detroit, the Great Recession, Black Lives Matter, precarity

## Introduction

Ever since the election of Donald Trump to the highest office in the United States, and especially since the controversial ending of his presidency (but not the "Trump-era"), many commentators in America and across the world have been wondering how this supposedly sudden and unexpected shift could have happened in the previously (predominantly) uncontested progress of the beacon of democracy. This scrutiny has reached beyond Trump himself and increasingly critical questions have been raised also about Barack Obama's presidency and its legacy. Gradually, also novelists have joined and will no doubt continue to contribute to the discussion.

So far the best known literary commentary on Obama found in a novel appears in *Homeland Elegies* by the American writer Ayad Akhtar. The novel, looking back to Obama's last year in office (as well as the 1980s in America and Akhtar's family's more distant past), has been made famous by Obama himself, who listed it among "his favorite books of 2020" (Aklilu 2020). In the novel, Akhtar (as a first-person narrator repeating a friend's views) writes about America in the run-up to the 2016 election as

a country where people were poorer, where they were lied to, where their lives felt meaner, where they had no idea how to change any of it. They'd taken the unprecedented step of putting a black intellectual into the highest office in the land, a man who promised change but offered little, whose admittedly genuine concern was marred by his superciliousness, who gloried in his pop-culture celebrity while bemoaning a system whose political dysfunctions prevented him from leading. Obama's victory had turned out to be little more than symbolic, only hastening our nation's long collapse into corporate autocracy, and his failures had raised the stakes immeasurably. Most Americans couldn't cobble together a week's expenses in case of an emergency. They had good reason to be scared and angry. They felt betrayed and wanted to destroy something. The national mood was Hobbesian: nasty, brutish, nihilistic – and no one embodied all this better than Donald Trump. Trump was no aberration or idiosyncrasy, ... but a reflection, a human mirror in which to see all we'd allowed ourselves to become. (2021, 242)

In his autobiographical novel, with the benefit of hindsight, Akhtar recognises that the process that led to Trump's rise to power had been long in the making. Those less inclined to idealise American history see an unbroken continuum between the current state of growing inequality leading to an existential threat to the democracy and its actual beginnings, not in theory but in practice (*Amend* 2021). In fact, such a voice (Akhtar's university teacher's) is included on the very first pages of *Homeland Elegies*: "America had begun as a colony and ... a colony it remained, that is, a place still defined by its plunder, where enrichment was paramount and civil order always an afterthought" (2021, xi).

However, Akhtar’s novel is not the first to reflect on Obama, America’s myths, and its ongoing problems. It will be the aim of this paper to examine an earlier, 2015 novel *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* by the US-born and British-based writer Benjamin Markovits, which can even be called an “Obama-era novel,” since it is set during Obama’s first term, was published during his second term, and concerns itself with Obama’s legacy. Trump is, perforce, not mentioned, but the novel conveys disappointment with the future author of *A Promised Land*,<sup>13</sup> disillusionment with the American Dream, and thus anticipates the “Trump-era.” It does so by addressing two problems on which I will concentrate in my analysis: firstly, the book’s biggest issue, i.e. the growing racial tensions in the supposedly “post-racial” America under Obama, reflecting the beginnings of the Black Lives Matter movement, and, secondly, the broader economic aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash, the ensuing Great Recession, and their impact on American white masculinity.

### The novel’s reception and premise

*You Don’t Have to Live Like This* is Benjamin Markovits’ seventh novel. It received positive reviews<sup>14</sup> from most critics stressing above all its timeliness (McElroy Ansa 2015, Wade 2015, Looby 2016) and appreciating its very attempt at tackling a subject which is all too rarely addressed by fiction. In one critic’s words, “[s]o few fiction writers deal directly with street-level economic and cultural conflict in the present day that you’re grateful that *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* exists at all” (Seymour 2015). Another critic complains, however, that, inevitably for a novel about Detroit, “[r]ace and class seem to be everywhere but nowhere *new* in this novel” (McElroy Ansa 2015; added emphasis). One more reviewer remarks that the novel “asks extremely awkward questions about class and race in contemporary America, and provides precisely zero answers” (Kelly 2015). It is true, inventing novel ways of addressing problems which are so difficult to solve exactly because they are so old and unchanging does not appear to be the writer’s goal – and one may

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13 Obama’s memoir published in 2020.

14 Out of the ten reviews I have read, only one was lukewarm (see McElroy Ansa 2015). Max Liu called the book a “profound ... meditation on contemporary America,” and wondered: “Is Benjamin Markovits contemporary fiction’s best-kept secret?” (2015). The novel received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction in 2016.

wonder why it should be one. Markovits does not dispense solutions to the problems, but he does offer us a warning.

The novel is set around 2011 in Detroit. The city is as obvious a choice for any text of culture addressing the Great Recession<sup>15</sup> as it is challenging. Anyone taking on this challenge runs a risk of adding to the by now considerable sum of already existing forms of (pseudo-) artistic exploitation, often resulting in “ruin porn.” Markovits escapes this threat by adopting an overall “reportorial” tone (Scholes 2015, Seymour 2015, Wade 2015), and taking his chosen topic “seriously” (Kelly 2015, Liu 2015). An illustration of this take can be seen in what one of the novel’s characters says about Detroit:

This city ... lies at the center of so much of what America is talking about and worrying about today: the death of the middle class and the rise of social inequality, the collapse of the real estate market and the decline of manufacturing, the failure of the American labor movement and the entrenchment, almost fifty years after Martin Luther King led the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, of a black underclass. (Markovits 2015, 56)

All these issues, as well as the crisis of American white masculinity, on which I will concentrate in the last part of the paper, are presented in this novel, whose main premise is an attempt at Detroit’s urban revitalisation through a corporate-run socio-economic experiment.

