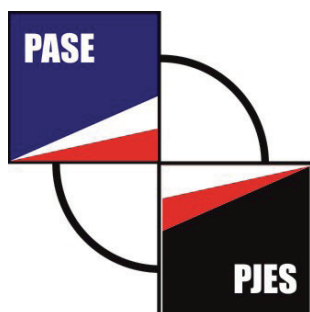




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## Inverting Dickens: Biofiction, Illegibility, and the Author as Suspect in Dan Simmons's *Drood*

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**Abstract:** Dan Simmons's *Drood* (2009) rewrites Charles Dickens not as a stable moral authority but as an object that can be known only through suspicion and compromised testimony. By handing narration to Wilkie Collins – addicted, jealous, and belated – the novel turns “Dickens” into a contested construction produced by biography, scandal, and the reader's own appetite for access. This essay argues that Simmons stages three linked inversions. First, the Staplehurst railway accident breaks Dickensian intelligibility: trauma is narrated as an experience that resists plot, and celebrity recognition functions as a survival credential rather than proof of ethical clarity. Second, the novel shifts from the readable surface of London to Undertown, an infrastructural counter-city governed by permissions, debts, and embodied forms of knowledge, thereby reversing the familiar “paperscape” model of Dickensian urban mastery. Third, Simmons converts the unfinishedness of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* into an afterlife engine, showing how detection plots and completion fantasies compete to seize authorial sanction once the author is absent. Across these sites, *Drood* exposes how modern regimes of surveillance, commodified intimacy, and interpretive hunger manufacture literary authority. Rather than simply debunking Dickens, the novel demonstrates that Dickens's cultural afterlife persists through managed illegibility: the more closely the text promises to reveal the man, the more it multiplies uncertainty and makes authority itself the mystery. Reading the novel as neo-Victorian biofiction, the essay tracks how Collins's hostile witness turns private memory into evidence and how the rhetoric of detection collapses into coercion. These dynamics reposition Dickens from explanatory center to unstable celebrity body – policed, managed, and circulated – so that the desire to “solve” Dickens becomes indistinguishable from the desire to possess him.

**Keywords:** neo-Victorian biofiction; Dickens afterlives; Wilkie Collins; urban infrastructure; unfinishedness

In contemporary Anglophone culture, “Dickensian” functions as a convenient moral shorthand: it can name poverty, institutional cruelty, and the belief that narration makes suffering socially legible. Boyce and Rousselot note that the term condemns “repressive institutions” and “social injustices” by drawing on Dickens’s unusual fusion of literary authority and public visibility (Boyce and Rousselot 2012, 3). Yet that authority is continually maintained through heritage culture – adaptations, commemorations, and marketable versions of “the Victorian” – rather than simply inherited from nineteenth-century texts (Boyce and Rousselot 2012, 4).

Dan Simmons’s *Drood* intervenes by attacking precisely that aura. Its innovation is less a darker “portrait” than a reorganization of the terms by which Dickens is made available as a public object. From its first pages, the novel frames Dickens through the logic of indictment and spectacle, posing the question, “Did ... Charles Dickens plot to murder an innocent person and dissolve away his flesh in a pit of caustic lime?” (Simmons 2009, 7). The accusation does not arrive as a late twist; it is the narrative’s opening contract. A familiar Dickens, famous, benevolent, and culturally secure, is placed under a form of hostile biography that treats moral authority as a mask requiring explanation.

The inversion is formal. *Drood* relocates the production of “Dickens” to Wilkie Collins, who narrates from physical deterioration, chemical dependence, and professional rivalry, so that Dickens appears not as the origin of narrative order but as an object reconstructed by a damaged witness. Collins insists on insider status, yet his access is repeatedly undercut: he is absent from decisive events, forced to rely on second-hand reports, and often unable to separate hallucination from observation. That structure is recognizably neo-Victorian in the sense Louisa Yates describes when she defines the mode as “self-reflexive literary engagement with the Victorians, the Victorian, and Victorianism”, marked by “revisionist history, intertextuality, and, often, fragmentation” (Yates 2009, 187). Simmons turns fragmentation into method: the reader receives Dickens only as a contested construction, assembled within a witnessing apparatus whose failures are part of the novel’s argument about how celebrity authors are known.

The method of this paper is textual and intertextual rather than biographical in a documentary sense. It combines close reading with neo-Victorian biofiction studies, reading *Drood* in relation to the unresolved legacy of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, biographical traditions surrounding Dickens, and scholarship on Dickens’s afterlives. After establishing the biofictional frame, the paper traces

how questions of authority and legibility recur across Collins's narration, Staplehurst, Undertown, detection, performance, and unfinishedness.

This paper argues that Dan Simmons's *Drood* inverts Dickens by shifting narrative authority to Collins's compromised testimony, staging Staplehurst as the collapse of Dickensian intelligibility, relocating London's legibility into Undertown's controlled infrastructure, and corrupting detection into coercive compulsion that collapses the boundary between suspect and investigator.

To say that *Drood* "inverts" Dickens is to reverse the usual direction of explanation. Dickens's novels often translate opaque institutions into readable motives; Simmons borrows that apparatus only to turn it against its inventor. The novel foregrounds "unintelligible" experience – first in Dickens's own post-Staplehurst account and then in Collins's drugged testimony – so that illegibility becomes the condition of authorship rather than an accident (Simmons 2009, 15). In Louisa Yates's terms, this is neo-Victorian re-vision: recognizable Victorian forms installed in order to unsettle their claims to coherence (Yates 2009, 187).

## I. The Other Dickens and the Biofictional Economy of Authority

Neo-Victorian biofiction often promises to restore historical figures to complexity, yet it can also render the famous person less human and more artifact, a surface rewritten to stage contemporary anxieties about authority and ethics. Kathyne Ford offers a useful working definition when she writes that "Neo Victorian biofiction may be defined as the mainly literary, dramatic, or filmic reimaginings of the lives of actual individuals who lived during the long nineteenth century" (Ford 2014, 7). *Drood* pushes that "reimagining" toward inversion: Dickens is not granted interiority so much as he is placed under hostile interpretation, as if the author's life were a text whose meaning must be extracted by force. The novel's opening allegation about lime functions as a sales pitch to cultural curiosity, but it also exposes what that curiosity wants – secret access to Dickens – and what it costs: a Dickens made readable only through suspicion.

The stakes are biographical and institutional. John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens* established one of the most influential stabilizing portraits of Dickens, energetic, morally awake, devoted to work, and legible as a genius, yet even Forster records how precarious that authority could be at the level of the body. Dickens, Forster reports, warned that "Work and worry, without exercise, would soon make an end of me" (Forster 1872, 9). *Drood* does

not simply contradict Forster; it turns biography into a battleground, staging Dickens's authority as something maintained by omission, reputational management, and the strategic control of what the public may see. Collins becomes a rival biographer who insists that Forster's monument rests on silence and that Dickens's respectability is a structure sustained by household labor, legal pressure, medical certification, and intimidation.

Collins's narration supplies humiliations that puncture the public icon. He recalls seeing Dickens "stuck in a rural, doorless privy with his trousers down around his ankles" (Simmons 2009, 8). The image is crude, but its function is theoretical. It turns Dickens from authorial presence into bodily vulnerability and insists that celebrity relies on selective visibility. The humiliation also sets the tone for what Boyce and Rousselot call the "Other Dickens", a Dickens produced when neo-Victorian appropriation refuses reverence and treats Dickens's image as available for inversion (Boyce and Rousselot 2012, 1).

The same logic governs Dickens's domestic scandal. Collins frames Dickens's separation and relationship with Ellen Ternan not as background but as an emblem of how Dickens's public life is propped up by concealment. The scandal is triggered by a banal logistics error: "Dickens had bought the actress Ellen Ternan an expensive bracelet [...] and the idiot jeweller had delivered the thing to the Dickenses' home" (Simmons 2009, 8). A private gift becomes public evidence; the household becomes an archive of betrayal. The inversion here is not moralism but infrastructure: Dickens's authority requires the capacity to move objects and people without leaving readable traces.

Simmons sharpens that portrait by stressing Dickens's household not as a refuge but as a disciplinary theatre. Collins recalls Dickens "shouting and roaring at" Catherine Dickens and "actually screaming in his wife's face" (Simmons 2009, 10). The language is blunt, but its narrative purpose is precise: Dickens's celebrated tenderness toward "the poor" is inverted into a private practice of intimidation. Even Dickens's paternal charm is shown as conditional. Collins remarks that Dickens "enjoyed his children, seemed almost to dote on them, until they began to think for themselves" (Simmons 2009, 10). Read against Laird's claim that later commemorations recast Dickens from "benevolent patriarch" into "restless, tormented, and sometimes vindictive genius" (Laird 2012, 13), the domestic scenes in *Drood* do not merely scandalize; they show how authority in the novel operates as conditional affection, granted only so long as it does not generate independent judgment.

When rumor threatens that infrastructure, Dickens turns to institutional verification. Collins reports that a doctor was “ordered to publish a statement [...] declaring [...] Miss Georgina Hogarth was *virgo intacta*” (Simmons 2009, 11). The Latin phrase marks a culture in which bodily examination can be conscripted to defend reputations. Dickens’s moral authority is thus shown to depend on an ability to mobilize coercive forms of legibility against others. The novel even adds a judgment from within Dickens’s family: “My father was like a madman” (Simmons 2009, 11). Dickens is inverted not into a simple villain but into a manager of exposure who uses the same social machinery his fiction often condemns.

## II. Hostile Witness: Collins, Addiction, and the Problem of Testimony

*Drood*’s most consequential decision is to make Wilkie Collins the medium through which Dickens is known. Collins narrates from the ruins of his own credibility. His dependence on opiates and later morphine distorts time, interrupts memory, and renders perception vulnerable to suggestion. The novel does not treat this merely as psychological texture. It turns addiction into an epistemological condition: Dickens becomes readable only through a narrator who cannot guarantee what he sees.

This structure has two effects. First, it reverses the direction of authority. Dickens, famous for producing narratives that organize social complexity into intelligible form, becomes the object about whom intelligibility is disputed. Second, it turns biography into compulsion. Collins repeatedly frames himself as dragged along by Dickens’s private obsessions and by Inspector Field’s pressure. The reader is asked to evaluate Dickens’s actions through an account that is itself a battleground of envy, dependence, and fear.

The novel externalizes the costs of Collins’s compromised witness through a recurrent figure of apparition and repetition. In the aftermath of Dickens’s separation scandal, Collins sees his former household employee Mary Hogarth as “the Woman in Green”, her skin “green”, her face “a moderately decomposed corpse”, a vision that returns in corridors and half-lit thresholds (Simmons 2009, 56). Rather than offering a tidy supernatural explanation, *Drood* uses the Woman in Green as an image of what cannot be domesticated into biography: private damage made perceptible as haunting. The apparition also folds the domestic interior into the novel’s broader infrastructural logic. Mary’s reappearances often hinge on passages, stairs, and servants’ routes, spaces designed for circulation

without notice. That design rhymes with *Undertown* itself: an architecture of movement whose success depends on staying off the map. Collins's testimony, then, is not only unreliable because of opiates; it is structurally routed through spaces that train perception to miss what is right beside it.

The hostility in Collins's witness is not accidental; it is thematized as part of Dickens's celebrity economy, where intimacy becomes a form of public property and narrative access becomes an entitlement. David Vincent, describing nineteenth-century reception, notes that Dickens's works became the object of mass conversation: "the whole reading public were talking about them, discussing their real meaning, their real truth, their human characters" (Vincent 2009, 8). *Drood* turns that shared interpretive habit into a trap. Collins cannot separate his personal rivalry from Dickens's crowd power because Dickens's power is always interpersonal as well as textual; what once looked like communal meaning-making becomes, under Simmons's pressure, a condition of anxious over-reading in which private rumor and public discussion converge to produce Dickens as unstable.

Collins's recollections therefore oscillate between admiration and contempt. The privy memory is one pole; the other is Dickens's ability to bend people into service. Collins insists that Dickens expects forgiveness from readers regardless of private conduct, and that this expectation shapes Dickens's behavior as entitlement. The narrative's moral pressure comes from uncertainty: because Collins is compromised, the reader cannot accept his indictment as transparent truth, but because he is intimate, the reader cannot dismiss his testimony as mere fantasy. Dickens's inversion happens in that unresolved space.

### III. Staplehurst: Trauma, Paranoia, and the Failure of Dickensian Intelligibility

The Staplehurst railway crash functions in *Drood* as both a historical event and an epistemic rupture. Simmons uses the crash to dramatize what happens when Dickensian intelligibility fails, when the author associated with narrative legibility encounters a scene that refuses to become coherent. Collins describes Dickens's post-crash account as saturated with the language of interpretive breakdown. Dickens, whose "stories were [...] always eminently intelligible", confronts a moment where "Perhaps the unimaginable began" (Simmons 2009, 15). The phrase does not merely describe shock. It marks a shift from narration as mastery to narration as inadequacy.

Simmons's rendering of Staplehurst also refuses the consolations of heroism by staging Dickens's survival as a performance of recognisability. Dickens stops a guard and demands, "Look at me! [...] tell me whether you don't know me", and takes comfort in being instantly identified as "Mr Dickens" (Simmons 2009, 14). That insistence on recognition is not vanity for its own sake: it is a survival tactic that turns celebrity into a credential. Yet the same sequence undercuts that credential by tracking the objects Dickens chooses to save. Once planks are laid, Dickens "clambered back into the tilted coach" to retrieve "his top hat and his flask of brandy" (Simmons 2009, 14). The hat and the flask read as props, tokens of the public Dickens who must re-emerge intact, so that even trauma becomes a scene of self-preservation as self-display. In *Drood*, Dickens's famous energy is no longer proof of moral clarity; it is the engine of a branded persona that must keep moving even when the narrative cannot make sense of what has happened.

The crash sequence also introduces Drood as a perceptual compulsion. Dickens repeatedly misrecognizes ordinary phenomena as the return of the cloaked figure. At one point, "A shadow passed over them. Dickens whirled, sure [...] that it would be Drood [...] But it was only a cloud passing between the sun and the river valley" (Simmons 2009, 17). The moment matters because it shows paranoia taking the place of explanation. Dickens needs an enemy because randomness and helplessness are otherwise unbearable. Drood becomes a narrative device Dickens uses to convert trauma into a mission.

Simmons reinforces this shift with the word that opens Dickens's unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. In Dickens's first chapter, Jasper listens to opium den mutterings and pronounces them "Unintelligible!" (Dickens 1870, 2). Ford notes that "the word 'Unintelligible' links the Victorian and neo-Victorian", since it is both "the final word in *Drood*" and a word from Dickens's unfinished novel (Ford 2021). Simmons's Staplehurst scene moves that intertextual hinge onto Dickens himself. During the crash, Dickens cannot make out Drood's speech over the noise: "Unintelligible, murmured Dickens. Unintelligible" (Simmons 2009, 22). The inversion, then, is exact: Dickens becomes the one confronted by unintelligibility, no longer the author who resolves it.

From this point, Dickens's interpretive habits are recorded as obsession. He begins to propose explanations that look less like evidence than like compulsive horror. When he tells Collins that "some sort of cannibalism went on" at Staplehurst, Collins responds with disbelief, briefly wondering whether the crash has "mentally unhinged" his friend (Simmons 2009, 30). Bell places this pattern

within a wider biofictional economy of “cannibalising Dickens”: later representations make Dickens “into a villain, a cannibal himself”, suggest that he “cannibalises his friends and his life in his fiction”, and then cannibalize “Dickens’s works and his life in their own fiction” (Bell 2020, 204). At Staplehurst, Simmons localizes that economy in trauma. Cannibalism becomes the grotesque story Dickens reaches for when random disaster resists explanation. It also connects to a longer cultural controversy. Collins notes that “it was actual cannibalism, or at least the rumour of it, that had changed the course of Charles Dickens’s life” when Dr. John Rae reported on the fate of Franklin’s expedition (Simmons 2009, 35). Simmons thus frames Dickens as someone whose public authority has been shaped by disputes over what horrors England will acknowledge as real.

Staplehurst, then, becomes the novel’s model for inversion. Instead of Dickens organizing trauma into a story, trauma destabilizes Dickens into a man who chases a story in order to survive trauma. The reader is left with a Dickens whose power is no longer ethical clarity but the ability to infect others with his obsession. Collins’s narration renders this infection both persuasive and suspect.

#### IV. Undertown and the Anti-Paperscape: Infrastructure, Access, and the Desire to Map

If Staplehurst marks the collapse of narrative legibility, Undertown marks the collapse of urban legibility. Céline Prest argues that Dickens’s London is frequently structured as “paperscape”, a city whose inscriptions are “meant to make places immediately legible, like so many labels” (Prest 2016, par. 6). Prest also stresses the ambition of that model, observing that “the whole space of London seems to be encompassed by such a map” (Prest 2016, par. 7). *Drood* reverses the expectation that London can be mastered by surface reading by making the city’s depth, its tunnels, sewers, crypts, and bricked corridors, the privileged space of action. Undertown is not simply a gothic metaphor; it is an infrastructural system connected to civic works and governed by gatekeeping, secrecy, and negotiated access.