The story is told by a first-person narrator, Greg Marnier, known as Marny. A white man in his mid-thirties, Marny is “an Ivy League loser” (Lorentzen 2015): a Yale graduate with a PhD in history from Oxford, who is nonetheless stuck in a dead-end academic job in Wales. He decides to return home, and is forced to stay with his parents in Baton Rouge. As he says, “The fact is, I don’t know where I felt more at home. Nowhere” (Markovits 2015, 13). He is, thus, existentially homeless, “in a transitional state” (90), in search for his own place and role.

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15 Admittedly, this one is only the latest among the many crises the city has suffered. As we learn from Richard Florida, “[a] large sea of disadvantage and despair surrounds a small island of urban revival in the city’s center. Decimated by deindustrialization and white flight, the city has lost more than half of its population since the 1950s, and large areas are now virtually abandoned. In 2009, at the height of the recent economic crisis, the city’s official unemployment rate neared 30 percent. In the summer of 2013 the city declared bankruptcy” (2018, 141–142).

An opportunity to find it comes at a ten-year reunion with his college friends. His own idea evolves into a project which his now multi-millionaire friend Robert James wants to develop in Detroit. Marny moves there and finds his “first grown-up apartment” (87). The rest of the novel is a test: of the narrator’s own maturity, as well as of Robert James’ experiment in urban regeneration.

As one critic has pointed out, the novel’s premise is “based on reality: the population of Detroit fell by 25 per cent in the first decade of this century, and one regeneration scheme offered cash incentives to those willing to live in the derelict properties” (Wade 2015). The novel joins the debate on how to solve the economic and social problems exemplified by Detroit by envisaging its own answer to the question: how to make a bankrupt city afflicted by high unemployment, poverty and violence prosper again? And at the same time: how *not* to do it?

The scale of the problem that needs solving is immense. Already on his way to Detroit, Marny wonders, “Where are the cars? Where is everybody?” (Markovits 2015, 27). This disconcerting sense of unreality – “Everything felt like a computer game” (24) – is going to stay with him for most of his stay in the city. Its Gothic-looking cityscape has a strongly defamiliarising, uncanny effect. Some of the realistic and factual descriptions of urban decay would not be out of place in a dystopia:

There wasn’t any traffic on the road to force me along. Mostly what I saw was empty lots, not falling houses – block after block of grassland. Trees grew out of the roofs of abandoned buildings. There were abandoned cars, too, and tires, shopping carts and heaps of trash sitting where houses used to stand. The effect was rural, not suburban. (30)

... the houses were standing empty, nature was taking over. It’s kind of terrifying ... how quickly weeds grow; certain trees as well. All of this architecture, which seems like such a permanent feature of the landscape, needs constant updating, home improvement, middle-class pride and ambition, or the landscape swallows it up. After a few years. (317)

Because of the initial conditions in Marny’s designated new house (“There was no running water, and the toilets started out bone dry.... Instead of grass the garden grew mattresses, tires and broken bricks” [48]), he first stays in Rob-

ert's house in Detroit. The physical distance between their houses hyperbolically mirrors the financial and class status difference between the two former college friends:

You could see the neighborhood shifting from street to street. Burned-down houses were replaced by boarded-up houses were replaced by empty houses with FOR SALE signs in the window. By the time I got to Robert's house I had climbed about two-thirds of the way up the class ladder. (48)

Since on Manry's street nearly half the buildings had burned down, it took him over two months "to build up the nerve to move out ... not ten blocks away" (47). Still at his parent's house, his mother had warned him that "Detroit [was] the number one most violent city in America" (21), but Marny dismissed the comment by saying: "The news and entertainment industries in this country *sell* fear, it's what they do, because people like you want to buy it" (21; original emphasis). Nonetheless, one of the first things he did already on his way to Detroit was to buy a gun, followed by another gun.

Also Robert describes Detroit as "basically a war zone," "like driving through London after the Blitz" (17).<sup>16</sup> Since he believed his undertaking in this context could be of historic proportions, he wanted a historian on hand, in case the project took off. Marny is to write about the regeneration scheme, as he studied American colonial history (53), and, according to Robert, what they were doing in Detroit belonged to the same tradition as that of the Pilgrims'. As a colonial historian Marny would be well equipped to understand "what people forget about the early settlers," and what Robert stresses, namely that "they were shipped over by private companies; it was a business venture" (53).

This reminds us of the already quoted observation from Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies*: "America had begun as a colony and ... a colony it remained, that is, a place still defined by its plunder, where enrichment was paramount and civil order always an afterthought" (2021, xi). Similarly, Robert's main drive was not

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16 This may sound like an exaggeration, until we consider the observation made by Chris Hedges, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who has covered wars all over the world in the last twenty years: "The destruction of poverty can replicate almost exactly the destruction of war" (*The Agenda...* 2012). For more on this topic and what Hedges calls "sacrifice zones of America" see Hedges and Sacco (2014).

humanitarian, it was the profit motive. In his opinion, “Detroit could be useful as a model for urban regeneration only if it made money. Somebody had to get rich off it, and it was his job to persuade investors that they would” (Markovits 2015, 48). Soon enough Robert and a group of investors were buying up a hefty piece of the city with two thousand houses, empty plots and some derelict industrial sites (56–57).

The plan behind the landgrab was to rent out everything very cheaply to individuals, but also to groups of people who would organise themselves over the Internet (57). Because of the conditions described above, moving there on one’s own was too intimidating. Still, Robert believed that the property allowed one to “set up any kind of society.... But you need a critical mass of people to make it work” (17). As Robert hoped, the scheme would “add ten thousand economically active residents to a city that had lost almost a million in the last forty years” (57).

Clearly, Robert’s ambition was to engage in nothing short of social engineering. The kind of “economically reliable” society Robert was interested in was middle-class, mainly white, but he also “insisted on keeping up a black *presence* in the neighborhood, partly for the PR” (125; added emphasis). In the end, among the newcomers are many mixed-race couples (126). The consequence of this corporate plan in this novel about Detroit is that a vast majority of its characters are white, with only two black characters standing out from the geographically close, yet otherwise distant “blackground.”

As we can see, the proposed solution to the Detroit problem is “a kind of Groupon model of gentrification” (17): affordable real estate made available online for a sufficient number of mainly young (but not only) professionally active people creating a partly racially diverse “political mix” (127). The desirable proportions within this “mix” could only be achieved through careful selection. The tool serving this purpose was a website called “Starting-from-scratch-in-America” (57). Marny belonged to the informal “committee” hand-picking his own future neighbours on the basis of their online profiles: “we sat around all day looking at Facebook, deciding who would get into our village. Like a bunch of assholes” (57).

Marny is only mildly self-critical about his power in toying with real people, in a campaign orchestrated by his Mark Zuckerberg-type dotcom multi-millionaire friend. The unreliable narrator’s opinions aside, the novel invites far more criticism. Its reviewers have recognised that in devising the scheme described

above, and especially in the creation of the character of Robert James, complete with his typical “Silicon Valley’s hubristic patter of total transformation” (Miller 2015), Markovits “deftly satirises this quick-fix brand of Silicon Valley solutionism, the shallow attempts to solve deep-seated problems with technology, buzzwords and blue-sky thinking” (Wade 2015). In this way “the limitations of Silicon Valley’s can-do culture” (Wade 2015) are effectively exposed.

### Obama and racial tensions in the novel

Moreover, *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* can also be read as a disappointed response to the much broader “Yes We Can” culture. As an “Obama Novel,” it is “very much a novel of Obama’s first term, when the idea of a post-racial America still had some dreamlike currency, written early in his second, when racial conflict became one of the central stories of his presidency” (Lorentzen 2015).

In fact, Barack Obama makes a cameo appearance in the novel, taking part in a political fundraiser organised by Robert James for what is already being called “New Jamestown” (Markovits 2015, 226). Robert is very eager to attract the president’s attention, and the function is carefully designed: it plays on the story of the Pilgrims’ feast (168). In his own speech, anticipating the president’s speech later on, Robert makes knowing use of nostalgia operating on two temporal planes – the early stage in the development of the country and the early stage in the development of an average metropolitan and moneyed member of the middle class:

one thing that worried me, is how *big* to make these neighborhoods.... And in the end what I decided was, they should roughly add up to a midsize college campus. There’s a reason people have such nostalgic feelings in this country about their four years of college.... It’s because college is really the only time in our lives that most of us get to live in the kind of small-town community that we still associate with the founding of this country. And by the way, the Pilgrims on the whole were young, they were a young group of people, some of them were starting out in life for the first time, ... and some of them ... starting over from scratch. (169)

Obama’s speech, barring his typical linguistic mannerisms, could seamlessly follow:

the American Experiment ain’t over yet.... The people rebuilding Detroit, and some of you are in this room right now, are still tinkering with it, still adapting it, still moving forward. You have come here ... because there was a voice in your head saying, *You don’t have to live like this. There’s a better way to live.* This voice has called people to America for over four hundred years. It calls to us now... (179)

Thus Obama’s fictitious but pitch-perfect speech plays a central part in the novel—it gives it its title. In addition, the speech also plays a pivotal role in the story. While up to the day of the president’s visit Robert’s project was progressing according to plan, from this day onwards things take a sudden turn for the worse. This is symbolically suggested when, after the party, during a friendly game of basketball with the president, Marny is accidentally elbowed by someone (perhaps by Obama himself) and suffers from a nosebleed. Such placing of Obama, and the outcome of his visit, in the novel’s structure may symbolically represent Obama’s own presidency. Before he arrives, and at the beginning of his stay, there is optimism, and even a sense of celebration. However, before long the enthusiasm for his positive words, energy and hope wanes, as they fail to materialise. The situation begins to deteriorate, and eventually dissolves into chaos—prefiguring the 2016 election campaign and Donald Trump’s presidency.

In the novel, this does not refer to Marny’s mild injury; a far more serious incident takes place later the same day. It involves a black teenager, Dwayne Meacher, who steals a “new settler’s” iPhone and, while escaping on his bicycle, is hit by a car. It is unclear if the (white) driver, also a member of the New James-town community, hit the boy accidentally or was in fact trying to deliberately stop him, and thus to stop the theft (and punish the thief). The boy finds himself in hospital, in a coma. Consequently, the racial and class tensions that from the beginning lay latent in the revitalised neighbourhoods now come to the fore.

The crisis escalates after Nolan Smith, the local artist who takes the car driver to court, becomes a suspected kidnapper of a child. It appears that he initially believed the boy, who was left unattended and wandered away from home, to be James’ son, whom Nolan wanted to use for “political pressure” (296) in his unspecified negotiations with James. However, the boy turned out to be the son

of a white Detroiter, Tony Carnesecca, a memoir writer, who is openly racist. He was the one who warned Marny early on: "The reason our neighborhood works is that everyone is white.... I want you to realize what you're getting into. Detroit is a black city. They don't want you living there" (63). Later, Carnesecca published an op-ed in *The New York Times*, where he wrote about the white driver hitting Meacher with his car:

Could this constitute a justifiable *arrest* under Michigan law? ... In a city like Detroit, whose tax base has been decimated by population flight, *taking the law into your own hands* is ... a necessary feature of a citizen's obligations, to himself and his neighbours. (280–281; original emphasis)

This striking far-right proposition is one of a few places where the unpopular question of taxation reappears in the novel. On the one hand, taxes are seen as an unnecessary evil; on the other hand, as we can infer from Carnesecca's words, the scarcity of tax money is presented as both an evil (in the inevitable vicious circle: the less tax money, the worse the situation; the worse the situation, the less tax money...), as well as a good excuse that necessitates and justifies vigilantism masquerading as law and order.

Inevitably, there is a confrontation between Nolan and Tony, and it turns violent. Tony knocks Nolan unconscious in Marny's house. They leave Nolan on the floor – without calling for medical assistance – to collect Tony's son, who is safe in Nolan's house nearby, looked after by Nolan's mother, and happily playing with Nolan's son. Ironically, Mrs. Smith, unaware of the circumstances, looks at the superficially symbolic scene and remarks: "These two just found each other, it's a beautiful thing" (300).