Prest’s language is especially helpful here because it points to a Dickensian habit of translating space into readable tokens, street names, postings, documents, and labels that invite the reader to orient and judge. Simmons borrows the desire for orientation but evacuates its security. Undertown functions as a counter-archive: instead of paper traces that stabilize memory, it offers sealed

passageways, bricked-up corridors, and acoustic tests that privatize knowledge. Where Prest's paperscape suggests a city "encompassed" by representation (Prest 2016, par. 7), Simmons constructs a city whose most consequential "texts" are infrastructural and can be read only by those with the right touch, the right keys, and the right permissions. Undertown therefore becomes the spatial analogue of Collins's narration: both promise access, and both make access contingent, coercive, and unreliable.

The novel introduces Undertown through rumor and commodity. A woman in an opium den tells Dickens and Collins that Drood is "in the deepest parts of Undertown ... where the Chinees named King Lazaree provides ... the purest pure opium in the world" (Simmons 2009, 74). Knowledge of the underground arrives as information for sale, purchased with coins, and framed as access to a supplier. Undertown is thus immediately economic: a space where bodies and secrets move along routes controlled by those who profit from them.

When Dickens and Collins finally reach Lazaree's domain, Simmons emphasizes the deferral of arrival. Lazaree denies that they are in Undertown at all: "One might say that this is the foyer to ... the antechamber of the porch of the vestibule of Undertown" (Simmons 2009, 94–95). The comic recursion does more than build atmosphere. It encodes power as spatial delay. Undertown is not a place one simply enters; it is a threshold economy in which each boundary is another opportunity for negotiation, surveillance, and debt.

Dickens responds by trying to impose procedure. During a descent through sewer works, he "quickly made three parallel marks on the crumbling brick where our crude staircase opened into the sewer" so they can "find our way back" (Simmons 2009, 101). The gesture resembles detective practice, a rational attempt to preserve orientation. Yet in context, it also signals desperation. Marking the wall is not mastery of the underground; it is a confession that the city's depths refuse stable mapping. The author, whose essays and novels often move through London by confident observation, is reduced to carving a memory aid into a brick.

This shift in spatial logic is also a shift in Dickens's role. Dickens becomes a would-be cartographer of a space whose cartography is guarded. Undertown's accessibility depends on intermediaries such as Dradles, whose craft allows walls to be opened and resealed without an obvious trace. The novel repeatedly frames such knowledge as not simply technical but political: whoever controls entrances controls movement, and whoever controls movement controls what

can be known. Prest's paperscape becomes an anti-paperscape here: the city's decisive texts are not printed but built, sealed, and cut into stone.

Undertown's resistance to mapping is staged most vividly when Dickens attempts to learn a new literacy from Dradles, the cathedral mason. As the men enter the Rochester crypts, Dickens whispers, "Watch this, Wilkie! And listen! And learn", as Dradles begins tapping walls to distinguish "solid" from "hollow" (Simmons 2009, 259). Dradles's method is not visual but acoustic and tactile: knowledge is produced through vibration, echo, and trained attention. The scene matters because it inverts the cultural hierarchy that usually supports Dickens's urban mastery. Prest warns that even Dickens's surface paperscape contains an internal limit: "over this Dickensian paperscape looms the threat of illegibility", and "paper appears less the medium for words than the shroud of meaning" (Prest 2016, abstract). *Drood* literalizes that threatened illegibility by relocating decisive knowledge into a sonic underground where paper is useless, and where the author must apprentice himself to forms of expertise that cannot be translated into printed "labels" without losing their force.

Simmons links this infrastructural inversion to Dickens's own private infrastructures of secrecy. Dickens's ability to run a "Second Life" with Ellen Ternan depends on managing routes, lodgings, and knowledge distribution. Undertown becomes an exteriorization of that logic: a London where intimacy and access are always mediated by hidden channels. Rather than letting Dickens read the city, *Drood* makes the city read Dickens, mirroring his dependence on clandestine networks.

## V. Coerced Detection: Field, Surveillance, and the Collapse of the Case

Detection offers a particularly sharp lens for inversion because it sits at the intersection of ethics and knowledge. In classic detective structures, evidence produces explanation, and explanation promises a restoration of order. *Drood* borrows detective machinery only to contaminate it, turning inquiry into leverage and closure into compulsion. Chloe Wadoux summarizes a recurring pattern in neo-Victorian Dickens rewritings with unusual clarity: "the Inimitable is either presented as a detective, or as a criminal figure, or both" (Wadoux 2019, 69). Ford moves inside the same collapse when she argues that "Drood's reality is secondary to Collins's obsession with detection", which becomes "a vehicle for authorial intervention – and invention" in his competition with Dickens (Ford 2021). The key for Simmons is the final clause, "or both." Dickens, often

remembered for exposing injustice, is recast as a figure who may be implicated in the hidden economy he claims to pursue, and the very act of investigation becomes part of what makes him suspect.

Inspector Charles Field embodies this contamination. Collins imagines Field “would attempt to blackmail me beyond a mere threat to expose” his relationship with Caroline (Simmons 2009, 183). The wording is significant: blackmail is not presented as an aberration but as an expected method in Field’s professional repertoire. Investigation becomes inseparable from coercion, and coercion becomes inseparable from private life. The detective does not simply find facts; he extracts compliance by holding reputations hostage.

Field’s own claims about *Drood* also destabilize the logic of evidence. When Collins doubts that a figure like *Drood* could move through Dickens’s public readings unnoticed, Field insists, “*Drood* is a man of infinite guises” (Simmons 2009, 211). The claim immunizes the theory against falsification. If *Drood* can be anyone, then any absence of proof becomes proof of disguise. Detection collapses into paranoia: the more elusive the object, the more powerful the hypothesis.

Field’s coercion is effective because it mimics the same conversion of intimacy into evidence that structures Dickens’s celebrity. Field treats information as currency, demonstrating, through his agents’ reports and his casual recitations of Collins’s movements, that privacy is already a compromised fiction (Simmons 2009, 239). This is why Collins’s description of Dickens’s “*Game of Drood*” is so revealing: Dickens “manufactures and plays the games he enjoys” and, through “fame and force of personality”, “bullies those around him to play the game as well” (Simmons 2009, 239). Wadoux’s formulation that Dickens rewritings repeatedly make him a detective, a criminal, “or both” (Wadoux 2019, 69) helps explain the procedural stakes: in *Drood*, the detective apparatus does not simply test Dickens; it folds him into a regime of surveillance whose authority is itself coercive, making ‘truth’ indistinguishable from the power to force compliance.

At the center of that paranoia is Dickens himself. Collins’s suspicion crystallizes into a statement that collapses the suspect-detective distinction: “Dickens is *Drood*” (Simmons 2009, 236). The line is not merely sensational. It names the novel’s central inversion. Dickens, the supposed pursuer, becomes the pursued; Dickens, the guarantor of moral narrative, becomes the narrative threat. Even Field rejects the claim as “highly unlikely”, but the conversation matters because it shows how far the “case” has drifted from verifiable action. By this point, the investigation is not about identifying a criminal mastermind so much as deciding what Dickens is allowed to be.

The claim also functions as a critique of celebrity intimacy. Dickens's public authority depends on being treated as singular, recognizable, trusted, and morally intelligible. *Drood* reverses that by treating Dickens as a role that can be performed or inhabited, as if Dickens's own performative authorship makes him vulnerable to role confusion. If Dickens can mesmerize audiences through readings, if he can play moral crusader while managing scandal, then he can also be imagined as the master of a covert system. The novel's logic is brutal: performance erodes the boundary between authenticity and disguise.

## VI. Performance, Animal Magnetism, and the Violence of Authorial Intimacy

Simmons intensifies Dickens's inversion by reframing the public readings as coercive intimacy. Ferguson notes that reading culture fostered a fantasy of closeness in which "the author is every reader's domestic companion and friend" (Ferguson 1997, 2). *Drood* turns that friendly presence inside out. Collins links Dickens's stagecraft to mesmerism – "animal magnetism" (Simmons 2009, 30) – so performance becomes a technology of influence that steers feeling, suspends judgment, and recruits spectators into repeated violence.

This logic peaks when Dickens adds "Murder of Nancy" to his programme. Collins calls it "another unprecedented departure for a man of letters", testing what audiences will endure for intimacy and sensation (Simmons 2009, 474). Forster appears as the adviser who encourages the inclusion, framing it as both artistic and calamitous (Simmons 2009, 474). Authority here is not ethical representation but the capacity to stage suffering as spectacle – and to survive its fallout.

Seen in this light, the public readings become less a celebration of Dickens's art than an institution that consumes his failing body for the sake of continued access. Friends and physicians warn him, yet he persists, delivering "Murder of Nancy" with a ferocity that transfixes the hall even as it threatens collapse backstage (Simmons 2009, 49). Ferguson's formulation of the author as "domestic companion and friend" (Ferguson 1997, 2) clarifies the ethical instability of this scene: the more intimately the audience believes it possesses Dickens, the more it demands ever more intense proximity, and the more Dickens must convert suffering into spectacle to keep that proximity alive. Inversion, here, is not simply that Dickens performs cruelty; it is that the very medium through which Dickens became beloved is recoded as a mechanism that extracts, disciplines, and harms.

## VII. Unfinishedness and the Afterlife of *Edwin Drood*: Authority, Completion, and the Lime Pit

*Drood*'s final inversion turns on unfinishedness. Dickens's last novel fuels completion industries because a missing ending invites interpretive possession. De Stasio notes that unfinished narratives provoke "curiosity and investigation" (De Stasio 2012, par. 1); with Dickens, that curiosity attaches to the absent authorial sanction that would fix meaning. Hoel argues that unfinishedness makes sense only "in the context of a creative authority" and that readers pursue the author as guarantor (Hoel 2012, 4). Simmons exploits that author-function crisis by letting Collins offer "secret" access as a substitute sanction. Tomaiuolo observes that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* can feel structurally "closed" while still making full disclosure impossible (Tomaiuolo 2023, 176). *Drood* converts that paradox into atmosphere: explanation becomes compulsion, and what Frenk calls "unending Dickens" persists because closure is endlessly deferred (Frenk 2011, 140).

That is why Simmons can deploy the apparatus of mystery without granting its satisfactions. In a conventional detective economy, a missing ending would be solved; here it becomes the condition that keeps interpretation circulating. The pressure to complete, to name *Drood*, or to certify Dickens's moral status is figured as addiction: a compulsive return to a scene that will not yield closure. Unfinishedness trains explanation into desire.

Simmons uses that engine to make Dickens himself unfinished. The novel repeatedly converts the desire for a solution into an atmosphere of compulsion. Instead of stabilizing Dickens as the author who would have resolved *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Drood* places Dickens in a world where resolution is structurally undermined by unreliable narration and by the underground's refusal of stable evidence. Unfinishedness thus migrates from text to author. Dickens becomes a figure who cannot be completed into moral certainty.

A few pages later, Collins registers his own eagerness to reach "the quick-lime pit" and finish the night's business (Simmons 2009, 572). The phrasing aligns the narrative's drive for closure with bodily urgency and bathos. Completion becomes less a moral act than a logistical one: get to the pit, finish the work, go home. The language exposes the grim mechanics behind completion fantasies. Endings are made by bodies, at night, under pressure, with tools and substances.

The late chapters sharpen the link between text, body, and disposal. After Dickens's death, Collins burns his inscribed copy of *Bleak House* and insists, "The

book was the style and the style was the man" (Simmons 2009, 610), collapsing authorship into a fetish that can be possessed or purged. Domestic objects likewise become instruments: Collins carries "a small embroidered sofa pillow" that later serves as silencer and shield (Simmons 2009, 611), and he recounts smothering Martha with it before shooting through it (Simmons 2009, 516). Comfort is retooled as concealment.

Most damningly, the novel makes Collins complicit in the very violence with which he framed Dickens. Collins describes carrying "the body of Joseph Clow ... to the quick-lime pit" (Simmons 2009, 613). The moment collapses the distance between narrator and accusation. The man who began by inviting the reader to imagine Dickens dissolving a victim in lime ends by participating in a lime-pit disposal. This is inversion at its sharpest. Dickens is not exonerated, but Collins's authority to indict is structurally sabotaged by his own implication in the narrative's murder economy.

Ford's definition of neo-Victorian biofiction clarifies why *Drood* refuses the comfort of a solved mystery. If biofiction is the "reimagining" of historical lives (Ford 2014, 7), then Dickens's afterlife becomes a field of narrative choices whose stakes are ethical and political: which Dickens will be made legible, which will be suppressed, and who benefits from the version that circulates. *Drood* therefore does not simply ask whether Dickens was guilty or innocent of some secret crime. It asks what it means for a culture to demand a Dickens who can always be "known" through ever deeper access, and it shows how that demand can turn interpretive hunger into the very violence it claims to investigate.

*Drood* thus inverts Dickens through a network of reversals. Authority shifts from the canonical author to a hostile witness. Moral legibility yields to interpretive breakdown. London's readable surfaces yield to an underground governed by access and debt. Detection yields not to closure but to paranoia. And unfinishedness becomes a cultural machine that keeps Dickens present by keeping him unsettled. In Simmons's novel, Dickens is not the stable moral emblem heritage culture promises; he is the contested residue produced when celebrity, biography, and narrative desire refuse to let the dead author rest.

## Conclusion

Taken together, these inversions show that *Drood* is less interested in debunking Dickens than in modelling how Dickens's authority is manufactured and

contested. By filtering Dickens through Collins – punctured by morphine, jealousy, and hallucination – the novel makes knowing Dickens inseparable from wanting to know him. Undertown supplies the spatial analogue for that desire: a counter-city entered only through permission and debt, whereas the unfinishedness of *Edwin Drood* supplies the temporal analogue, sustaining what Frenk calls an “unending Dickens” whose afterlife persists because closure is withheld (Frenk 2011, 140). Dickens is kept alive by being kept suspect.

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## Against the Machine: An Ecofeminist Reading of E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*

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**Abstract:** E.M. Forster's 1909 short story *The Machine Stops* is a text that has traditionally been read as a dystopian tale about the dangers of mechanization and the alienation of modern life. This paper aims to revisit it through the principles expressed by ecofeminist theory during the late twentieth century, with particular attention to the frameworks of Val Plumwood, Karen J. Warren, and Vandana Shiva. The analysis argues that Forster's text anticipates many of the concerns later articulated by ecofeminism, such as the risks of the overuse of technology, the subjugation of nature, and the fragility of closed, hierarchical systems. The short story focuses on humanity's estrangement from both the natural world and the physical body. This is embodied in the contrast between the two main characters: Vashti, who represents full complicity with the Machine's values, and her son Kuno, who seeks to recover a direct relationship with the natural world. Forster envisions a society that denigrates physical contact, erases the cycles of birth and death, and renders food, air, and energy sources invisible, thereby creating the illusion of autonomy from nature. This alienation, while promising comfort and rational order, results in existential sterility and ecological vulnerability. The eventual collapse of the Machine exposes the fragility of a system that denies all ties with the natural world. In contrast, Kuno's resistance and his rediscovery of the surface world point toward a renewal of embodied existence, echoing ecofeminist calls for reconnection with nature. This analysis reconsiders the Machine not merely as a symbol for the dangers of technological dependency, but as a figure for the logic of domination – the hierarchical reasoning that legitimizes the exploitation of both nature and women – that ecofeminism identifies as simultaneously ecological and patriarchal. The collapse of the Machine at the end of the story highlights the ecofeminist suggestions for a renewed relationship with the natural world and respect for ecological limits that technological systems cannot indefinitely suppress.

**Key words:** alienation, ecological collapse, ecofeminism, E.M. Forster, technological dependency

## Introduction

Traditional critical interpretations of “The Machine Stops” (1909) have positioned this short story as an early critique of technological totalitarianism, with references to anxieties about mechanization and modernist alienation. The story’s origins lie in E.M. Forster’s intellectual disagreement with H.G. Wells’ techno-utopian vision. Forster’s biographer notes that “The Machine Stops” was conceived as a “reaction against one of the earlier heavens of H.G. Wells” (Furbank 1978, 121), especially his *A Modern Utopia* (1905), which envisioned a rationally organized World State governed by technocratic elites. Seamus Flaherty’s recent scholarship demonstrates that Forster found Wells’ centralized system to be an “abomination” – a mechanized totalitarian hierarchy that prioritized efficiency over human connection and subordinated individual autonomy to collective order (Flaherty 2020, 444). Yet, more than a century later, the text resonates with environmental and feminist thought, a path that has been insufficiently explored. While it is not an explicitly ecofeminist text, its themes of technological dependency, human alienation from nature, and the decline of people’s physical bodies allow us to read it through an ecofeminist lens. This paper offers an outline of the ecofeminist theoretical framework and then applies it to Forster’s text in order to lay out the alienation from nature and the body as central to the author’s dystopia, and finally considers how the collapse of the Machine gestures toward ecofeminist visions of renewal.