Of course, the reality is the opposite of beautiful. A protracted legal process follows: Nolan is accused of kidnapping, and, predictably, found guilty. In addition, the trial attracts the attention of the media, who uncover inconvenient truths about New Jamestown. Some criticised it even earlier as "the 'Communist-style society of this Detroit development'" (229) populated by "[l]aw school droupouts, shady businessmen, porn pushers; rich kids who couldn't make it on Daddy's dime. Life's unattractive failures" (228). Even more damningly, an article in the *Time* magazine entitled "Utopian Vision Faces Real-world Politics and Problems," discusses the project as a front for a commodities scam,

where large amounts of aluminium are stored in Detroit’s empty industrial spaces to enable speculation on its prices (336).

However, the most serious consequence of the trial and its verdict is the ensuing violence. “Riots” last three days (384). Large sections of New Jamestown are set on fire: Nolan’s house burns down; Marny’s house loses its roof in the fire. Furthermore, “[t]here were more than a hundred arrests. Seven people died, one of them shot by the police, which came in for a lot of criticism afterwards” (385). No details are given, but it can be inferred from analogous real-life events, such as the protests following the acquittal of the man who killed the black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, which led to the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 (Black Lives Matter), that the person who was shot was black, as very likely were the other casualties similarly not specified.

In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler writes about real-life events such as the public demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014 in response to the police killing of an unarmed black man, Michael Brown (2015: 26), events which may well have served as a source of inspiration for Markovits. Butler points out “how quickly forms of public forms of political opposition” are “renamed as ‘unrest’ or ‘riots’,” “even when they do not engage in violent acts” (26). No consensus will be found between the conflicted sides about what happened in Ferguson, but the protests’ organisers insist, as in a number of later such cases, that they started as largely peaceful demonstrations that turned violent due to police aggression (Lopez 2016).

Perhaps Markovits’ fictitious events developed similarly. The author includes echoes of the early Black Lives Matter movement in his novel, but its first-person narrator has no access to the events and this story is not his to tell. Certainly, Butler’s “performative theory of assembly” is applicable to the riots in the novel, since the protesters exist in the condition of precarity, and gather no doubt “to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space ... demanding to be recognized, to be valued, ... exercising the right to appear, to exercise freedom, as they are demanding a livable life” (Butler 2015, 26). “Precarity,”<sup>17</sup> writes Butler,

designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support

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17 For more see Standing 2016 and Desmond 2017.

more than others,<sup>18</sup> and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.... Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence, or other forms not enacted by *states* but for which the judicial instruments of *states* fail to provide sufficient protection or redress. (Butler 2015, 33–34; original emphasis)

The one character in the novel who embodies both precarity and active protest against it is Nolan Smith. He is a secondary figure, but at the same time the most complex and interesting character creation in the novel. The only thing said about his background is that his older brother was killed in a gang shooting when Nolan was in high school (Markovits 2015, 141), and that he is most likely gay, although this is never stated clearly, only guessed (66, 269). We never get to know more about his perspective, informed by the double jeopardy of being a gay African American. Even though this limits the scope of the novel, it is understandable that, just as in his reticence about the riots, Markovits refrained from creating a direct access to this character's point of view, as this would have resulted in charges of "blackface." Consequently, we only learn about Nolan's views from Marny's several conversations with him. As an artist, Nolan

wanted to push realism further, he wanted to make art that changed reality, that had an effect on it, and one of the forms he was looking at was legal art.... Lawsuits, he said. He wanted to sue people, where the art was just the legal act, the court papers and documentation, the judge's ruling. But it cost money. A lot of what he did was apply for grants. (143)

It is remarkable that Nolan chooses this particular — prohibitively expensive — art form. But again, we could draw upon Butler's theory and infer his intention to both consciously engage in and point to the (usually not con-

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18 According to a survey reported by Florida, in 2014 "[b]lack Americans were five times more likely than whites to live in extremely poor neighborhoods" (2018, 98); "[t]oday, economic segregation remains closely associated with race, even as levels of racial segregation have declined" (115).

scious) institutional performativity in the theatre-like setting in the abstract and arbitrary context of the law, which nonetheless has very tangible and material consequences. We can also infer Nolan’s intention to reappropriate this context, which is typically unfavourable to people like him in the US (13<sup>th</sup> 2016). Thus, not turning it into an empowering platform, Nolan can draw attention to this example of frequent systemic injustice. According to Hannah Arendt, quoted by Butler, “all political action requires the ‘space of appearance’” (2015, 72), and such a space opens very publically when one appears in court. Even though Nolan would be acting (including the other meaning of “acting,” i.e. performing) by himself, as Butler says, one is not only “a collection of identities,” but also “an assembly already” (68). Whether as part of a collective, or in their name, “[s]howing up, standing, breathing, moving..., speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts livable life at the forefront of politics” (18).

Consequently, Nolan becomes part of his art, his own tool and material. But as a result, his own life becomes even less “livable.” He is offered an opportunity to settle the case out of court, but he decides to pursue it, even though he is certain to lose, and he does lose (this happens after he has already lost custody of his son). His prison sentence may become the logical conclusion to his “legal art.” Whether it is likely to “change reality” and “have an effect on it” is very doubtful, however. Rather, it serves as a passive reflection of reality, which instead has had an effect on him, and the “type” he represents, identified by Tony Carnesecca a long time before their altercation as “a violent angry Negro” (Markovits 2015, 151).