*The Machine Stops* imagines a world in which the human race has retreated underground, where each individual is entirely dependent on a vast self-sufficient technological infrastructure, known as the Machine, which provides sustenance, communication, and intellectual stimulation for its inhabitants. The story centres on Vashti, who embodies complete devotion to the Machine’s values, and her son Kuno, who begins to question the underground civilisation and yearns for direct experience with the natural world. The story imagines people living in individual self-contained pods, which they call “cells”, isolated from one another and avoiding direct physical contact; at the same time, direct experience and unmediated knowledge are replaced by abstract forms of connection, facilitated by the omnipotent Machine. Direct contact with nature is completely

rejected, while travel is discouraged as futile and eventually forbidden because “the habit was vulgar and perhaps faintly improper: it was unproductive of ideas, and had no connection with the habits that really mattered” (Forster 2021, 48). When the Machine begins to fail and civilization collapses, the reader is shown the fragility of a society that has ceded its agency to technology. Only those who have already sought the “outside” – the Earth itself – glimpse the possibility of survival.

Despite its enduring relevance, *The Machine Stops* has received comparatively limited critical attention relative to other canonical texts of the anti-utopian tradition, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The novella was situated primarily within the tradition of technological anxiety and mechanization critique. This scholarly neglect shifted dramatically during the Covid lockdowns of 2020-2021, when Forster's prescient vision of isolation and technological mediation suddenly acquired contemporary relevance. Fordoński's (2025) comprehensive bibliography documents a marked surge in scholarship on *The Machine Stops* from 2020 onward, reflecting the story's newfound resonance with pandemic experiences. Francesca Pierini, for example, examines how the story's depiction of screen-mediated communication and enforced physical separation eerily anticipated pandemic-era online education, arguing that Forster identifies the “imponderable bloom”, i.e., the ineffable quality of embodied human presence, that digital interfaces cannot replicate (Pierini 2020, 285-289). Building on this technological critique, Emine Şentürk analyses the underground dwellers' relationship to the Machine through Günther Anders' concept of “Promethean shame”, or the human sense of inadequacy before one's own technological creations, demonstrating how Forster's characters internalize their inferiority to the machine's capabilities (Şentürk 2023, 167). This scholarly interest has been accompanied by media coverage, with *The Conversation* and the BBC highlighting the story's relevance to pandemic lockdown experiences. However, even within this recent wave of scholarship, sustained ecofeminist readings of the text remain scarce.

Earlier scholarship examined the novella's participation in what Krishan Kumar identifies as the modern anti-utopian tradition's response to industrialism. Since “industrialism had remained bound to the interests of the dominant social groups” (Kumar 1987, 232), ecological thought impacted Western societies in the sense that it “has always tended towards utopia, though not necessarily in the formal sense” (Kumar 1987, 415). More recent readings have explored the story's

prescience in relation to digital culture, networked surveillance; as Pettman observes, Forster's text anticipates the dangers of "midwifing our nascent electronic nervous system" (Pettman 2021, 11). However, despite this growing body of scholarship, a comprehensive ecofeminist analysis of *The Machine Stops* specifically – one that would situate the text's interrogation of technological totalitarianism within the broader framework of patriarchal domination over both women and nature – remains absent, and this paper aims to address that critical lacuna.

### **Ecofeminism: Theoretical Framework**

According to Greta Gaard's definition, ecofeminism is a framework that recognizes the interconnected and reinforcing oppression of both the natural world and human communities, stemming from a patriarchal culture that emphasizes separation and domination (Gaard 1993, 1-2). At its core lies the recognition that patriarchal and capitalist systems construct dualisms – man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body – that devalue the second term and legitimize its exploitation. Karen J. Warren (2000, 24) further develops this theoretical position by identifying the "logic of domination", a structure of hierarchical reasoning that not only posits an upper and a lower tier, but also provides the moral justification for the subordination of the "lower" term. For Warren, the conceptual connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature is simultaneously empirical and philosophical, requiring a sustained ethical response (Warren 2000, 15). Warren's exposition takes a specific argumentative form: first, a value-hierarchical dualism is established in which one term is positioned as superior to another; second, the author argues that such superiority confers the right to dominate; and third, the domination of one term by the other is thereby moralized and legitimized (Warren 2000, 46-47). Most importantly, Warren argues that this logic is not descriptive but normative, because rather than reflecting hierarchies, it constructs them. Consequently, any feminist theory that fails to address the domination of nature remains conceptually incomplete, since the same logical structure subordinates women and nature simultaneously. Warren calls this a "boundary condition" for ecofeminist philosophy, i.e., a necessary criterion that distinguishes ecofeminism from liberal feminist positions that leave the human/nature hierarchy unexamined (Warren 2000, 66).

Val Plumwood further refines the analysis of dualisms promoted by Western thought – such as human/nature and male/female – which produce not only

ecological destruction but also gendered, racialized, and class-based forms of oppression. The author identifies five interlinked logical features through which dualistic hierarchies are constructed and maintained: backgrounding, whereby the contribution of the subordinated term to life is rendered invisible or denied; radical exclusion, which exaggerates differences between the poles; incorporation, which defines the subordinated term exclusively in relation to the dominant; instrumentalism, which reduces the dominated to a means for the dominant's ends; and homogenization, which treats the dominated as an undifferentiated and interchangeable mass. Taken together, these five features constitute what Plumwood calls the "master identity," a mode of subjectivity that constructs its freedom precisely through the denial of its dependence on what it dominates (Plumwood 1993, 48-60). All five of these terms, as will be demonstrated below, are inscribed in the Machine's relation to both the natural world and the bodies of the human inhabitants of the world it controls. Similarly, Carolyn Merchant's foundational study *The Death of Nature* (1980) traces how early modern science and capitalism produced a mechanistic worldview in which nature was reconceived as inert matter to be dominated and exploited. Vandana Shiva (1988) later argued that this mechanization of life was inseparable from the marginalization of women, who were associated with the natural and the bodily.

It is equally important to acknowledge that ecofeminism is not a monolithic discourse. By the mid-1980s, certain strands of ecofeminism – particularly those associated with spiritual and cultural ecofeminism – were criticized for essentializing the woman-nature connection, inadvertently risking expanding the very dualisms the framework sought to dismantle. Christine Cuomo argues that hypothesising women as having consistent features across all manner of diversity plays into patriarchal logic. Instead, she proposed a rigorous, non-essentialist ecological feminism grounded in an ethic that emphasized dynamic, relational identities rather than fixed categories. According to her, "much of the history of Western philosophy" was modelled by "a lack of attention to the diversity of women's experiences" (Cuomo 1998, 117).

Forster's *The Machine Stops* resonates with these feminist concerns, as the Machine functions as both metaphor and apparatus of the mechanistic worldview: it is the concrete manifestation of Merchant's world-machine (1989, 20), a totalizing system that replaces organic interdependence with technology. For instance, when Vashti recoils at the prospect of leaving her cell, Forster writes that she "shrank back into the room, and the wall closed up again" (Forster 2021,

22), literalising the sealed, womb-like enclosure that mediates all contact with the world beyond. This architectural metaphor (the cell as protective membrane) embodies Merchant's mechanistic worldview made concrete.

Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality," developed in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), is another theoretical concept that can be applied to an ecofeminist reading of Forster's text. Alaimo argues that the human body is not a bounded, autonomous entity but one that comprises continuous flows of matter that cross the threshold between self and environment as "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo 2010, 2). Trans-corporeality thus reframes bodily porosity (the organism's susceptibility to environmental toxins, climates, and ecological systems) not as vulnerability to be overcome through technological mediation but as an ontological condition that demands acknowledgement. This concept is directly applicable to Forster's dystopia: the sealed architecture of the underground cells enacts a systematic denial of the body's constitutive permeability. By mechanically processing air and food, eliminating all unmediated sensory contact with the natural world, and substituting technological mediation for ecological embeddedness, the Machine performs a radical fantasy of bodily autonomy. Alaimo's framework reveals that it is precisely the illusion of self-sufficient, machine-serviced, bounded-body that renders the civilization fragile. Trans-corporeality cannot ultimately be suppressed, and when the Machine's systems fail, the bodies that have been sealed off from their ecological conditions of existence prove incapable of survival.

### **The Machine and the Logic of Domination**

The Machine in Forster's story enforces a radical separation between humanity and the natural world. The story describes the surface of the Earth as being abandoned, hostile, and unnecessary, since all needs are met underground through the provision of the almighty Machine. As Vashti insists, there is no life left on the surface of earth and that is why it has been abandoned. This denial exemplifies what Plumwood calls the "backgrounding" of nature, i.e., the erasure of the ecological foundations that sustain life, replaced by an illusion of autonomy.

The logic of control and abstraction is enacted by the omniscient Machine since all knowledge is mediated exclusively through its communication system. People communicate through screens, exchanging ideas and lecturing on various

topics they have never directly experienced themselves. Travel is discouraged, and eventually forbidden, as unnecessary and subversive. Some dwellers of this underground world have even started to worship the Machine as an infallible authority, echoing Merchant's account of how the mechanistic worldview supplanted organic models of nature with mechanized, hierarchical ones (Merchant 1980, 193). In this regard, the reflection articulated by Kuno shortly before the tragic conclusion of the story is particularly relevant, warranting extensive quotation:

Cannot you see . . . that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it. The Machine develops – but not on our lies. The Machine proceeds – but not to our goal. We only exist as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could work without us, it would let us die. (Forster 2021, 42– 43)

Forster's story is set in a world where humans are no longer in contact with the surface of the Earth, thus illustrating a complete severance from the natural world, a central concern to ecofeminism. The all-encompassing and controlling Machine exploits and dominates the environment, and although people are under the impression that the Machine takes care of them by providing the human population with everything necessary for a comfortable lifestyle, it actually oppresses and controls them. Because they receive everything they need with just a push of a button, the inhabitants of the underground world have become sluggish, detached from their bodies, losing self-reliance and the ability to interact physically with the world. As a result, they are unable to grasp the importance of the essential role of nature in sustaining life.

Kuno longs for the physical world and starts yearning for a return to a more authentic and natural connection with the Earth. When he returns from a visit to the outside world, he tells his mother that he “felt that those hills had called with incalculable force to men in the past, and that men had loved them. Now they sleep – perhaps for ever. They commune with humanity in dreams” (Forster 2021, 42). The fact that Vashti, his mother, is detached from any maternal intuition and

completely lacks an emotional bond with her son, stands as a metaphor for the decline of the feminine principle – life, nurturing, interconnectedness – which is sacrificed for the sake of a sterile and artificial-coded technological system.

A note of interpretative caution must be mentioned here. It is Kuno, a man, who seeks and achieves reconnection with the natural world, while Vashti, a woman, embodies complicity with the Machine's logic of domination. This configuration does not straightforwardly align women with nature in the manner of the more essentialist strands of cultural ecofeminism. Kuno's transgression is best understood not as the expression of a masculine identification with nature but as an act of resistance to the logic of domination itself. His reconnection with the surface, embodied in his actions of climbing the hills, breathing unfiltered air, experiencing the weight and texture of the earth, constitutes a practical refusal of Plumwood's five modes of dualistic reasoning, enacted at the level of the body. Vashti, conversely, has fully internalized the Machine's hierarchical values, demonstrating that complicity with systems of domination is not genetically or essentially determined but is the product of ideological formation. This dimension of Forster's text in fact strengthens its ecofeminist relevance, illustrating Plumwood's argument that the "master identity" is a socially constructed position available, in principle, to any subject who identifies with the dominant term of the dualism (Plumwood 1993, 57).

When the Machine finally collapses in a huge explosion that wipes out all of the underground inhabitants, its perpetual hum stops to make way for "the silence that is the voice of the earth and of the generations who have gone" (Forster 2021, 60). This can be interpreted as a return to nature. In order to regain its primordial connection with the Earth, humanity must die first. Kuno's final act, which stands as a metaphor for his life in death, is that of kissing his mother for the first and last time: "I am dying – but we touch, we talk, not through the Machine . . . We have come back to our own. We die, but we have recaptured life" (Forster 2021, 62).

The structure of the Machine mirrors patriarchal domination, not only in its hierarchy, but especially in the suppression of dissent. When Kuno starts speaking about the outside world and his intention to visit it, his mother treats his words as heresy: "She knew that he was fated. If he did not die today he would die tomorrow. There was not room for such a person in the world. And with her pity disgust mingled. She was ashamed at having borne such a son. . . The very hair that disfigured his lip showed that he was reverting to some savage type. On atavism the Machine can have no mercy" (Forster 2021, 39).

Kuno's desire for a direct, physical, embodied experience with nature on the surface of the Earth is marginalized and dismissed as irrational. The philosophy promoted in the underground world is that experiences gained through direct engagement with the natural environment are useless because they lead to "first-hand ideas" which, in fact, do not exist. The most important are not those ideas produced as a result of physical impressions, but the ones that are "second-hand" and thus "removed from that disturbing element – direct observation" (Forster 2021, 49). Additionally, since "terrestrial facts must be ignored" (Forster 2021, 50), everything related to nature must also be ignored. Thus, in humanity's desire for comfort "it had over-reached itself. It had exploited the riches of nature too. Quietly and complacently, it was sinking into decadence, and progress had come to mean the progress of the Machine" (Forster 2021, 52).

Yet, when Kuno clandestinely travels outside and gets the chance to experience the stars, the air, the hills, he connects with nature; this triggers a revelation, which he shares with his mother. Her response is blunt and in accordance with the dictates of the Machine: "I dislike the stars" to which Kuno remains resolute and replies "I want to see these stars again. They are curious stars" (Forster 2021, 16). Forster contrasts Vashti's sterile intellectualism with Kuno's longing for a connection to the Earth. After walking on the hills outside, Kuno restores a sense of continuity with ecological and historical life beyond the Machine: "I felt that those hills had called with incalculable force to men in the past, and that men had loved them. Now they sleep – perhaps for ever. They commune with humanity in dreams. Happy the man, happy the woman, who awakes the hills of Wessex. For though they sleep, they will never die" (Forster 2021, 42). This invocation of Wessex evokes Thomas Hardy's literary geography, a rural England that Hardy documented as vanishing under industrialisation, lending Kuno's vision an elegiac quality that resonates with Hardy's own concerns about the loss of traditional life. This moment resonates with ecofeminist calls to revalue embodied experience. Although the underground civilisation appears to be autonomous, in reality it depends on the Earth's resources; thus, the idea of self-sufficiency becomes an illusion.

### **Alienation from Nature and the Degradation of the Human Body**

Central to Forster's dystopia is the alienation from both the natural world and the physical, sensorial dimension of existence, which, in the case of the underground world, leads to a degradation not only of people's emotions, but also of

their material bodies. This alienation is not incidental but constitutive of the Machine's oppressive logic. To understand Forster's vision through an ecofeminist framework, it is crucial to trace how the text portrays this alienation and how it exposes the costs of denying a connection with nature.

In *The Machine Stops*, physical touch is considered distasteful; for Forster's characters, physical contact becomes a site of discomfort and even revulsion. Vashti, who is the epitome of the values promoted by the underground world dominated by the Machine, repeatedly shudders at the idea of physical proximity to other bodies. When her son Kuno asks her to visit him in person, she protests: "But I can see you!", "What more do you want?" (Forster 2021, 15). In her logic, which is modelled according to the ideological norm of the Machine culture, the mediated image suffices; the presence of bodies is unnecessary and even burdensome. Bodies are immobilised in isolated cells, their functions outsourced to mechanical devices. This resonates with Merchant's analysis of mechanistic science, which reconceives the body as a machine and nature as inert matter (Merchant 1980, 189).

Bodies are passive, immobile, serviced by mechanical arms. At the beginning of the story, Vashti is described as a "swaddled lump of flesh", a woman "with a face as white as a fungus" (Forster 2021, 13). She barely moves from her armchair and has everything delivered to her cell by the robotic arms of the Machine. Vashti recoils from the very idea of leaving her cell at her son's request to see him in person. The Machine displaces the body's functions with technological substitutes, mirroring the ecofeminist criticism of the idea of mechanization as a means of rendering the organic obsolete.

Forster's description of Vashti's face as "white as a fungus" requires closer analysis as it is an indication of the Machine's deeper logic. The fungal simile is not incidental as fungi subsist by breaking down and absorbing organic matter, thriving in conditions of darkness and decomposition. Forster thus figures Vashti not merely as bodily diminished but as a creature adapted to a system that feeds upon the dissolution of organic life rather than sustaining it. Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality is illuminating here; Vashti's body, sealed within its cell and serviced by mechanical arms, is a body systematically obstructed from the material flows that constitute living organisms. The pallor of her face, drained of colour by the absence of sunlight, wind, and outdoor air, materializes at the level of individual physiology the cost of that hinderance.

Physical exercise is abhorred because "it was a demerit to be muscular" (Forster 2021, 34). To take matters even further, the dwellers of the underground

world perform a reversed Spartan ritual, in which babies are checked upon their birth, and “all who promised undue strength were destroyed” because “it would have been no true kindness to let an athlete live” since “he would have never been happy in that state of life which the Machine had called him. He would have yearned for trees to climb, rivers to bathe in, meadows and hills against which he might measure his body.” Thus, the schism from nature is total because “man must be adapted to his surroundings” (Forster 2021, 34). When Kuno realizes that by breaking all ties with the surface of the Earth humanity has lost itself, he becomes determined to recover at least part of it. He starts doing physical exercises that make him stronger and ultimately allow him to reach the surface, or what he calls the “outside” world. By reconnecting with nature for a brief moment, Kuno understands that people have also lost the measure of themselves. In other words, they had lost the self-awareness of their own value: “Man is the measure” for his “feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is lovable and desirable and strong” (Forster 2021, 35).

Forster's partial deployment of Protagoras' maxim, “Man is the measure of all things”, is significant here. The original Protagorean formulation is radically anthropocentric and relativist, placing human perception at the centre of all value and truth. Protagoras' maxim positions humanity as the arbiter of reality itself, with individual human perception determining what exists and what has value. Yet in Forster's context, Kuno reclaims the maxim not to assert human dominion over nature but to restore embodied, sensory knowledge of the world – feet as measure of distance, hands as measure of ownership, the body as measure of what is lovable. This represents an inversion: where Protagoras' maxim places abstract human consciousness at the centre of epistemology, Forster relocates “measure” in the material, sensory body engaged in direct encounter with the physical world. Kuno's vision is thus anti-anthropocentric in its implications as it insists that meaningful measurement emerges not from human sovereignty over nature but from immersion within it. In this reading, Forster transforms potentially dominating anthropocentrism into an embodied ecology of knowledge, anticipating an ecofeminist principle which suggests that genuine understanding comes not from abstracting ourselves from nature, but from recognizing that our physical existence depends on and connects us to the Earth.

The estrangement from nature is absolute. The Earth's surface is described as barren, hostile, and unnecessary or, in Vashti's words, as “only dust and

mud, no advantage” (Forster 2021, 18), reinforcing the narrative promoted by the Machine that life is possible only within its controlled environment. For her, the Machine provides everything, but this also means that everything is controlled by the Machine: meals arrive mechanically, without origin or context; air is purified and circulated through hidden systems; users do not see the sources of their sustenance and in fact, they deny that sources exist outside the Machine. Nature, therefore, becomes redundant. When the Machine fails, this illusion disintegrates, and the dependence on invisible systems reveals itself. It is not dependence on nature, but the Machine’s promise of autonomy, that becomes radical vulnerability.

The idea that the food supply is invisible deserves closer attention as an ecofeminist concern in its own right. In Forster’s underground world, food arrives pre-processed and standardized, with no discernible origin, no labour of cultivation, no seasonal variation, and no connection to soil, water, or the bodies of other organisms. As Forster writes, “there were buttons and switches everywhere – buttons to call for food, for music, for clothing” (Forster 2021, 18); food appeared at the press of a button as “the Machine. . . feeds us and clothes us and houses us. . . the Machine is omnipotent, eternal; blessed is the Machine” (Forster 2021, 51). This represents what Shiva identifies as the systematic erasure of ecological and subsistence knowledge, a process she terms “mal-development”; this mode of development renders productive ecological knowledge invisible in order to keep its subjects dependent on centralized technological provision (Shiva 1988, 6). In Forster’s novella, the underground inhabitants have not only lost knowledge of how food is produced; they have lost the very capacity to recognize this loss as a loss. When the Machine begins to fail and food deliveries become erratic, the population reveals itself as entirely incapable of responding since they lack not only practical skills but the very conceptual frameworks that would allow them to understand what sustenance requires. This is Plumwood’s “backgrounding” literalized: the ecological foundations of life have been so thoroughly rendered invisible that their sudden reappearance, in the form of scarcity, can only be experienced as catastrophe.

The alienation from nature and the degradation of the physical body are not simply a cultural oddity in Forster’s dystopian world; it is the source of its downfall as they reveal the fragility of the Machine’s closed system. Ecofeminism argues that attempting to dominate nature will ultimately undermine humanity, as ecological interdependence cannot be erased especially since “nature’s

life" becomes a "*precondition* [original emphasis] for human survival" while the "integrity of inter-connectedness in nature" becomes a "*precondition for life*" (Shiva 1988, 45). Forster dramatizes this principle in the breakdown of the Machine: once the relation to nature is denied, collapse becomes inevitable. When its systems falter, humanity has no resilience. The collapse of the Machine plunges civilization into chaos, leading readers to think about the revenge of nature. Lights fail, air grows unbreathable, food is no longer delivered, and communication ceases. As a result, the collapse exposes the illusion of self-sufficiency and the violence of abstraction. The Machine, like Merchant's mechanistic worldview, is revealed to be finite, fragile, and dependent on the very ecological processes it sought to displace. Furthermore, it could be argued that Forster's novella anticipates Shiva's principle that, as long as nature and the Earth remain inert, the very conditions of human survival become endangered. Humanity can survive only by promoting "living cultures" which "are based on the dignity of and respect of all life, human and nonhuman", "cultures which do not promote life-destroying lifestyles or consumption and production patterns, or the overuse and exploitation of resources" (Shiva 2006, 11). In other words, the more humanity denies Earth, the more fragile its survival becomes. At the same time, Shiva mentions the necessity of an Earth Democracy whose principles are based on the ideas that "we are members of the earth family, our deepest identity is our earth identity, and our highest duty is to protect all life on earth" (Shiva 2006, 97).

From an ecofeminist perspective, this collapse is not merely apocalyptic but revelatory. It illustrates an existential crisis, as human life loses its meaning without a connection to nature. Vashti and her peers devote themselves to interminable lectures on topics varying from Australian music to the French Revolution and the sea, things that no inhabitant of the underground civilisation has directly experienced. These are hollow performances, disconnected from reality. The Machine's promise of comfort yields only sterility. The text dramatizes the consequences of alienation while opening the possibility of renewal. In the final scene, Kuno tells Vashti that humanity has learnt its lesson and that even though the machine stops, humanity survives because there are still people who have rediscovered and embraced the outside world, patiently waiting for the era of the Machine to come to an end. The Earth, once denied, reasserts itself as the ultimate ground of life.

The ambiguity of Forster's ending deserves further attention from an ecofeminist perspective. The "Homeless" (the people who have survived on the surface of the Earth) are evoked by Kuno in his final speech but are never directly

represented in the narrative. The reader receives no description of their communities, their practices, or the relation they have with the natural world. This representational silence is significant. Thus, Forster appears to point toward ecological renewal without being able – or perhaps willing – to narrate it from within the discursive framework the Machine has established. This parallels a change that ecofeminist theorists have themselves identified related to the difficulty of articulating positive visions of ecological interdependence within and against conceptual vocabularies saturated by the logic of domination. As Warren argues, ecofeminist ethics is not merely critique but construction, requiring new narratives of care, trust, and kinship capable of grounding alternative relations with the natural world (Warren 2000, 110). That Forster's text gestures towards, but does not develop, this alternative may itself be read as symptomatic of the limits that the logic of domination places on what can be imagined, a limitation that lends the story its peculiarly melancholic, yet cautionary character.

## Conclusion

While E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* predates the formalization of ecofeminism, the story allows for an ecofeminist interpretation since the collapse of humanity is generated by the disconnection from nature as a result of technological dependency and the oppression of the natural world. The systemic marginalization of nature is closely connected with the appreciation of technology and the suppression of emotion and physical contact. The story's conclusion, where the Machine collapses and the remaining humans realize the importance of connection to the natural world, can be seen as an ecofeminist call for a more holistic, life-reaffirming system that integrates rather than exploits.

As Pettman points out, E.M. Forster's text, even though published more than one hundred years ago, anticipates and describes in its dystopian scenario our own world and warns us of the dangers generated by technology overuse. As we ponder whether a symbiotic relationship between our real lives and the online ones is dangerous or beneficial, we "may indeed still be at the beginning of the story that Forster recounts" and that the real nightmarish scenario would be that the "Machine has not stopped at all, but is only just beginning to really hum" (Pettman 2021, 12).

Ecofeminism emphasizes renewal through reconnection and interdependence with nature. Forster's text, though grim and apocalyptic in its depiction of the dissolution of civilization, indicates the possibility of what Shiva calls an

"earth democracy," a politics grounded in sustainability and respect for nature. The survivors will not be those who cling to the abstraction but those who seek to reconnect with the Earth.

By rejecting embodied existence, the Machine culture attempts to transcend what it perceives as the vulnerability of dependence on nature. Yet Forster reveals the cost of this fantasy: bodies atrophy and the richness of the emotions derived from physical proximity is all lost. Read through an ecofeminist lens, *The Machine Stops* becomes an intentional but cautionary tale about what happens when technology outgrows its purpose and begins to govern life rather than serve it. It reminds us that the Earth exists beyond abstraction and that humanity needs to turn again to the outside – the ground of life itself.

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# Audio Monsters: Cosmic Horror and Inhuman Beings in *The Magnus Archives*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The following analysis aims to showcase the ways in which the podcast *The Magnus Archives* (2016–2021) incorporates various elements of cosmic horror storytelling and the tradition of horror radio drama to portray the subject of monstrosity and becoming inhuman. The article presents the origins of audio drama that influenced the creation of modern-day podcast fiction and its role in constructing a recognisable image of a monster further developed in the realm of podcasting. Through combining the modern technical possibilities of aural production with a cosmic horror narrative, *The Magnus Archives* offers a contemporary approach to inhumanity. The podcast follows the Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute and his team who uncover the hidden truths about the dangers of the world they live in while becoming intertwined with the evil forces they seek to defeat. Throughout the story, the characters face various interpersonal conflicts that show the physical and psychological changes resulting from their experience with supernatural entities. These discoveries lead the Archival team to the forces of power beyond their comprehension that challenge the notion of what makes one human, ultimately leading them to confront their morality. By constructing a narrative that places the characters in situations characterised by extreme conditions, the podcast encourages the listeners to challenge their own beliefs and uncertainties. Due to its modern approach to the technical possibilities of audio drama, *The Magnus Archives* provides a story that offers an interaction between the tradition of horror storytelling and the modern existential view of monstrosity which explores the subject of survival and choice.

**Keywords:** horror podcast, cosmic horror, audio drama, monsters, existentialism

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## Introduction

The history of the relationship between cosmic horror and audio drama is one that can be considered as interconnected. Cosmic horror's beginnings are commonly associated with the writings of H. P. Lovecraft which depict monsters beyond human understanding. Ralickas (2007, 364) describes cosmic horror as "that fear and awe we feel when confronted by phenomena beyond our comprehension". This notion reflects the impressions of early radio when the format was still developing. The rise of cosmic horror coincides with the emergence and subsequent popularity of radio and radio drama as a medium, both of which later became an inspiration for horror podcasts. As such many modern horror podcasts combine the elements of traditional horror radio dramas with current technological possibilities to create stories both relatable to modern audiences and accessible on streaming platforms all around the world. An example of such fusion is the podcast *The Magnus Archives* (2016–2021). Written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J. Newall, the podcast tells the story of a fictional institution dedicated to the research concerning supernatural experiences and events. Functioning outside of the governmental structure, the Magnus Institute conducts interviews with those who came into contact with supernatural creatures and collects items that seem to be affected by paranormal forces. The main objective of the Institute, however, is to sustain the patron of the organisation – an evil representation of the endless pursuit of knowledge. This purpose is deliberately hidden from the workers to trap them under a contract that cannot be terminated. The podcast follows Jonathan Sims, the Head Archivist, and his team as they record statements, navigate the mysteries surrounding the Institute, and face the question of what makes one a monster. Through the implementation of sound effects and the discussion surrounding the complexity of choice, *The Magnus Archives* showcases the modern horror approach to humanity and monstrosity as a spectrum rather than opposing ideas.

## Monsters of the past and the present

When the tradition of radio drama first began to emerge, horror stories evoke the interest of the audience. Due to the nature of horror storytelling, the radio was often seen as the superior format as it was able to convey mystery through the usage of sound effects and the lack of visual cues (Cantril and Allport 1935, 232).

The popularity of aural horror continued to rise as the radio entered its golden era. According to Pavlik (2017, 1) the Golden Age of radio in the United States is considered to have lasted “[f]rom the 1920s to the 1950s”, while Chignell (2019, 1) recognises the years between 1920 and 1965 as the time of the golden era of radio in the United Kingdom. As a global phenomenon, the radio connected people across the ocean as a source of entertainment for people of all ages. Similarly, the interest in horror was shared by people regardless of gender or age and due to that “[i]n some homes [...] crime and horror programs were strictly rationed or entirely forbidden, and in other settings, the family listened together for mutual assurance” (Barfield 1996, 158). During this time the radio offered a variety of horror programming often inspired by classic Gothic novels such as the adaptation of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) directed by Orson Welles in 1938 or Suspense’s 1952 adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Although the monsters depicted in radio drama differed in their origins and personalities, there was a tendency towards portraying an image of a monster as an evil force causing destruction and existing outside the natural order.

Then podcast culture arose in the early 2000s, the pop culture image of a monster had undergone a variety of changes. Due to the fact that multi-layered approaches in fiction were steadily increasing, the figure of a monster became more humanised compared to previous depictions (Erle and Hendry 2020, 1). At the same time the format of podcasting was adapting new approaches to storytelling supported by the rise of streaming services and the accessibility of recording equipment (Roose 2014). As the medium has changed, so has its approach to horror. Bottomley (2015, 183) highlights *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–present) as the podcast that brought back radio drama into the consciousness of contemporary audiences by implementing “scripted, dramatized serial narrative that is written, performed, and produced to be heard” common for oral storytelling. The podcast is focused on the character of a radio host – Cecil Gershwin Palmer – as he informs his listeners about different, commonly paranormal, events taking place in a small town of Night Vale. Hancock (2018, 38) recognises that for some the domestication of horror within the community of Night Vale residents offers “the comforting semblance of a wished-for home”, showing a new perception of fear and the supernatural visible in modern media. Owing to its incorporation of humour and music, *Welcome to Night Vale* has since proved influential in the scope of horror podcasts.

While radio-inspired programming experienced a revival, cosmic horror gained new popularity due to audio possibilities of storytelling. Littles (2023,

147) notes the audience possesses “a desire to have such intimate connections with horror”, which can be fulfilled by interacting with horror audio media. As the relationship between cosmic horror and audio drama is one that allows both forms to thrive due to the lack of visual representation, the aural format is used to further the mystery of horror characteristic for its cosmic imagery. Cosmic horror entities and monsters can therefore retain their incomprehensible nature by only appearing through sound. This approach results in every individual listener having to imagine the visual expression of characters present in the narrative instead of relying on a provided image. The lack of observed image has been noted to be a strength of audio horror (McMurtry 2015, 50). In view of this dynamic, cosmic horror encompasses this capability as it invites abstract conceptualizations of monstrosity impossible to visualise. The role of a monster, therefore, is to function as an extension of internal fear connected to the loss of power, rather than existing as a separate entity.

One of the most popular aspects of cosmic horror storytelling is the way in which unknown forces impact one’s identity. The idea of the convergence between human nature and monstrous cosmic powers has been depicted by H. P. Lovecraft as an impossible battle. Lovecraft’s characters struggle with their desires to uncover the mysteries of their reality while becoming overtaken by the power they are unable to understand and defeat despite their correlation with humankind. Describing the supposed appearance of Cthulhu, Miller (2011, 126–127) states that “here is a thing as alien as any extraterrestrial visitor from across the unfathomable distances of deep space, yet as human as ourselves”. As Miller explains, this relationship between the alien and the human helps to combine the fear of intellectual inferiority of human beings and the bodily discomfort of exploring the physical form beyond human recognition.

Similarly to *The Magnus Archives*, Lovecraft’s leading characters are often scholars who wish to broaden humanity’s knowledge. *At The Mountains of Madness* (1936) depicts an expedition that discovers a civilization of species called shoggoths, who pose a danger to humanity. The novella showcases the dark side of the pursuit of knowledge and becomes a warning to future researchers. As pointed out by Kneale (2007, 112), Antarctica was yet to experience an intensified research interest and so to Lovecraft and the contemporary reader it would appear as a mysterious land, furthering the suspension of disbelief and showing the ways in which knowledge becomes a dangerous and corrupting force capable of altering one’s identity, causing madness in the process. The podcast

approaches the subject of ancient beings through the introduction of the Entities – immortal forces controlling the world from the shadows. While Lovecraftian beings tend to be present in a singular space, the forces of *The Magnus Archives* are ever present for those aware of them. Through their powers, the Entities shape reality according to their will.

The power of affecting one's psyche is one commonly explored in Lovecraftian writings. *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) portrays human lack of agency when confronted with ancient forces that possess power beyond comprehension and the possible reactions to being presented with it. The short story's protagonist – Francis Wayland Thurston reacts to the information with curiosity and attempts to research the origins of the stories he had come across. He contacts various other investigators and a victim of a mysterious creature named Gustaf Johansen. Johansen's recollection of the encounter with Cthulhu leads Thurston to fear for his own life as he realises he may become another victim. This desire to escape the monster is contrasted with the cult of The Great Ones, which hopes for the release of Cthulhu and worships his existence. While discussing the role of identity in the works of Lovecraft, Ralickas (2007, 365) divides the possible outcomes of contact with the cosmic horror into three categories:

With its identity and the foundations of its culture destroyed, the subject who experiences cosmic horror always succumbs to one of three comparably dreadful fates, judging from the standpoint of a balanced, rational mind: insanity, death, or the embracing of its miscegenated and no longer human condition.