Nolan often has to repeat (with pained patience) that he is not angry. The problem (to those who consider him angry) is that he uses strong language in a confident manner, and he is who he is, which intimidates white men. As Marny observes, “Nolan’s a big guy,” “he had big hands.... He wasn’t just stronger than me but maybe two or three or four times stronger” (297). “I wanted to know what made him so angry,” Marny said, “*I didn’t get it. These places were scary places before people like me came along*” (317; added emphasis). From Marny’s perspective, thanks to people like him, the regenerated part of Detroit, where Nolan also lives, is not scary *any more*: according to him the solution to scariness – for everyone – turned out to be real estate renovation and gentrification. Some took this simple reasoning even further:

There was a general feeling in the neighborhood, which I didn't totally share, that the old Detroit blacks should be grateful to us, for pushing up their property prices and giving some of them domestic employment, mowing lawns, painting walls,... and bringing in stores and bars and restaurants where before there were boarded-up shops. (151)

However, as Marny immediately adds: "But the stores weren't cheap and the truth is, you didn't see many black faces at Joe Silver's coffeehouse, for example. Most of the old residents kept to themselves" (151).

This is exactly the point Nolan makes in response to Marny's observation that "[t]his city wasn't always a black city" (317):

When the white people made enough money, they moved out.... How much money have you people brought to this city that you didn't spend on yourselves? On your schools and your houses and your neighborhoods? ... If this thing works out, how many people from Detroit will be able to afford a house in one of your neighborhoods? (317-318).

In this way Nolan provides his answer to the expected gratitude for the new residents' "pushing up [the] property prices." He is equally ungrateful for the selection of menial jobs in and around richer (white) people's houses. Nolan is the one character who spells out the other side of the early American settlers' myth which the "new settlers" and the investors behind the scheme like to evoke so much. As we saw in Robert James' "Thanksgiving-themed" speech earlier, they use it highly selectively: omitting the fact that the celebrated early settlers took away land already belonging to someone else and, not long after, brought slaves to it. In no uncertain terms, Nolan calls the new settlers "Goddamn colonizers" (266), the "urban renewal" – "Negro removal" (143), and about New Jamestown, in an echo of the Occupy Movement, says "I consider this occupied territory" (139) – as if a foreign state had invaded his home country.

In fact, such perception of the racial and, at the same time, economic divide that exists in Detroit – in the novel synecdochically representing America as a whole – is not Nolan's alone. Marny's experiences, as well as those of Gloria Lambert, his black girlfriend he briefly lives with, cast the United States as disu-

nited parallel states with people belonging to one’s own race living on one side of a curiously both invisible and visible border, with foreigners on the other side. When entering the Detroit high school where for a time Gloria and Marny both teach, Marny passes through a security check and a metal detector, and notices that everyone is black: “I shouldn’t have been surprised, in fact, I wasn’t surprised, which didn’t stop me feeling like I’d entered another country, after an airplane flight” (115). About his upbringing Marny says that, although his high school in Baton Rouge was sixty-five percent black, he did not have one black friend; instead he had “a sense of some world that was everywhere around me, which I couldn’t get into” (221).

In turn, Gloria recounts to Marny the traumatising circumstances of the death of her father, who suddenly collapsed while they were cycling in a white neighbourhood in Detroit. Gloria was seven and “didn’t know any white people to talk to” (193). She sat on the grass by her father for almost an hour: no one reacted, even when the little black girl was initially crying. The reason why she did not knock on anyone’s door was that “she was scared they weren’t supposed to be there and she didn’t want to get her daddy in trouble” (193). She obsessed about it in her adult life: “If I hadn’t a been scared, I’d have knocked on somebody’s door and got help. It’s all about race” (230).

### **The great recession and white masculinity**

Thus, in the novel’s racial conflict, Marny is put in the middle, between Gloria and Nolan on the one side, and Tony Carnesecca on the other. Quite obviously, the man who called Nolan “a violent angry Negro” (151) is an “angry white male” himself. Carnesecca represents a problem which in his 2013 book *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*, Michael Kimmel calls “aggrieved entitlement”: “that sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you” (2017, 18). Kimmel refers to the titular hitherto most privileged group’s sense of victimisation due to their increasing loss of privilege in general, as a result of which white masculinity is experiencing a severe crisis.

But this phenomenon is not new: as Susan Faludi wrote in her first book *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, first published in 1999, the same crisis drove the political decade of the 1990s (2000, 407). Already then a white man told her: “Basically, the white male is the most discriminated-against minority, the largest

minority in the country" (416). Faludi shows that the roots of "the Trump-era" fuelled by the crisis lie in the dismantling of the American industry and American social safety network since Ronald Reagan's replacement of welfare capitalism with neoliberal capitalism,<sup>19</sup> and far predate Obama's presidency. Obama, however, if only symbolically, did mark progress for African Americans, which thus reinforced the "aggrieved entitlement" of some white male Americans.

The crisis of white masculinity is central to most of the hitherto produced "crash fiction" set in America. Such literature has been analysed in two collections of essays: *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film and Television: Twenty-First Century Bust Culture*, edited by Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski (2013) and *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, edited by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (2014). Both volumes focus on what Boyle and Mrozowski call "bust culture" – "a concept employ[ed] to refer to post-crash cultural artifacts inflected by diminishment, influenced by scarcity, and infused with anxiety" (2013, xi).

The first collection offers three essays about print literature: two about popular fiction and one about "American literary novels." In the latter, David Mattingly (2013) examines two post-crash novels about two white American men affected by the recession: Jess Walter's *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (2009) and Joseph G. Peterson's *Wanted: Elevator Man* (2012). Both novels end on a positive note of "acceptance of diminished living conditions with potential for self-discovery and ethical renewal" (Mattingly 2013, 104).

In the second collection, one essay, by Hamilton Carroll, analyses two novels about "crisis masculinity" and masculinity crisis: again, *The Financial Lives of the Poets* and Sam Lipsyte's *The Ask* (2010). Both are "first-person narratives of masculine disempowerment, domestic upheaval, and social failure" with "the men who stand at their centers – and who tell their own stories – reclaim[ing] agency" and "depicted as heroic" (Carroll 2014, 219). Both "[d]eeply ironic, and richly satirical works" (217), nonetheless end with "a return to masculine pride" (219). In both, "[f]inancial downturn is represented as an opportunity to reassess lives and recalibrate expectations" (218).