The examples mentioned in the previous point represent these notions, as the members of the Antarctica expedition are either killed in time of its duration or return changed. Having become terrified of the consequences of their curiosity, they are no longer capable of behaving in the same way they used to. The cult of Cthulhu and Thorton's research methods show the similarity between accepting the unknown powers and losing oneself in fear as both approaches can be considered insanity. This idea of limited possible outcomes functions as the basis for the plot and character development throughout the events depicted in *The Magnus Archives*, as within the podcast the monstrous Entities controlling the world are capable of changing the physical form of the characters as well as their psyche. Thus, the identity of the characters is affected by the forces they cannot

control and the extended contact with the powers leads either to madness, death or to loss of humanity. The notion of becoming inhuman is explored through the character of Jonathan Sims who becomes a servant to one of the Entities and the patron of the Institute – the Eye.

### **Identity and agency in the realm of cosmic horror podcast**

The worship of the monstrous unknown is one of the leading themes of *The Magnus Archives*. Through the usage of existential framework the podcast explores a variety of characters that may be regarded as immoral or monstrous without being classified as traditional monsters. As such *The Magnus Archives* offers an exploration of the characters who become mad upon the contact with the horror, those who die in their pursuit, and the ones who become a part of the system themselves. According to one of the characters – Gerard Keay (MAG 111, 23: 52–25: 58), within the world of the podcast there are fourteen Entities that survive by being the fears of all living creatures. The Entities are divided based on the characteristics of the particular fear they seek and embody. One of the Entities depicted in the podcast is the embodiment of the fear of insanity referred to as The Spiral (MAG 111, 26: 30–26: 38). Those who encounter it often lose their identity and either become its servants or struggle with their sense of reality. One example is a creature known as The Distortion that merged with a young researcher called Michael Shelley, thus creating an amalgamation of a monster that embodies lying and manipulation, and a human being who slowly loses his sanity and ceases to exist as an individual. When The Distortion chooses Helen Richardson as its next victim, the identity of Michael is erased and replaced by Helen's. Although Helen appears to be capable of withstanding The Distortion's influence, it is later shown that the distinction between the two has disappeared.

In addition to monsters and the Entities, which can be categorised as typical cosmic horror monsters that use humanity in order to sustain themselves, the podcast features a selection of their worshippers with powers bestowed upon them referred to as the Avatars. The Avatars possess a limited scope of powers in exchange for their loyalty towards an Entity. One of the first Avatars introduced in the series is Mike Crew who is the servant of The Vast. As the Vast manifests the fear of heights, Mike is able to manipulate his victim's perception of space to simulate falling, inducing emotional distress in the process (MAG 091, 3: 32–3: 43). At the same time, he is able to live alongside regular people without causing

harm if he so desires. This example shows that the Avatars exist on the boundary between what is considered to be a human being and what is seen as a monster. While they are capable of aimless destruction, the Avatars differ from monsters in the traditional understanding due to their human form. Although their bodies may undergo changes often related to their powers, many of them remain relatively physically unchanged, such as Mike, whose only distinctive feature is a scar from his childhood before he made the choice to devote himself to The Vast. The seemingly human form of the character provides a contrast with his psychological state as he enjoys trapping people in environments that terrify them and make them realise their own insignificance within the universe. The behaviour exhibited by Mike resembles that of a traditional monster due to the fact that his actions function as entertainment rather than a requirement for survival.

The presence of the Avatars furthers the discussion surrounding the subject of monstrosity as it foregrounds an existential dimension of life and its meaning, especially when taking into consideration the subject of agency and of their behaviour towards the Entities and the harm they cause. The character of Jonathan encompasses the intricacies of choice in the face of horror. While his life has been shaped by the forces outside his control, in order to satisfy his personal need for knowledge, Jonathan consistently chooses curiosity even when it causes harm to himself and others. Despite that he attempts to retain his humanity and is willing to sacrifice himself in order to save others from suffering. As the protagonist and one of the most powerful figures within the realm of the podcast, Jonathan represents an image of an existential struggle:

Existentialists like to say that man is in anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility. (Sartre 2007, 25)

Jonathan's life during and after his internal change into the Avatar is marked by suffering. If he refuses to satisfy his patron, he will likely die of starvation, but if he follows his instincts, he will hurt innocent people. Despite his attempts to remain human, he can no longer return to his previous state before becoming marked by the powers. At the same time, Jonathan does not want to embrace

the life of a monster. As the Archivist, he feels responsibility for his crew: their safety and humanity even when he prioritises his job over their wishes.

The contrast between his behaviour and inner convictions is noticeable both in the beginning of the podcast and in its latter parts when his power grows stronger. This change is communicated to the audience through the usage of static in the background. In the instances when Jonathan uses his power of forcing people to tell him their story, the listeners can hear rising static which varies in intensity. At first the static appears when Jonathan reads old statements collected by his predecessor. After gaining control over his power, it can be regularly heard in conversations when Jonathan forces others to answer his questions. The sound symbolises Jonathan's internal development and his slow loss of humanity. During season three when Jonathan asks Elias, the Head of the Magnus Institute, whether he is human, Jonathan receives an answer which challenges his understanding of human nature and encourages the audience to reanalyze the common perception of being human:

[W]hat does human even mean? I mean, really? You still bleed, you can still die. And your will is still your own, mostly. That's more than can be said for a lot of the 'real' humans out there. (MAG 092, 19: 53–20: 05)

To Elias, whose real identity is Jonah Magnus – the creator of the Institute and virtually an immortal being, physical wounds and death are one of the aspects separating humans from higher beings considered monstrous. Importantly, he seems less preoccupied with the subject of free will. While for Jonathan the ability to make a choice is what constitutes the basis of his identity, Elias has already given up his free will in order to receive power from the Eye. His response suggests that being human does not mean having the ability to make a choice. This approach provides a different perspective than the one established by Jonathan and functions as a possible mode of humanising the characters in the podcast regardless of their alignment with the evil forces.

The discussion of choice remains a vital part of the story in the subsequent seasons as throughout the latter part of the series Jonathan struggles with losing his humanity and becoming the 'other'. In his view, the psychological and physical changes he is undergoing locate him in the direct opposition to human beings. The notion that by losing humanity, one becomes an opposing force is

referred to by Cunningham (2020, 486) as the state of being “anti-human”. This idea is shared by Jonathan as he struggles to accept his position between his understanding of human nature and of monstrousness. He believes that by giving up his humanity, he becomes a threat to humanity as a whole and wishes to escape this system despite the unwillingness to reject the lifestyle the job of the Archivist requires. By confronting the fear and desire regarding his state multiple times over the course of the series, Jonathan offers a different approach to the cosmic horror narrative. This continuous internal journey encourages the listeners to view the existential threat of the unknown corrupting one’s morality as an extension of human nature rather than a separate entity.

The subject of identity within the realm of horror reaches its culmination in the last season of the series which depicts the consequences of The Change. The Change, which functions as the beginning of the apocalypse, is brought by Jonathan while he is controlled by Jonah Magnus. The Change is meant to be the end of the world controlled by humanity and the commencement of the new era led by the Entities taking over the world and torturing all humanity. The event and its repercussions resemble the one discussed by Pip-pin (1999, 86) in relation to the role and the structure of the biblical Book of the Apocalypse:

In the Apocalypse desire is linked with horror; there is a certain joyous response to the destruction and gory details [...]. The narrator is fixated and obsessed with the details of the horrible events. The world has never known such violence and terror.

After the inception of the apocalypse, Jonathan is tasked with telling the stories of the people who are being tortured by the Entities and the Avatars. His descriptions offer details accompanied by sound effects, such as worms moving in the ground (MAG 166, 19: 57–21: 40) or a crowd laughing at a person being tortured (MAG 172, 10: 15–10: 17), which showcase the extent of the horror that overtakes the world. Due to this new role, Jonathan can be compared to the biblical narrator of the Apocalypse, a chronicler of the horrifying. Undertaking this responsibility leads to Jonathan’s psychological distress. Nonetheless, he is unable to reject his role as his physical self is sustained by the fear of others. Due to his negative self-perception Jonathan becomes increasingly self-destructive.

Yet despite that, inducing the apocalypse leads Jonathan to have a mixture of feelings which include an awe that could be related to the concept of the sublime. It has to be noted that whether he felt joy or was only being a subject of control by the higher power cannot be deduced from either the podcast or the official transcription as it is purposely concealed from the audience through the ambiguous usage of voice acting and sound.

While discussing the interaction between the audience and the apocalyptic imagery, Pippin (1999, 97) points out that this combination carries strong emotional influence by comparing it to a “bomb threat” that causes fear just by being mentioned as a possibility whether confirmed or not; the audience, therefore, reacts to the idea itself and begins to find discomfort in the narrative as “[a]pocalyptic horror connects with the most fearful emotions and heightens the sense that the end is near” (Pippin 1999, 103). The placement of the apocalypse as the last installment of the series functions as the final test for the characters’ resolve: whether they reject Jonathan due to his inhuman status or decide to accept his new identity in the world ruled by the monsters beyond understanding or control. When confronted with the possible end of humanity, the characters opt to work together despite their differences, reluctantly accepting Jonathan’s inhumanity. They elect to preserve their own world and doom another universe by relocating the Entities. The characters are aware that this act of choice could possibly be deemed as immoral due to its potential harm to others, but despite that they choose to prioritise their own survival of their own planet. In the end the distinction between being human and inhuman emerges as a complex notion as it can no longer be established based on the possibility of harm. The series, therefore, concludes with a realization that although in the face of cosmic horror there is no such thing as a solution that saves everyone, one can still choose to become responsible for protecting others even when changed into the ‘other’. This resolution shows that modern day cosmic horror fiction attempts to depict the relationship between human beings and monsters as a spectrum rather than polar opposites.

Throughout the series, Jonathan has multiple opportunities to give up on humanity and in the final season he is offered this choice once again. Despite that, he strives to protect his world and is willing to sacrifice himself in order to achieve this objective. In the end, Jonathan remains a complicated character. Through his internal development, the audience is offered a multi-layered depiction of his existential struggle contrasted with the joyful violence exhibited by many of the other Avatars and Entities. While by the end of the podcast he

is certainly inhuman, Jonathan never turns into a traditional monster placed in opposition to humankind. Within the realm of the podcast, the characters are judged by their actions rather than their physical state. Even though The Entities function as a monstrous cosmic force, they only appear in mentions, not in the direct confrontation with the characters. It is the Avatars who resemble traditional monsters in the proclivity for violence and their rejection of human morality. To become an Avatar one has to make the decision to serve the power, thus bringing the subject of choice into the forefront of the discussion surrounding the image of a modern monster. When listening to the podcast it is seldom possible for the listener to distinguish the human characters from the Avatars based on the voice alone. Some, such as The Distortion, are denoted by sound effects, but the majority of the Avatars are audibly indistinguishable from the human characters. This approach to character portrayal centers evil is the matter of choice rather than an inherent state of being. The characters, therefore, become monstrous not when they transform into an inhuman being, but when they inflict direct violence upon others and reject the possibility of redemption.

## Conclusions

The development of podcasts as a narrative horror form has its origins in the legacy of radio drama. The format of a cosmic horror podcast allows *The Magnus Archives* to explore the subject of humanity and how one becomes a monster as a spectrum instead of the opposing forces. Throughout the story, the podcast explores the themes of identity, choice, and their interconnection in the context of the cosmic horror genre. The characters of the podcast make decisions which shape the progression of the story and exemplify their agency while also falling victim to the forces beyond their control. By introducing the element of choice in their descent into a state between remaining human and turning into a monster, *The Magnus Archives* shows the role of agency in forming one's identity and its importance when confronting a power beyond comprehension. The notion of becoming inhuman is depicted through the character of Jonathan Sims, who represents the existential approach towards the subject of an internal supernatural change: he is psychologically conflicted and never fully chooses either side, thus making him an example of a being in-between. The subject of choice is further shown by the aural portrayal of the characters possessing inhuman capabilities, as the majority of them are indistinguishable from the human characters. By implementing sound

to accentuate this ambiguity, *The Magnus Archives* places the listeners' focus on the actions of the characters, rather than their physical or vocal characteristics. Together, these elements provide a study of monstrosity in relation to the past and the present images of evil. The existential portrayal of inhumanity in *The Magnus Archives* corresponds to modern horror sensibilities and provides a cosmic horror tale which continues to captivate the audiences all around the world.

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## Translating Vita Sackville-West's *Seducers in Ecuador* into Polish: Cultural and Linguistic Challenges

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**Abstract:** Despite writing during Modernism, Vita Sackville-West generally avoided the formal experimentation associated with this literary period. *Seducers in Ecuador*, however, stands out as one of her most formally innovative works. To date, no translation of the novella into Polish has been undertaken. Thus, the author of this paper has carried out the task independently. This study examines the challenges encountered in the translation process. The analysis focuses on three principal areas: sociocultural differences, irony, and the translation of technical and archaic vocabulary.

Methodologically, the paper uses an autoethnographic approach to examine the translator's subjective experience and reflections on the linguistic and cultural challenges encountered during the translation process. Drawing on theories developed by Eugene Nida, Katharina Reiss, and Hans J. Vermeer, the study explores the tension between domestication and foreignisation, as well as between dynamic and formal equivalence.

The analysis demonstrates that dynamic equivalence is the most effective strategy in the majority of cases, particularly when translating culturally specific references, tonal irony, and syntactic structures that would sound unnatural if rendered literally in Polish. A reader-oriented approach enables the translator to preserve the communicative effect and readability of the original text while adapting it to the expectations of the target audience. At the same time, it is shown that formal equivalence remains necessary in passages where excessive adaptation would weaken the literary style or tone of the novella. The paper concludes that successful literary translation requires a flexible combination of strategies rather than exclusive reliance on either domestication or foreignisation.

**Keywords:** translation, Vita Sackville-West, literature, linguistics, dynamic equivalence

The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the flourishing of the Modernist movement. And although Vita Sackville-West lived and created during that time, she was reluctant to follow the exploratory trends of the period. She wrote a number of novels, short stories, plays and poems, and her writings are generally considered as "those of a traditionalist and a conservative" (Dennison 2014, 171). However, *Seducers in Ecuador* appears to align with the Modernist movement. Written in 1924, the novella tells the story of Arthur Lomax, who takes part in a cruise. During the cruise, the protagonist starts wearing coloured glasses that alter his perspective on the world. As a result, he believes in a false reality and makes a series of poor decisions, ultimately culminating in his tragic downfall. The story employs experimental techniques in both its narrative structure and perspective.

Not without importance is the fact that Vita Sackville-West was privately involved with Virginia Woolf when she wrote *Seducers in Ecuador*. It seems highly probable that the key Modernist innovator influenced Vita's writing – after all, the novella opens with a dedication to Virginia Woolf. In 1925, *The New York Times* wrote: "the author's dedication to Virginia Woolf would seem to indicate not only admiration for Mrs. Woolf's very splendid talent, but also a discipleship in her method" (Crawford 1925, 13). Also, scholars describe *Seducers in Ecuador* as "quite as Woolfian any of Woolf's stories, short or long" (Sackville-West 2003, 11). This speaks in itself about the work's place within a literary era.

However, at present Sackville-West remains largely in the shadow of Virginia Woolf, and her works are not widely recognised. This relative obscurity has consequently limited the translation of her oeuvre into other languages, with only a small number of her many works rendered into Polish. As Alison E. Martin correctly points out, "while scholars of translation studies and transnational book history are uncovering the networks that enabled works of 'high' British modernism to circulate across Europe, scant attention has been paid to middle-brow authors like Sackville-West" (2018, 78).

Consequently, very little of Vita Sackville-West's work has been translated into Polish. One example is *All Passion Spent*, published in 1982 as *Wygaste namiętności*. *Seducers in Ecuador* has never been rendered into Polish. The author of this paper translated the novella for her own purposes. The aim of this paper is to analyse the challenges encountered in the rendering process, including sociocultural differences, the use of English irony, and specific vocabulary (both technical and archaic). The study is structured into three sections, each devoted to a distinct category of translation challenges.

The methodological starting point for the analysis is an autoethnographic approach, which foregrounds the translator's subjective experience and reflexive engagement with the process of mediating linguistic and sociocultural challenges. Ellis et al. define this perspective as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (2011, 273). Ethnographers "intentionally highlight the relationship of their experiences and stories to culture and cultural practices" (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis 2016, 22).

Autoethnography remains an underexplored area of translation studies. Recent scholarship supports this observation. For example, Borg (2025) notes that few translation researchers have adopted autoethnographic approaches. More broadly, Marin-Lacarta and Yu (2023, 147) argue that ethnographic methodologies were incorporated into translation studies relatively late and have received limited methodological reflection. Nevertheless, several scholars have advanced perspectives that align with the principles of autoethnography. For example, Michael Cronin considers translation as a culturally situated act, emphasising the translator's reflexivity and positionality. His approach shares affinities with ethnographic inquiry, highlighting how translation involves deep engagement with identity negotiation, cultural norms, and intercultural encounters (Cronin 2006, 4).

Accordingly, the analysis of Vita Sackville-West's *Seducers in Ecuador* is grounded in an examination of the translator's own experience. The study demonstrates how cultural norms can influence the rendering of the text, considering that "the question of the identity of the interpreter is inseparable from the practice of interpreting" (Cronin 2006, 5). While formulated in relation to interpreting, this insight is equally applicable to translation, since translational choices are likewise influenced by positionality, lived experience, and sociocultural context.

Furthermore, the examination in this paper builds upon the debate around two broad strategies: foreignisation and domestication. The starting point for this dispute was Friedrich Schleiermacher's statement that "either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader" (1992, 42). Venuti later reinterpreted this binary as an ideological opposition between ethnocentric domestication and foreignising resistance to target-culture norms (Venuti 1995, 20), thereby

shifting the discussion from a descriptive model to an explicitly ethical and political framework.

The foreignisation-domestication framework continues to be employed as an analytical tool for examining translation strategies and ideological positioning across a range of contexts, including literary, legal, audiovisual, and institutional translation. Recent studies have applied the model in corpus-based analyses (Bažjić and Dobrić Basanež 2020), subtitling research (Yonamine 2022), and media localisation studies (Nasution et al. 2019), confirming its continued relevance in contemporary translation studies.

At the same time, while domestication and foreignisation have been extensively examined through textual and comparative analyses, relatively little research has investigated these strategies from an autoethnographic perspective. Autoethnographic studies have tended to focus on translators' experiences, identities, and professional practices rather than on domestication and foreignisation as explicit analytical categories. Consequently, there remains considerable scope for research exploring how translators experience, negotiate, and justify domesticating and foreignising decisions during the translation process.

Within the broader debate on domestication and foreignisation, several theoretical frameworks have emerged that seem to be important for this study. For example, the functionalist (or Skopos) approach, developed by Reiss and Vermeer, holds that translation strategies should be determined primarily by the purpose of the translation rather than by strict loyalty to either the source or target culture (2014, 85-86). From this perspective, domestication and foreignisation are practical choices shaped by context, audience, and function. Going further, Eugene Nida explores the distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence (Bassnett 2013, 34). Formal equivalence focuses on preserving the grammatical structure, wording, and cultural features of the source text, which seems to align with foreignisation. Dynamic equivalence, by contrast, aims to produce the same effect on target readers that the original had on its audience, even if this requires adaptation or simplification; this approach is thus more closely connected with domestication.

This study attempts to determine which of these perspectives may be regarded as the more effective translation strategy for addressing the challenges encountered in rendering *Seducers in Ecuador*. The translator's approach is primarily reader-oriented and therefore based largely on dynamic equivalence; however, in some cases, formal equivalence proves necessary.

## 1. Sociocultural Differences

*Seducers in Ecuador* is steeped in cultural markers, such as class distinctions, notions of English identity or even colour symbolism. These nuances, which would be instantly recognisable to English readers, appear to be far less transparent to the Polish audience. And hence their translation may be problematic. This section of the paper examines selected aspects of cultural reference that generated difficulties in the Polish rendering of Vita Sackville-West's story.

First of all, the novella contains multiple allusions to class stratification, even if these allusions are veiled at times. The opening passage describes one of the characters – Bellamy – this way: “a tall, cadaverous man, with a dark skin, white hair, and pale blue eyes, he belonged to Lomax's club” (Sackville-West 1995, 4). The details concerning the protagonist's physical appearance do not seem to pose problems in translation – the first part of the sentence can be rendered easily in a literal manner; the issue arises when it comes to interpreting the phrase “Lomax's club”.

Bellamy owns a yacht, and Lomax is invited to join a cruise. One reads: “this trip would serve to pass the time. A yachting trip was a pleasant, civilised thing to undertake, and Lomax preferred civilised things” (Sackville-West 1995, 5). From all these hints, the reader may deduce that both characters are comfortably situated and make no effort at physical work, which indicates their affiliation with the upper class. In her article, Amy Milne-Smith (2006) explores gentlemen's clubs in nineteenth-century London. According to the scholar, such centres played a significant role in the leisure of upper-class men at that time: “in the middle of the city, clubs afforded private spaces dedicated to relaxation and camaraderie. Both married and single men regarded their club as a central part of their lives, functioning as a surrogate home” (Milne-Smith 2006, 796). The word “club” in Vita Sackville-West's novella may thus stand for a gentlemen's club.

If one translates the passage literally – “należał do klubu Lomaxa” (“he belonged to Lomax' club”) – the aspect of the character's social position will be lost. Thus, a more appropriate option appears to be a contextual adaptation, such as “należał do tego samego klubu dżentelmenów co Lomax” (“he belonged to the same gentlemen's club as Lomax”). This subtle change encourages the target reader to recognise the character's privileged social status.

What may also pose a challenge in the translation of *Seducers in Ecuador* are behavioral norms associated with English culture. The example appears in this elliptical description: “Bellamy with his reserve, and Heaven knows

what tragedy at the back of it" (Sackville-West 1995, 10). Reserve, which is "powściągliwość" or, a bit closer to the original, "rezerwa", seems to constitute a culturally specific quality; combined with Englishness, it represents a sublime politeness mixed with emotional distance. The phrasing which best reflects the aspect of Englishness is therefore needed. The variants such as „Bellamy z właściwą sobie rezerwą" ("Bellamy with his usual reserve") or "Bellamy z typową dlań powściągliwością" ("Bellamy with the reserve typical of him") read naturally and are true to the original, though they lack the cultural undertone. In this situation, it would be more accurate to expand the sentence slightly. Thus, two variants step on board: „Bellamy ze swoją angielską powściągliwością" ("Bellamy with his characteristically English reserve") or „Bellamy z typową dla Anglika rezerwą" ("Bellamy with the reserve typical of an Englishman"). The second one seems a better option, as it is more concise and polished.

People interpret symbols in diverse ways, assigning them unique meanings shaped by their culture and traditions. This also concerns colours, which hold various associations across different regions of the world. An obvious example is blue, which has a unique implication in English. *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that "blue", in relation to "a person, the heart etc.", means "depressed, low-spirited, sad, sorrowful; dismayed, downcast; (of a state or feeling) miserable, melancholy, dejected. In early use often in to look blue; now frequently in to feel blue (originally U.S.)" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "blue"). The colour lacks such connotations in Polish. In *Seducers in Ecuador*, Lomax wears coloured glasses which distort his perception of reality, and it is while looking through the blue lenses that the protagonist makes decisions which result in his failure and misery. Thus, the colour of lenses adds an extra semantic layer in the original language. This additional meaning is lost in the Polish translation due to the cultural difference – neither "niebieski" nor "błękitny" foreshadows the character's subsequent misery and death, and no other colour in Polish could serve this function either.

It seems that the only colour associated with sorrow and death in Polish tradition is black. Stanulewicz, Komorowska, and Pawłowski observe that Polish respondents link black with sadness, depression, and mourning (2014, 262). However, it is impossible to replace blue with black in translation, as Lomax possesses black glasses as well, which he uses in other circumstances. Thus, the only option that remains is a direct translation. The author of this paper opted for "błękitne okulary" i "błękitne soczewki", and added a note explaining the colour's extra meaning to the Polish reader.

Some of the difficulties in translating Vita Sackville-West's *Seducers in Ecuador* from English into Polish arise from sociocultural differences, including an alternative view of social division, dissimilar behavioural norms, and varying symbolic interpretations of colours. These are instances in which formal equivalence proves inadequate or even impossible, requiring explanatory notes or supplementary information. Thus, dynamic equivalence, which seeks to produce the same effect on target readers as the original had on its audience (even if adaptation is required), becomes an appropriate strategy in the cases discussed. The next sections of the paper discuss translation challenges resulting from the use of irony and non-standard vocabulary in the novella.

## 2. Irony

The incorporation of humour, wit, and irony into the text makes it more lively and dynamic. As Caws puts it, *Seducers in Ecuador* is "enlightened by irony" (Sackville-West 2003, 355). Indeed, the literary rhetorical device that involves "saying what is contrary to what is meant" (Colebrook 2004, 1), permeates Vita Sackville-West's story. This part of the paper analyses various types of irony in the novella, examining which translation strategy – dynamic or formal equivalence – proves more suitable in each case.

The first example concerns verbal irony which, as Colston explains, bears "the characteristic of a linguistic creation by a speaker or writer, that somehow expresses some proposition, stance, attitude, description, etc., concerning objective reality, that is somehow contrary to that reality" (2017, 236). A special type of verbal irony is sarcasm, defined as "a nasty, mean-spirited or just relatively negative form of verbal irony" (Colston 2017, 236). The example can be seen in Sherlock Holmes' reply for other character's "commonsensical" theory explaining the murder in *The Sign of Four*: "on which the dead man very considerably got up and locked the door on the inside" (Doyle 1908, 104). It is obvious that the dead man could not do it.

The example in *Seducers in Ecuador* is somehow related to the socio-cultural issues examined in the previous section. The main character is somehow sarcastically defined in these words: "such inclinations as he had towards the finer gestures – and it is not to be denied that such inclinations were latent in him – had been judiciously repressed, until Lomax could congratulate himself on having achieved the comfortable ideal of all true Englishmen" (Sackville-West 1995, 5). In a neutral sense, a "true Englishman" refers to a male of a particular

nationality, and also a particular type of person – the conventionally proper and emotionally reserved one. The phrase may look simple, but in the story it is used ironically, thereby acquiring an extra semantic layer. So, a “true Englishman” in Vita Sackville-West’s novella indicates simultaneously: 1. a man from England, of a pure national and homogeneous identity; 2. someone who embodies the idealised English traits, such as self-control or conventional morality; 3. an ironic critique or denial of these very traits. Due to this semantic ambiguity, rendering the phrase into Polish may present a challenge.

It seemed that the best course of action was to find a Polish equivalent that reflects all these nuances. The literal translation, „prawdziwy Anglik” (“a true Englishman”), preserves the idea of national homogeneity but tends to sound neutral or even complimentary in Polish, thereby weakening the original ironic undertone. Another option considered was „typowy Anglik” (“a typical Englishman”), which conveys stereotypical cultural associations and can sound slightly pejorative, yet it still fails to capture the original tone. Consequently, the author chose the variant „Anglik z krwi i kości” (“an Englishman through and through”), as it combines a sense of authenticity with an implicit capacity for irony without becoming overtly complimentary.

The example discussed corresponds to Eugene Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence, positing that a translation should aim to reproduce the effect of the source text – including its tonal dimension – rather than its formal structure. At the same time, this case also seems to align with Skopos theory, which holds that translation strategies are determined by the intended purpose of the text in the target culture and therefore often require adaptation rather than literal correspondence.

Apart from sarcasm, *Seducers in Ecuador* contains metafictional irony. In this type of irony, “the author takes the role of an elitist ironist who makes the reader question the literal meaning of the text” (Peña-Cervel and de Mendoza Ibáñez 2022, 244–245). In other words, the text openly acknowledges itself as a constructed narrative, playing with readers’ expectations about conventional storytelling. This can be exemplified by *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning* by Lemony Snicket, where at the very beginning the implied author claims: “if you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book” (1999, 1).

In Vita Sackville-West’s novella, one reads: “the practised reader will have observed by now that the element of surprise is not to be looked for in this story” (Sackville-West 1995, 7). If translated literally into Polish, the passage may take

on an overtly descriptive, didactic quality. The literal variant: “wprawny czytelnik powinien był już zauważyć, że w tej historii nie należy szukać elementu zaskoczenia” conveys the instructive and intrusive tone – not to mention that the sentence sounds a bit clumsy. To avoid this, the translator may employ one of indirect narrative strategies that soften the tone of the passage, but are more in keeping with Polish stylistic conventions. Again, this strategy is consistent with Eugene Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence.

One of the solutions is to avoid addressing the reader directly. The sentence rendered this way reads: “nietrudno zauważyć, że w tej opowieści element zaskoczenia nie odgrywa istotnej roli” (“it is easy to observe that surprise is not a significant element in this story”). In this case, the tone is more neutral than in the original, and irony is muted but not erased; at the same time, the didactic quality disappears. Or, if opting for a variant that is more faithful to the original, one may resort to a compromise. The sentence “jak łatwo się przekonać, ta opowieść nie obiecuje czytelnikowi zaskoczeń” (“as becomes readily apparent, this story offers the reader no surprises”) also softens irony, but it preserves the reader’s presence and addresses them in a conventionally Polish, non-instructional way. And this is the option the author of this paper chose.

Furthermore, *Seducers in Ecuador* presents philosophical insights into existence and perception, which are quite often ironical. For example, the narrator declares: “to those blessed with perception, let perception remain sacred” (Sackville-West 1995, 4). The irony of this observation stems from the fact that the main character’s “perception” is artificial and it leads him away from truth and responsibility, although he believes otherwise. Philosophical irony also poses certain difficulties in English-Polish translation. For example, there is the risk that the Polish rendering of the passage quoted will acquire a quasi-Biblical, didactic quality. The literal translation: “dla tych, którzy zostali pobłogosławieni percepcją, niech percepcja pozostanie świętością” sounds scriptural in tone – and it somehow loses the ironic nuance of the original. Modifying the phrasing or syntax appears to eliminate the Biblical undertone of the passage. The author of this paper opted for the version: “niech percepcja pozostanie święta – przynajmniej dla tych, którzy jej doświadczają” (“let perception remain sacred – at least for those who experience it”). In this variant, the word “przynajmniej” (“at least”) is added; it appears to retrieve the irony in the statement.

The last example concerns dramatic irony, namely the one where “the audience knows something of which one or more of the characters is unaware”

(Mackey and Cooper 2000, 90). The classic example of this type of irony is from *Romeo and Juliet*, where Romeo kills himself believing Juliet to be dead, while the reader knows she is only in a deep sleep (Shakespeare 1901, 131–132). As for *Seducers in Ecuador*, the beginning of the story offers such a revelation: “perhaps Miss Whitaker deserves precedence, since it was she, after all, who married Lomax. And perhaps Bellamy should come next, since it was he, after all, for whose murder Lomax was hanged” (Sackville-West 1995, 7). The characters’ fates are already established; the reader knows from the start what will happen to them.

This sort of irony seems to be the least challenging for the translator, because it is structural rather than tonal; in other words, it is independent of phrasing or cultural context and therefore requires no adaptation for the target audience to understand it. Thus, formal equivalence appears to be an appropriate strategy in this case. The literal variant: “być może panna Whitaker zasługuje na pierwszeństwo, skoro to ona, koniec końców, poślubiła Lomaxa. A być może Bellamy powinien znaleźć się na drugim miejscu, skoro to właśnie za jego zabójstwo Lomax został powieszony” works fine, as it perfectly retains the dramatic irony embedded in the disclosure of the characters’ ends to the reader. This is, naturally, not the only option – due to the aforementioned structural quality of dramatic irony, quite a lot of equivalents may be formed which would work equally well.

The analysis in this section demonstrated that *Seducers in Ecuador* contains irony of different types, and their translation into Polish posed various difficulties. In most cases, the irony is based on tonal nuances; this applies to three of the four examples discussed. In these instances, translating from English into Polish required certain modifications, either in the overall tone of the passages or in their syntactic structure. Consequently, dynamic equivalence proved to be the most appropriate translation strategy here. At the same time, one type of irony in *Seducers in Ecuador* – namely, dramatic irony – is not grounded in tonal or cultural factors. It does not require adaptation, as a literal translation preserving the structure of the original is sufficient. In such a case, structural equivalence appears to be the most suitable approach.

### 3. Lexical (and Syntactic) Challenges. Nautical and Period-specific Vocabulary

Two types of vocabulary presented difficulties in the translation of *Seducers in Ecuador*. First of all, as the plot of the novella is set on a ship, the nautical terminology is applied there. Secondly, the text employs vocabulary that nowadays

may be considered archaic and obsolete. Setting aside the period in which the narrative was created, its style appears deliberately mannered, leaning toward an old-fashioned aesthetic. This section of the paper examines these two lexical fields. Wherever possible, the translator employed a reader-oriented translation approach, corresponding to dynamic equivalence. However, in some cases, it was necessary to depart from this strategy when the literary style of the original suffered too greatly.

To begin with, the use of nautical terminology is illustrated in this passage: “the Nereid, when she was not running before a fair wind on an even keel, lay over to the water, so low that now and then she shipped a gobbet of sea, only a thin little runnel that escaped at once through the open scuppers of the lee runner” (Sackville-West 1995, 20). The literal translation of “on an even keel” (where a keel refers to the lowest beam stretching from a bow to a stern) is “na równym kilu” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “keel”). The expression “na kilu” may sound a bit clumsy for the person unfamiliar with nautical terms, yet it is entirely correct in Polish.

At the same time, the phrase “open scuppers of the lee runner” may be rendered with no modification as “otwarte szpigaty przy linie biegowej po stronie zawietrznej” (Puchalski 2003, s.vv. “scupper”, “lee”). However, the meaning of the phrase may remain unclear for an average Polish reader. One of the solutions available is to provide a note with a further explanation of the phrase. Another one is to replace that direct part with a less literal, though more descriptive rendering, such as: “otwarte odpływy pokładowe po tej stronie systemu lin roboczych, na którą nie wiał wiatr” (“the open deck drains of the running rigging on the side sheltered from wind”). This would make the expression at least a bit more imaginable for an average Polish reader. However, in this case, the overall literary quality of the text could be compromised – such a translation would depart excessively from the stylistic character of the original. Consequently, with regard to terminology, the translator’s decision is to remain close to the source text, adding necessary footnotes. Formal equivalence, therefore, emerges as the predominant translation strategy in this instance.