In Mattingly's conclusion, which would be equally suitable for Carroll's essay, the abovementioned early "crash fiction's" protagonists are diagnosed with "contemporary apathy": "[a] reluctance to protest and engage politically sees [them] putting themselves and their families first ... and not engaging in a wid-

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19 Ironically, "Make America Great Again" is a slogan Trump copied from Reagan.

er political or ideological struggle” (2013, 104–105). Today, this can be seen as a foreshadowing of Trump’s “America first” policy. Mattingly adds that “[p]alpable expressions of discontent are largely absent” in the discussed books (105). Moreover, these works represent only a single (privileged) point of view:

the overwhelmingly white middle/professional class-centric fiction thus far ignores narratives from other social groups, notably African Americans, Latinos, rural Americans, blue-collar workers, and newly radicalized activists involved in protests through such groups as Occupy Movement.... more expansive narratives may yet emerge that contextualize America’s travails in a suitably global context. Based on evidence thus far, however,... there does not appear to be an appetite among writers or audiences for directly or overtly political work. As of April 2013, there appear to be no twenty-first century Upton Sinclairs or Norman Mailers about to publish muckraking accounts of aspects of the crisis. (109)

Two years later, this state of affairs began to be remedied by Markovits’ novel. *You Don’t Have to Live Like This*, admittedly, also concentrates on the challenges faced during the Great Recession by a white middle/professional class male. However, as we have seen, it concentrates on racial tensions, and includes strongly critical views of African American characters. In addition, it does not comfortably end with the white male protagonist’s “ethical renewal” and “acceptance.” It ends with a sense of failure and shame. After the riots, Marny’s living conditions are diminished, he reassesses his life, but there is no “return to masculine pride.” Firstly, from the beginning Marny’s infantilising lack of money is frequently highlighted. Secondly, in the crucial scene of the fight between Nolan and Tony, after Tony urges Marny to get his gun, Marny freezes, unable to decide what to do.<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, also as a witness in Nolan’s trial, Marny feels undecided, impotent, and guilty himself. In the words of one critic, “Marny is an unwitting archetype for his generation, a childish man”<sup>21</sup> (Kelly 2015).

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20 Faludi writes about handling a gun, a key symbol in America, as “a caricature of a patriarchal image ... The guns were the props in what was essentially a performance of masculinity” (2000, 444).

21 Again, Faludi wrote about this phenomenon, “a childish man,” already in *Stiffed*: “By the mid-1990s, the media was full of quizzical and grumpy commentary about the proliferation of ‘permanent adolescent’ men” (2000, 531).

Finally, after Gloria leaves him because of his indecisiveness, and still during but especially after the trial, Marny becomes depressed, isolated, and develops a porn addiction (Markovits 2015, 349). He can no longer live in his rented house and stays with various friends. His situation is even worse than where he started, two years earlier, but his emotions are similar:

the old confused feelings returned.... I haven't got a job, though I do some day labor, fruit picking, furniture removal, leafleting, yard work. As little as I can get away with.... I sold my car .... Basically, I'm treading water .... My point of view is undergoing an alteration, and when your point of view changes you see things you couldn't see before, different aspects of reality become available. (389)

A few paragraphs later, in a metatextual moment, Marny reflects on his own story, the text that the reader has almost finished reading. Thinking about a friend who wrote an autobiographical novel, he wonders: "If she can make six figures by writing some novel about me, what should I get for writing this?" (391). The "periphery guy" (26), the "outsider" (58), the Nick Carraway to Robert James's Jay Gatsby (Miller 2015, Wade 2015), was meant to be Robert's chronicler, and he is one, although not of his multimillionaire friend's success. Instead, he writes about New Jamestown now and how it became this way: "It's a different place these days.... there's also a lot of petty theft" (Markovits 2015, 389), there's "the not-for-profit crime. The senseless destruction.... burning cars" (276). It turns out not everything has to be for profit. When your point of view changes you do see things you couldn't see before.

## Conclusion

The most recent American literature so far shows little interest in a direct, politically critical engagement with the Great Recession (see Kowal 2019a). Perhaps it is too soon for such literary responses to the crash and the resultant crisis—or rather overlapping crises; perhaps the subject matter is too daunting. There are a number of novels which use the Great Recession merely as a background, while concentrating only on an individual character and his (predominantly his) financial troubles, never directly venturing into broader concerns about the American economic system, not to mention its relation to the rest of the world.

Against this background, Benjamin Markovits’ *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* stands out as an exception,<sup>22</sup> additionally because it is an early example of the emerging new genre of the “Obama-era novel.”

As demonstrated in this paper, Markovits’ book conveys a sense of disappointment with the optimism that the first black American President’s election inspired. Change was hoped for, but nothing changed. It is symbolically significant *how* Obama appears in the novel: he meets and shows support not to people like Nolan Smith but to Robert James, who represents the rich white elites and the financial sector, which had caused the 2008 crash in the first place. Thus the words Obama utters, “You don’t have to live like this. There’s a better way to live” (Markovits 2015, 179), which are about the American Dream, ring hollow in Detroit—Markovits’ small-scale model of America. The dream is out of reach for many, as the Black Lives Matter movement proves by struggling not for a better life, but, in Butler’s words, for a *livable* life. At the same time, the dream feels increasingly out of reach even for those who consider themselves exclusively entitled to it: those white men who by now are angrier than ever, and—as we know now—brought Trump to power.