Other fragments that include nautical terms constitute similar challenges. For example, the narrator says: “what he liked was a day with plenty of tacking, and then he would turn the mate or the captain off . . . and cry ‘Lee-o!’ to the crew” (Sackville-West 1995, 21). The command “Lee-o!” appears problematic. The sailing terminology glossary published by Grenada Bluewater Sailing explains the expression as “the action of putting the helm across to go about” (Grenada

Bluewater Sailing n.d.). Furthermore, *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* suggests that the term indicates "the warning given by the helmsman of a sailing vessel that he is starting to tack" (Hattendorf 2007, s.v. "lee-oh"). In Polish, this command can be translated into "zwrot przez sztag!". However, similar to "szpigaty", this rendering may also mean nothing to an average Polish reader. Thus, a certain degree of simplification, reflecting aspects of dynamic equivalence, seems to be helpful. One of the best options is "na wiatr!", because it sounds natural and remains readily comprehensible, without compromising the tone or the stylistic and literary value of the original text.

Another lexically demanding passage reads:

The men were black figures clinging to stays for support, going down with the ship when she swooped from the crest down into the trough, rising again with her, thankful to find the deck still there beneath their feet, lashed by the rain, blinded by the darkness, unable to see, able only to feel, whether with their hands that, wet and frozen, clung to rail and stanchion, or with their bodies that sank and rose, enduring the tremendous buffeting of the tossing ship, and the shock of water that, as it broke over the deck, knocked the breath from their lungs and all but swept them from their refuge into the hopeless broiling of the sea (Sackville-West 1995, 26).

Again, a few technical terms ("stays" – "sztagi", "stanchions" – "kłonicy") (Puchalski 2003, s.vv. "signal stays", "stanchion") emerge there, presuming the reader's familiarity with nautical vocabulary. Yet, the translator's main challenge in this case seems to stem from the syntax construction. The sentence is lengthy and paratactic; the main clause – "the men were black figures" – is followed by a series of participial phrases ("clinging", "rising", "blinded", "enduring") that denote sensory perception.

The passage, which by means of the overuse of participial clauses seems to reflect the chaos during the storm, sounds somewhat natural in English; however, the Polish language appears far less tolerant of extended chains of participles ("–ąc", "–any", "–ony"). A literal rendering, corresponding to foreignisation and Eugene Nida's concept of formal equivalence, seems to be somehow risky, for at least two reasons: 1. it may disrupt the natural rhythm of the sentence; 2. it may lead to ambiguity as to who performs which action. The translator has

two options then: either to preserve the original's continuity or just to break the sentence into shorter, more Polish-friendly units, which aligns with the strategy of domestication. The author of this paper preferred the second option, as it renders the passage stylistically more natural in Polish, even though part of the original style – conveying the storm's breathless anarchy – seems to be partly lost. Thus it reads:

Ciemne sylwetki mężczyzn kurczowo trzymały się sztagów dla podparcia. Schodzili w dół razem z okrętem, gdy ten zsuwał się z grzbietu fali w jej dolinę, po czym znów wznosili się z nim, wdzięczni, że pokład wciąż pozostaje pod ich stopami. Smagani deszczem, oślepieni ciemnością, niezdolni do widzenia, zdani jedynie na dotyk. Czuli go zarówno w rękach, które mokre i zziębnięte zaciskały się na kłonicach i słupkach, jak i w ciałach, które opadały i unosiły się wraz z okrętem. Znosili potężne szarpnięcia miotanego statku. Znów i znów uderzała w nich woda, która zalewając pokład, wybijała im powietrze z płuc i niemal zmiatała ich z bezpiecznego miejsca w bezkresne, wzburzone morze.

Further translation difficulties arise from the text's stylised language. *Seducers in Ecuador* contains words and expressions that may sound old-fashioned today; some of them seem to be characteristic of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century British English. An example is the description of Lomax at the beginning of the novella: "attired in a suit of white ducks, a solar topee on his head, his blue spectacles on his nose, he contemplated the Sphinx" (Sackville-West 1995, 3). What may appear specifically confusing to the Polish reader are colonial-era terms referring to clothing: white ducks and solar topee, the former denoting white cotton trousers and the latter – a sun helmet. Again, in this case the translator has two options: foreignising, which involves using expressions close to the original and supplying them with footnotes ("spodnie typu white ducks", "kapelusz solar topee"), or domesticating, which amounts to replacing these foreign terms with more descriptive – and, at the same time, more understandable to Polish readers – phrases.

It seems that the expression "spodnie typu white ducks" does not say much to an average Polish person, except for the confusing connotation with farm birds. The same goes for the specific kind of hat used by British men in the colonial period. Thus, the translation option chosen by the author of this paper is

the second one, also associated with dynamic equivalence. In this perspective, white ducks may be rendered as "białe spodnie płócienne", and a solar topee – as "tropikalny hełm korkowy" or "kapelusz safari". This strategy makes these expressions more accessible for the target audience, without diminishing the literary merits of the original.

Other examples of old-fashioned English vocabulary in *Seducers in Ecuador* include: "bounder", "care a fig" and "confounded". *Cambridge Dictionary* labels each of these words as old-fashioned (*Cambridge Dictionary*, s.vv. "bounder", "not care/give a fig", "confounded"). What may pose a challenge in this case is finding Polish equivalents that carry the same old-fashioned stylistic quality. In fact, the objective here is to reproduce the same tone and effect in translation, which is the domain of dynamic equivalence.

One reads in Vita Sackville-West's story: "Miss Whitaker admired only one type of man, and dismissed as perverts or bounders all those who did not belong to it" (Sackville-West 1995, 9). *Cambridge Dictionary* explains a "bounder" as "a man who behaves badly or in a way that is not moral, especially in his relationships with women" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "bounder"). Words such as "łobuz" or "prostack" do not reflect the outdated tone of the original. Perhaps "niegodziwiec" or even "łotr" would fulfil this requirement. The best option found by the author of the paper is "łajdak" – not only does it sound old-fashioned, but it also somehow emphasises the social and moral context of indecent behaviour (especially when relating to male-female relationships).

The phrase "not care a fig", denoting "to not be at all worried by or interested in something" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "not care/give a fig"), occurs in the novella in the following fragment: "'tell me, Lomax,' said Artivale, 'do you care a fig for humanity?'" (Sackville-West 1995, 52–53). Interestingly, Polish has a literal equivalent, "figa", which in this context also sounds somewhat dated and archaic in contemporary usage. Retaining it in translation appears to be an appropriate solution, although a more natural rendering can be achieved by shifting the interrogative structure into a declarative one. The translation therefore reads: "'Przyznaj, Lomax,' rzekł Artivale, 'że figę cię ta ludzkość obchodzi'".

The last example of the outmoded terminology is "confounded". The narrator in *Seducers in Ecuador* says: "now, when he tried to meet with fact the fantastical world which so suddenly and so utterly swamped him, was a man confounded, a man floundering for a foothold" (Sackville-West 1995, 54–55). *Oxford English Dictionary* provides such a definition of the term "confound": "to throw into

confusion of mind or feelings; so to surprise and confuse (a person) that he or she loses for the moment his or her presence of mind, and discernment what to do" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "confound"). As for Polish equivalents, "zdezorientowany" sounds quite too modern; "zmieszany" appears too mild in tone. At the same time, "skonfundowany", although it is the most direct rendering, sounds a bit too archaic for a contemporary reader; thus, "skonsternowany" seems to be the best option. It is also outdated, but there is no risk that the Polish audience – especially the younger ones – will misunderstand the meaning.

Two lexical groups in *Seducers in Ecuador* appear to be particularly challenging for the translator: nautical terminology and archaic vocabulary. With the target audience in mind, rendering these elements often required either additional explanation outside the main text or the incorporation of supplementary information into the translation itself. In the case of archaic expressions, preserving the tone of the original was also essential. Thus, dynamic equivalence proves effective even at the level of individual lexical items. Exceptions occur in passages where the literary style of the original would otherwise suffer significantly; for example, nautical terminology could not be rendered in an overly explanatory manner without disrupting the text's stylistic qualities.

At the syntactic level, dynamic equivalence likewise proved necessary. Although certain features of the original phrasing and stylistic effect may be diminished in translation, reproducing the source text's syntactic structures too closely would often result in constructions that sound unnatural or even ungrammatical in Polish.

## Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this paper demonstrates that translating *Seducers in Ecuador* from English into Polish requires a flexible approach that balances fidelity to the source text with the needs and expectations of the target audience. The difficulties discussed throughout the study – including sociocultural differences, irony, archaic vocabulary, nautical terminology, and syntactic disparities between English and Polish – reveal that no single translation strategy can be applied consistently in every case.

Overall, dynamic equivalence emerges as the dominant and most effective approach. Since many elements of the novella depend on cultural associations, tonal nuances, or linguistic structures that do not function in the same way in

Polish, preserving the intended effect on the reader often requires adaptation rather than literal reproduction. This applies not only to broader cultural references and ironic passages, but also to lexical and syntactic choices. In many instances, attempts to preserve the formal structure of the original too closely would result in translations that sound unnatural, unclear, or stylistically inappropriate in Polish. Dynamic equivalence, therefore, enables the translator to maintain readability, communicative clarity, and the atmosphere of the text while still remaining faithful to the spirit of the original work.

At the same time, the analysis also demonstrates that formal equivalence cannot be dismissed entirely. Certain elements of the novella – particularly those in which literary style or narrative structure are central – require greater adherence to the original wording or form. Excessive adaptation may weaken stylistic qualities or disrupt the aesthetic character of the text. Consequently, the translation process involves constant negotiation between accessibility for the target reader and preservation of the stylistic and artistic features of the source text.

The study, therefore, suggests that effective literary translation should not rely exclusively on either dynamic or formal equivalence. Instead, successful rendering depends on the translator's ability to evaluate the function of each passage individually and to select the strategy that best preserves both meaning and literary effect. In the case of *Seducers in Ecuador*, a predominantly reader-oriented approach proves most effective, yet it must remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate moments in which closer formal correspondence is necessary to retain the distinctive style of Vita Sackville-West's prose.

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# Relationality and Posthuman Motoring in Human-generated and Non-human EV Discourse in Australia

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**Abstract:** Cultural attitudes towards electromobility and electric vehicles (EVs, hereafter) can be traced by investigating the discursive features of available written texts. Wodak and Meyer (2001) structure discourses according to the complexity of knowledge from which they arise. Against this theoretical background, the paper presents a sampled discursive analysis of a small, randomly selected EV-themed corpus of e.g. official documents, car magazines, car brochures, AI-generated content, internet webpages, etc. While the global transition to zero-emission mobility appears inevitable, it is language that shapes relational opinions and attitudes. The collected texts show the relational impact of EV-themed narratives on the wide group of EV stakeholders in the posthuman era of car development. Context is crucial in discourse analysis because it reflects the social situation and employs different types of language use, e.g. newspaper discourse, advertising discourse, legal or administrative discourse. The research sample, however, has to be narrowed down to show one aspect or a few in order to demonstrate the status of knowledge on the subject or show the style in which knowledge is conveyed to the recipients or at least to initiate a change in thinking. Australian EV-themed discursive samples can be categorized into three, partly overlapping, groups – prescriptive, descriptive and persuasive. Relationality as a concept and model, presented on the prescriptive, descriptive and persuasive model in the contemporary motoring may be adopted in different discursive areas affected by posthumanism.

**Keywords:** electric vehicles, Australian motoring discourse, car magazines, car brochures, artificial intelligence

## Introduction

There has been strong opposition towards the car culture, as it has been the main culprit of the degradation of the environment. More precisely, cars pollute and damage the environment to the extent that cannot be compared to any other invention exerting a similar influence on the planet. According to Matthew Pateron (2000, 253–270), cars change society and the space where society exists is significantly harmed by its ubiquity.

The term “posthuman” refers to the post-human-centred world, whereas the term “post-humanist” refers to the approach or philosophy which encapsulates the potential of the post-human world where human reason is no longer solely used to solve human problems. The digital era in humanism places us at the point where AI and advanced technology are seen as an emanation of post-human progress (Vernon 2008, 174). Nayar (2014, 8) points out that the popular understanding of posthumanism does not want to get rid of major human features, i.e. sensation, emotion and rationality. These will be just enhanced by technological intervention. The main focus is on improvement but not on replacement. A posthuman approach to electromobility in Australia seems to be an unresearched field to date. Electric vehicles in that context must first be defined as not only post-human-centred technological inventions but a part of a broader ecosystem existing relationally between humans, machines or infrastructure such as the environment or social and political agenda. Relationality in electromobility is, on the one hand, understood as interconnectedness between various factors shaping the advance of rediscovered electromobility.<sup>1</sup> On the other, I would like to show a parallel relationality of post-human or post-humanist features of EV discourse in discourse samples selected randomly or naturally for qualitative research. These may include (but are not limited to) official documents, car magazines with reviews and features, car brochures in their late phase of development or decline. Finally, particular attention is devoted to AI-generated

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1 Car historians write about the advent of the electric powertrain technology in the late 19th century. Hylton (2009, 116–117) points out that electric cars were cleaner and easier to operate especially by women. It was in the USA that the EVs were increasingly popular but in 1919 it was just 1% of commercial vehicles that were electrically powered. The major problem which stopped the promising development was the weight of the cells and byproducts, which eventually led to the slower development of EV technology (Parissien 2014, 36). Setright (2002, 33n; 392) only mentions the 1899 Camille Jenatzy's success of breaking a speed record in an electric car.

content, which presents the status of EVs in Australia as “seen” or compiled by a non-human database which has been fed with contextual questions.

### **(Electric) cars in Australia**

The first fifty years of car development were divided by Gijs Mom (2015, 3) into four phases: emergence, persistence, extravagance, and doom. However, the initial phases seem to be recurrent (i.e. EVs) due to the ever-changing circumstances shaping the background of automobilism *in extenso*. The last phase seems to correspond to the current posthuman turn in technology – doomed might be the efforts to save petrol-based engines and human agency is no longer needed to keep the vehicle going as they are becoming autonomous.

In Australia, environmental concerns were voiced by the International Energy Agency in 1993, which stated that cars contribute to 65% of overall road transport emissions. Thus, it seemed crucial to make the car sustainable not only to stop or slow down the degradation of nature, but also to argue that mobility and its advocates are able to think about cars in terms of improvement and progress aimed at minimizing the negative effects of motoring. The combustion of gasoline in internal combustion engine (ICE, hereafter) vehicles generates local air pollution and carbon emissions as major disadvantages.<sup>2</sup>

In the Australian context, motoring has been connected with the American car industry. Australian attempts to build an original car started as early as in 1855 with a steam tractor built in New South Wales. The cars with Benz engines were produced by Tarrant & Engineering Co. between 1901–1907. Being dependent on the USA and the Commonwealth, Australia did see a rapid development of road network and car ownership. In the 1930s the increase in car ownership in Victoria was 66% and in the West Australia, shockingly, 278%. Later, Ford and Holden took the lead in car production, offering vehicles which were slightly modified models available under different badges all over the world: Ford and Mazda for Ford Australia and

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2 There have been measures taken worldwide to reduce the consumption thereof although the popularity of automobiles and petrol was due to mostly low prices of petrol. Another disadvantage of gasoline is the fact that it is not renewable – the stock of oil is finite – and the data on how much petroleum remains at our disposal has not been confirmed. Geographically, the resources of crude oil are limited to a few locations all around the world (Mitchell et al. 2010, 85–86).

Vauxhall, a British car producer and Opel for Holden, operating in Australia respectively (Linz-Schrader 1992, 309–311).

But Australian car development and history is not only the outcome of globalization, which became the centre of attention in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Australia also became the final home of an engineer who had been forgotten for years and who has been discovered recently by Paul Schilperood. This Dutch motoring journalist and writer penned a revealing biography of a Jewish engineer of Hungarian descent who is alleged to have been the designer of the world-famous Volkswagen Beetle, the design having been taken away from him by the Nazi regime in the early 1930s. Schilperood (2012, 235–257) took a closer look at the final chapter of Ganz's life when he had emigrated to Australia in 1951, where he had worked for Holden for a few years before his death in 1967 (Caspers 2016, 107).

The first electric car was designed and developed also by a Hungarian physicist and priest in 1828, but the first one to be developed in Sydney was Henry Sutton's three-wheeler from 1899, which was also the first one equipped with a steering wheel. Coincidentally, in Europe the first electric car set the first 100 km/h speed record in the same year. Initially, electric cars seemed to be handier with their range and operation and were widely used as taxis, trucks, in public transport. Later, the internal combustion engine won the competition for popularity, but attempts and studies were not abandoned. The aforementioned Holden, a GM Australia and New Zealand group, developed a hybrid-electric ECOMmodore in 2000 and was publicly used at Uluru for the launch of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Relay. The car was mostly-electrically driven, using the power from a combustion engine to boost the energy supply.

Taking into consideration cultural multi-layeredness of the relationship between cars and humans in the age of EV transition, I would like to look at the written discourse of EV themes as of today in Australia as an exemplary ground of relationality and posthumanity. The paper will result in conclusions on the nature of Australian EV-themed texts as those constructing and promoting the relational and posthuman phase of motoring.