Markovits’ novel does not offer an easy recipe for a better way to live in America, but it does warn “You don’t have to live like this” by pointing to an anti-example. The feelings of shame and defeat with which the novel ends go beyond the narrator’s own sense of personal failure. It is not just Marny, but the whole experimental project that fails. As one critic put it, “‘how to live well, that’s the question,’ says Marny; but the subtext is ‘at what cost?’” (Wade 2015). On the one hand, there is an actual financial cost of this particular attempt at “living well” in the novel. On the other hand, there is also another, non-financial cost. Judith Butler expressed it by repeating Theodor W. Adorno’s formulation: “it is not possible to live a good life in a bad life” (2015, 22). In our context this means: the experiment was conducted at somebody else’s expense; someone else is paying the price. While, after the experiment is over, many of the new settlers pack their things and relocate yet again, the old residents remain in either unchanged or even worsened circumstances, some of them having lost a family member killed in the riots, some now homeless, like Nolan’s mother. Nolan himself, like many arrested in the riots, ends up in prison. While none

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22 One more such valuable politically engaged literary work is Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* (2015). See Kowal 2019b.

of the “social engineers” could be held directly accountable for the destruction, violence and deaths, they initiated a chain reaction – within a larger, pre-existing chain of events – which led to this outcome. Now they can just leave. There is no doubt that the chief “engineer,” Robert James, has a bright future ahead of him, in business, and very likely in politics.

What could be the novel’s clearest lesson? Lucy Scholes wrote for *The Guardian* that the novel “warn[s] us that communities are delicate ecosystems that shouldn’t be tampered with, even by those with the best of intentions” (2015). As Robert’s political science professor from Harvard, said, inaugurating the scheme that *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* is about:

What we are about to witness is a small experiment in regeneration – an attempt to repopulate these neighborhoods, to rebuild these houses, to revive these communities. It is, by its nature, a very local solution to some of the deeper and broader problems America faces today. But if you can fix it here, you can fix it anywhere. (Markovits 2015, 56)

Markovits’ warning is: no you can’t; not like this.

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## **The 29<sup>th</sup> PASE conference**

### **Intersections: Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Encounters in English Studies 24-25 June 2021**

**Grzegorz Maziarczyk,  
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University of Lublin**

With the constantly growing tendencies towards multidimensional approaches to social and cultural phenomena, the 29<sup>th</sup> PASE Conference focused on multiple intersections observable in English studies. Set against the current institutional policy to ‘discipline’ studies and research, the theme of conference attracted over 60 participants, who analysed in their papers interactions and crossovers between diverse cultural phenomena, trends, theories, methodologies and disciplines of study.

The 29<sup>th</sup> PASE conference was organised by the Anglicists from the Institute of Literary Studies and the Institute of Linguistics at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the initial date of the conference (planned for the year 2020) had to be postponed and eventually, for the first time in the history of PASE, the conference was held online in June 2021. This format allowed the organisers to cancel the conference fee, as all the keynote lectures and panels took place in MS Teams. Even though the virtual environment precluded face-to-face communication, it proved highly conducive to a fruitful exchange of ideas and enabled participation from all over the world. The plenary speakers included Professor John Harris from the University College London, Professor Ewa Kujawska-Lis from the University of Warmia and Mazury, Professor Fátima Vieira from the University of Porto and Professor Steve Tomasula from the University of Notre Dame. Their intersecting keynote lectures provided insights into recent developments in such diverse fields as phonology, translation studies, contemporary utopianism and the posthuman novel. The 29<sup>th</sup> conference followed the format introduced during the previous conference in Poznań and consisted of general as well as thematic panels, proposed by PASE members. It gathered scholars from a wide range of Polish as well as foreign universities and thus seems to have reversed the trend towards “localisation” of PASE conferences.

On the second day of the conference PASE General Meeting was held, during which Professor Jacek Fabiszak from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań was unanimously re-elected as the President of the Polish Association for the Study of English. The Board and the Auditing Committee were elected as well. The meeting concluded with a discussion of the most urgent issues and forthcoming events, including the next PASE conference to be organized by the Jagiellonian University in 2022.

A venture into the new online format, the 29<sup>th</sup> PASE conference demonstrated that even in the times of unprecedented challenges posed by the global pandemic, which had upended familiar forms of academic communication and interaction, Polish Anglicists and their colleagues from abroad could successfully meet to explore intersections in their interdisciplinary field of study.

## **32<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Foreign and Second Language Acquisition (ICFSLA)**

**Danuta Gabryś-Barker,  
University of Silesia**

The Institute of Linguistics, School of English at the University of Silesia, was the organiser of the *32<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Foreign and Second Language Acquisition (ICFSLA)*. As it has been for over thirty years now, this conference focused on research in second language acquisition and foreign language learning, relating to different aspects of both the teaching and learning of second/foreign languages.

For the first time, the conference was not held in its usual venue, Szczyrk. Due to the continuing pandemic and the unforeseeable path it could take, we as the Organising Committee (Prof. Danuta Gabryś-Barker, Prof. Adam Wojtaszek and dr Katarzyna Papaja) decided that the conference could not happen in its usual format - with all of its participants meeting face to face in Szczyrk. After long deliberation, just like many other conference organisers, we decided to run an online event on the Zoom platform. The dates were 20-22<sup>nd</sup> May 2021 and the event gathered over one hundred participants, not only from Poland but also from all over the world.

The leading theme and programme focus of the 32<sup>nd</sup> ICFSLA conference was *Narratives of Success and Failure: Stories from Foreign Language Teachers and Learners*. The presentations centred on research related to perceptions of what constitutes success and failure in a second/foreign language context - from the perspective of the teacher and/or the learner (as well as on the factors determining these perceived outcomes). The emphasis was the role of qualitative methods in SLA research, and especially the role of (personal) narratives as a tool not only of expression of subjective perceptions and experiences but also of interesting in-depth analysis of the issues relating to FL success and failure in a diversity of educational and non-educational contexts. These included both foreign language teachers/learners in formal instruction settings and those functioning as immigrants in an L2 country. This broad conference topic (a vital one for not only our SLA research but also for our teaching/learning practices, as hoped, attracted a wide group of participants from different educational institutions from around the world.

The invited **plenary speakers** who shared with us their research findings and reflections on the concepts of success and failure in an SLA context generated a lot of interest and lively discussion. Prof. David Singleton (Professor Emeritus, Trinity College, Dublin) in his talk *Language learners telling tales about their experiences* commented on the role of telling stories about one's personal experience of language and cultural encounters in a variety of contexts (for example immigrants, senior learners) and how they can affect multilingual pedagogy. In the talk entitled *The power to extol and disparage – within or beyond?*, Prof. Hanna Komorowska (University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw) offered an overview of the concept of success from a variety of perspectives and referred it to the concept of a successful language learner, language teacher and teacher educator within teacher training institutions. The talk by Prof. Agnieszka Otwinowska-Kasztelanica (Warsaw University, Warsaw) *Tell me your story! Bilingual children, qualitative data and measurable outcomes* argued for a mixed method approach to SLA studies, which she demonstrated so well in her overview of studies of Polish child bilinguals in two different context of language acquisition/learning. In her very interesting and innovative talk, *How we reframe lifelong learning through personal narratives*, Prof. Simone Pfenninger (University of Salzburg, Salzburg) focused on how 'narrative gerontology' can generate insights into understanding older people's lives and inform us about the psychological and social dimensions of L2 learning of third age learners. The last plenary talk, *Narrative analysis of critical incidents in language teacher practice*, given by Prof. Christine Gkonou (University of Essex, Colchester) discussed the very much under-researched theme of teacher emotions and wellbeing by analysing the university teachers' narratives of critical incidents perceived either as successes or failures. Teachers' narratives illustrate novel ways of understanding themselves and their emotional labour.

**Individual sessions** were organized around the four main simultaneously-run sections on the theme of success and failure in the development of different language competences, emotions in language learning and teaching, teacher development and technology in online teaching. Participants interested in issues of multilingualism and multilingual educational settings presented their research in an additional multilingualism section, whereas other areas of SLA research of interest to our conference participants could be heard in *varia* sessions.

In keeping up with the past traditions, the conference continued with an **academic publishers' session** for less experienced scholars, where they could get

updated information on selected journals directly from their editors and also receive advice and guidance on how to prepare their articles to meet the requirements of an academic journal and thus to be accepted for publication. As usual, the session was run in a question-and-answer format, where the editors not only presented their journals but primarily answered the detailed questions of younger participants. The questions related not only to their own journals but also to the more general context of academic publication. The editors participating in the session were the editors-in-chief of the following journals: *International Journal of Multilingualism*/Taylor & Francis/Routledge (Prof. Danuta Gabryś-Barker, University of Silesia, prof. Eva Vetter, University of Vienna), *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* /UAM, Kalisz-Poznań (Prof. Mirosław Pawlak) and *Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition*/University of Silesia Press (Prof. Danuta Gabryś-Barker, Prof. Adam Wojtaszek, University of Silesia)

ICFSLA conferences are not only valued events of academic exchange but also social occasions of great importance. Notwithstanding the difficulties, this year we took on Zoom a glass of wine with our friends and colleagues participating in the event. This was a symbolic moment, when we could share and overcome our anxieties about the current situation, but most of all we could share our pleasure at being able to be together virtually with reaffirmed hope of meeting face to face during the 33<sup>rd</sup> ICFSLA Conference in May 2022, held once again in Szczyrk.

You are most welcome to attend.

## Authors' Biodata

**Amira Aloui** is a 3<sup>rd</sup> year PhD candidate, University of Szeged, Doctoral school of literatures and cultures in English. She is working on Reason of State and theories of étatism in early modern drama and culture. Her thesis (currently) is entitled "Towards a Po(e)litics of the Tragedy of State: Raison d'État in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall*." She teaches early modern drama, Shakespearean drama, and literary theory. Fields of research include early modern drama, literary theory, and political philosophy.

**Dorota Osińska** is a PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Humanities, University of Warsaw. Her main research interest centres on late 18th and 19th-century British poetry, with a focus on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Aesthetic period, the relationship between visual art and poetry in nineteenth-century Britain, the Victorian novel, and revisionist poetry. She holds an MA in English Studies and is pursuing a PhD in English Literature at the University of Warsaw, concentrating on the reinterpretations of mythological heroines in nineteenth-century British literature and art.

**Michał Palmowski** is Assistant Professor in the Department of the History of American Literature and Culture at the Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University in Kraków. His academic interests include: utopia and dystopia in literature, science fiction, transgressive literature and literature of the Beat Generation

**Ewa Kowal** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Comparative Studies in Literature and Culture in the Institute of English Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. She has co-edited three books on contemporary literature and is the author of *The "Image-Event" in the Early Post-9/11 Novel: Literary Representations of Terror after September 11, 2001* (2012) and *The Post-Crash Decade of American Cinema: Wall Street, the "Mancession" and the Political Construction of Crisis* (2019). She is interested in feminist history, theory and criticism, gender studies, masculinities studies, housing studies, happiness studies, film and the visual arts.

## Information for Contributors

We invite our colleagues from Poland and abroad to contribute articles which would reflect their field of research and expertise. The articles will be blindly reviewed by two independent scholars prior to their publication. We hope to publish general issues as well as specific, topic-oriented ones. Our issues are open to all scholars working in English studies.

The journal encourages previously unpublished submissions in linguistics, applied linguistics, literature, cultural studies and related aspects of history. Papers should be written in English. Conference reports as well as book reviews which address similar issues are also encouraged. Proposals of edited thematic issues are also welcome.

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Pollan, Michael. 2006. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*.  
New York: Penguin.

Book with two authors:

Ward, Geoffrey C., and Ken Burns. 2007. *The War: An Intimate History, 1941–1945*. New York: Knopf.

Article in a scholarly journal:

Weinstein, Joshua I. 2009. "The Market in Plato's *Republic*." *Classical Philology* 104:439–58.

Chapter in a book:

Kelly, John D. 2010. "Seeing Red: Mao Fetishism, Pax Americana." In *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*, edited by John D. Kelly, Beatrice Jauregui, and Jeremy Walton, 67–83. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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