### **Relationality of strands**

Discourse strands constitute thematically uniform discourse processes that have synchronic and diachronic components. They have a finite range because it is easy to determine what has been said and/or what is, was and will be

said in the past, at present or in the future – motoring discourse is diachronic because it has been interwoven in the general process of history and civilisation. Discourse fragments are the discursive components referring to a text or part of a text which deals with a certain theme. Entanglements of discourse strands reflect references to some discourse strands that are often sub-themes or side topics to the main one – in motoring such entanglements appear any time the car “collides” with biographies or social or geographical narratives. Discursive events and their contexts<sup>3</sup> are traceable to real-world occurrences they represent. Discursive events are those that are represented politically or present in the media. Discourse planes are another stratum of discursive reality, be it science(s), politics, media, education, everyday life, business life, administration, etc. In automotive strands of discourse, planes refer to all macrostructures of human activity where the car is understood as an inherent component. Discourse position includes positive and negative aspects of discursive themes and their support from groups and individuals – discourse addressees take standpoints towards instances of motoring events. They speak in favour of or against the car in their lives. The overall societal discourse in its entanglement and complexity forms the real picture of the society whereas it always remains embedded in the worldwide discourse, e.g. globalising tendencies in motoring. The past, present and future discourse strands project trends for discourse and always require the researcher to conduct some “archaeology of knowledge because respective discourse strands exist in long discourse frames. Thus, they may entangle with other strands, change, get fractured, dry up and eventually re-emerge over time” (Wodak and Meyer 2001, 47). Here the car is understood as the historical process and naturally takes its transgressive or relational nature as an evolving artefact of technology and engineering. From the driver’s perspective, the car’s everyday use falls within “discursive repertoires” of ways in which people express their experiences connected with car use. On the one hand, the approach to cars oscillates between thriftiness, saving time, work and looking after and caring for relatives, friends and neighbours. Contrary to the tangible benefits resulting from car use, there are disadvantages connected with social and environmental problems.

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3 Cf. Widdowson (2004, 45–49) on the contextual effect as socio-cultural conventions. They must be identified by readers in order to understand the broader picture of strands.

## EV discursive strands: a sample corpus of texts

### Official documents

Regulatory publications are official documents from the Australian Government – *National Electric Vehicle Strategy*. Annual Update 2023–24. It is a body of texts, charts, and case studies with achievements and assumed plans on the administrative level, giving an overview of the EV agenda. What attracts our attention from the very beginning is the Acknowledgement of Country. It draws on the indigenous people of Australia:

These **enduring cultures** are the oldest on Earth. They have used their **traditional knowledge** to adapt as **Australia's climate has changed** over the millennia, and the resilience of these cultures is a **source of inspiration for this Government**. (NEVS 2024, i)

The message encapsulates the objective of the authorities placed in the cultural context of relational ethnicity. *Clean Energy Snapshot. Australian Electric Vehicle Market Study* by Australian Renewable Energy Agency acting under the auspices of the Australian Government is a visualized market research document with the focus on the development of charging facilities. *EV Owner Demographics and Behaviours* by Everengi/Ausgrid presents statistics of ownership, purchasing options and behaviours of EV users. The documents have been compiled in formal register and provide the key aspect of official EV agenda with charts, statistics and future prognoses. The language is official, although infographics include colloquial language shortcuts for the sake of space.

*Australian Electric Vehicle Industry Recap 2023* is a highly visual brochure which provides both data, Q&A and surprising facts on EV transition and adoption:

Queensland woman **uses** electric car **to run her son's dialysis machine** during power cut (Dec 31, 2023 (AEVIR 2023, 25)

Kath, Guimarães Neto et al. (2019) define posthumanism in the context of assistive technologies. They refer to *Cyborg Handbook* (Gray 1995, quoted after Kath, Guimarães Neto et al. 2019, 682), where the idea of *restorative cyborg* might

well explain the relationship between the dialysis machine and the EV as the source of energy for assistive technology. The car restores the power in the machine possibly in the event of power cut; it may also recuperate energy, so it extends the capacity of the life-saving medical equipment.

## Car magazines

### *Autocar* (1895 – now)

The genre of car reviews as we know today is associated with the establishment of one of the oldest car magazines<sup>4</sup> in Great Britain – the *Autocar* – in 1895. Yet there was still enough interest in them that in 1895 Henry Sturmey deemed demand to be sufficient for “a journal published in the interests of the mechanically propelled road carriage”. It took the *Autocar*<sup>5</sup> 33 years to apply sufficient rigour to its assessments to call them ‘road tests’. LJK Setright, in his *Drive On! A Social History of the Motor Car*, accounts for the establishment of the *Autocar* weekly as the propagandist publication that had been created to support the Daimler cars, which were to be sold in Britain. The prototype of the modern car test or reviews must have been the 1897 descriptions of Daimler and Panhard car advantages, which were imported by Daimler subsidy back then (Setright 2002, 24). *Autocar*, published until this very day, concentrates on car testing and reviewing and proposes a wide range of columns.

In the 12 August 2020 issue, Lawrence Allan gives an account of BMW’s environmental approach as multi-powertrain future strategy (*BMW details electrification and sustainability strategy*). The readers get to know about the plans of BMW towards 2035 to offer mild hybrids, plug-in hybrids (PHEVs), battery EVs and hydrogen fuel cell EVs. The article focuses also on sustainable acquisition of minerals, such as cobalt for lithium-ion batteries available in the iX3 model to come in 2019 which will be:

[...] **sourced sustainably** from Morocco and Australia. (Allan 2018, 7)

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4 Cf. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001, 5) on the role of socially constructed knowledge and discourses, e.g. the press.

5 *The* was dropped in the 1960s.

At the end, the reader learns about the future of batteries – they will be re-used and recycled in 90%. The finishing note of the article is the statistics, which says that X1 PHEV model emits 30% less overall CO<sub>2</sub> from production to disposal as compared to diesel option (Allan 2018, 7). Australia is mentioned here as a reservoir of raw materials, which corresponds with Karen Barad's challenging assumption on the constitution of apparatuses in science. (Barad 2003: 134). She claims that apparatuses are created in specific practices. Therefore, Australia becomes a place which is going to be used instrumentally in a particular way for a particular purpose by the car manufacturer in this case. The country becomes a tool in the EV transition era to supply certain assets. Furthermore, the space is rearranged and materializes as the resource for a rediscovered technological turn.

*A Fat Lot of Use That Is. EV in the Outback* from the 9 March 2022 issue of the *Autocar* is a narrativized report by Jeremy Hart on the EV during a trip in Australian outback – Nullarbor Plain. The author points out that the landscape is bare, with no or scarce greenery. He points out that conventional petrol is available, same as fried food on the way. The quote from a Western Australian EV club member, Robin Dean, sounds ironic and hallmarks the true topic of the article:

**“EV people** are adventurous; they want to see how far they can go and where other people haven't been before [...] And any risk driving is always a risk [in the outback]” (Hart 2022, 56)

Dean speaks of the EV community, even *EV pilgrims*, which seems, in his view, separated from the rest of motorists because of technological constraints they have to face while planning long trips such as Caiguna. It was in Caiguna that a retired engineer developed a generator running on cooking oil capable of powering a 50kW EV charger. The new invention was sponsored by crowdfunding. *Biofil* device, as it is referred to, needs 20 litres of chip oil to fully recharge the car. The car which was used for demonstration purposes, a Polestar 2, made history as the fastest charged car in Australia. Fully charged, the car would make Perth with only two stops. But the problem with emissions remains – the oil is burned and the solar panels will only solve this problem when they become more affordable for the outback. The road was frequented by only five EVs a year, but the locals expected a 4-time increase to 20 or even 100.

### *Wheels. Australia's Motor Magazine (1953 – now)*

According to the *Which Car* webpage (Stevens 2023), motoring magazines are the eighth in the rank of the most read printed magazines and only recently noted an increase by 2.8%. *Wheels* has been the oldest car magazine in Australia published since 1953 and publishes, among others, reviews of cars available on Australian market.

The November 2024 issue celebrates forty years of Nissan Motorsport International (Nismo), which was created to develop factory-endorsed race cars. In *The Right Note?* feature, Nissan Ariya Nismo, not yet available in Australia, is pictured as a link between the legacy of race cars and the new to come. However, as one of the Nissan global managers claims, high performance ICE cars have been in production for 17 years but “the regulator gives us some trouble” (Dobie 2024, 90). The main problem remains in the density and heat of EV batteries and this results in the concluding remarks:

Either way, further models will follow the Ariya. Nismo currently sells 80 percent of its cars in its Japanese homeland but global prospects like the Ariya will help bring it back to key markets with **electrification high on the agenda**.

This car demonstrates both **the possibilities and limitations** of current-gen performance EVs in one neat package. (Dobie 2024,90)

Having read the feature, the reader may want to make their own decision whether coupling high performance with electrification of cars is going to be a good decision. The article does not impose views but places electrification in the continuum of Nismo history.

The Dec 24 edition of *Wheels* features a few EV-themed articles. Dylan Campbell ridicules the new Tesla Cybercab prototype recently presented by Elon Musk. He acknowledges, however, the motoring and cultural affinities of the new project:

I don't mind how it looks; its sloping coupe roofline channels a little **Volkswagen XL1**, while the **swan-wing doors** are a bit **McLaren**. The clean minimalist exterior has a steampunk, **Blade Runner** vibe, while the aerodynamic, 21-inch disc wheels remind me of a **salt flat racer**. (Campbell 2024, 30)

Later the author recalls the essence of car culture, making the obvious but necessary observations in the fast-changing motoring world:

**A sports car** says we like **thrills** and taking a bit of a risk, while an **off-roader** says we love the call of **the wild**. A **Rolls-Royce** tells others that you have **more money** than they do, while a **Toyota Kluger** says you're a family man [...] (Campbell (2024, 30).

Even a Tesla says you're an early **adopter**. Or that you're **unbearable**. (Campbell 2024, 30)

But for the author the car is not a real car *per se* because it is an autonomous vehicle with no steering wheel. It is an example of the posthuman motoring era with no need of human agency performed in the act of human driving. Moreover, Campbell pays attention to the fact that Tesla autonomous driving led to at least 23 fatal accidents. Ironically, the author would not like to be seen in the car – even if dead. First drive section includes a retrofuturist EV Renault 5 or practical Kia EV5.

Interestingly, Gavin Green gives an account of the future of electric vehicles. This is a culturally immersed analysis from the very beginning because the author starts with a quote:

**Long term**, almost everyone agrees it's **electric**, at least in some form. But short to medium term it is, to paraphrase **Winston Churchill**, a **riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma**. (Green 2024, 96)

The quote encapsulates the problems EV-orientated industry has been facing for some time, with sales plummeting and future uncertain. Long-term perspective sees 2035 or 2040 globally as the ban deadline for ICEs although carmakers now predict that more time will be needed for successful transition (Green 2024, 100).

### Car brochures

The cultural world of brochures has been slowly disappearing or even no longer exists in the case of some car manufacturers. The status of car brochures is not homogeneous globally, however. Car manufacturers are also considering

implementing changes in the field of marketing – it is neither to interfere with the climate, nor contribute to its degradation. In some markets and for some passenger car brands, brochures are not available or have been reduced to a digital scrollable tablet format. Sangadji et al. (2025, 85) conclude their bibliometric research on the rise of posthumanism in marketing with a statement that human beings are no longer the sole agents of meaning and value within society. The example of car brochures provided below seems to be a good example of non-human-centred car brochures in PDF format as they do not place products in the human environments. The human setting has been removed from the brochure as if human agency was supposed to be just implied but not promoted. The traditional view of technology being controlled by humans has been reversed to expose environmental, zero-emission impact. Indeed, when we want to browse Kia offer for Australia, we have to go online or see reduced pdf-format brochures. Kia EV9 brochure available online offers only the list of mechanical and feature list for rear-wheel drive single motor and all-wheel drive dual motor in three trim options – Air, Earth and GT-Line. EV features are available for the webpage, but the brochure provides only technical and trim information in table format. The persuasive function has been retained on the webpage content where the potential buyer may learn about the advantages of electromobility and EV features of the model.

On the contrary, Lotus Australia, for EV – Lotus Eletre model in this case – does not offer car brochures, even in a PDF format. The advertising content of the car brochure has been morphed with the webpage offering videoclips, textual information and visuals.

## **The electric Hyper-SUV with racer DNA**

### **Responsibly luxurious ([www.lotuscars.com](http://www.lotuscars.com) )**

*Responsibly* harmonizes with electric as a non-ostentatious luxury approach has become more preferred among the customers. Yet, it may look surprising for those who may not be convinced if the concept of *luxury* carries any affinity with *responsibility*. On top of that, the webpage allures potential users to electrification connected with the legacy of the British brand adding touches of sustainability to its high-end image. This example may again prove what Sangadji et al. (2025, 86) aptly observed that brand interaction may be subject to a paradigm shift in marketing tools based on language to foster sustainability.

## AI-generated content

In my search of discursive strand data, I decided to ask ChatGPT AI engine to process and answer the topical question of the EV in Australia. Artificial intelligence is controversially perceived as a machine learning opportunity for mankind. The development of AI is global, but it is China and the US that constitute the forefront of the research on the application of AI. Substantial learning data is crucial to expand the system capacity. AI as a source of knowledge to solve problems is one thing, but driving a car, for example, by AI poses challenges from visual perception to navigation to proactive accident avoidance at the same time (Kissinger et al. 2021, 86). The key words from the problem area for the journal constituted for AI two independent questions:

### 1. Does electric vehicle have the grunt in Australia?

AI put the context of the answer to the general yes-no question figuratively yet accurately (*the grunt*) in quotation marks. A short introduction to the answer includes valuing comments showing advantages of EVs – *impressive* powertrains, *strong* performance, *quick* acceleration. Interestingly, the second part of the answer includes examples of EVs available on the Australian market:

- Tesla Model S Plaid (**speed and acceleration**),
- Rivian R1T (**off-road prowess**),
- Ford Mustang Mach-E (**muscle car feel with electric power**),
- Porsche Taycan (**performance-oriented sport sedan**),
- Lucid Air (**luxury and innovation**),
- Audi e-tron GT (**performance, luxury and sport design**).

The cars were shown as examples of “the grunt” without the place of production but with key word characteristics. Below the list with short model descriptions is a comment on the peculiarity of Australian market. The reader learns about practical features such as towing capacity for caravans, boats and trailers as those might be perceived natural in the Australian environment. EVs are considered as competitive towards diesel and petrol options for transport with towing capacity exceeding 4500 kg.

## 2. What do you know about car culture, electric vehicles and the transition to net zero mobility in Australia?

The wh-question was formulated in this way intentionally to investigate the structure of a complex answer to a complex question with three subject sub-areas concerning knowledge. Car culture is the broadest and most general. AI starts with motoring as a part of the national identity. This might sound obvious since great distances between settlements and low density of population required mobility. Vehicles are also described as indispensable for the rugged terrain. The response finishes with statistical data on car ownership – 19 million vehicles as of 2021. The AI tool underscores the interconnectivity of sustainability in transport and the future of reduced emission in Australia. It is directly linked to initiatives mentioned in the query response taken by administration on state and local levels – strategies, local initiatives and public transport EV transition. However, AI enumerates and briefly discusses major features of car culture – large vehicles, pickup trucks. The choice of cars is related to harsh road conditions. Australians take long trips for camping and caravanning. Therefore, they prefer bigger cars. EVs in Australia are the next item on AI list of cultural aspects of motoring. It emphasizes the slower pace at which the infrastructure develops apart from major cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Statistics show that EVs make up 7% of new car sales. Furthermore, AI aligns both barriers and opportunities for EV adoption in Australia. It repeatedly stressed the more difficult environment for implementation, pointing in particular to problems resulting from Australia's high reliance on the fossil fuel industry, which might generate opposition, similar to the cultural attachment surrounding ICE high-performance vehicles, which are perceived more car-like. This moves us back to the aspect of car culture as a concept:

**Public Perception:** Traditional car culture, with its focus on petrol-powered, high-performance vehicles, still **holds strong** in Australia. There's resistance in some quarters to EVs, as they're often seen as less practical or "**less fun**" than conventional cars, [...] (ChatGPT 4o mini).

Tradition and technological legacy of the past is acknowledged in the AI data analysis. Colloquial *less fun* relates to the opinions expressed by stakeholders – those who support or oppose electromobility but partake in it anyway. In the answer, one might feel textual pressure, which might change the opinion of sceptics:

Australians **are expected** to transition to electric mobility more rapidly. (ChatGpt 4o mini)

AI projections envisage the integration of EV solutions with higher range and improved battery capacity, alongside the coexistence of shared transport, autonomous vehicles, and improved public transport, all while encouraging a reduction in car ownership. These analyses omit ICE vehicles and even PHEVs, which might sound surprising.

Conclusions

Context is crucial in discourse analysis because it reflects the social situation and employs different types of language use, e.g. newspaper discourse, advertising discourse, legal or administrative discourse. (Fairclough (2011, 3).<sup>6</sup> The research sample, however, has to be narrowed down to show one aspect or a few in order to demonstrate the status of knowledge on the subject or show the style in which knowledge is conveyed to the recipients or at least to initiate a change in thinking. Australian EV-themed discursive samples can be categorized into three, partly overlapping, groups.

Relationality

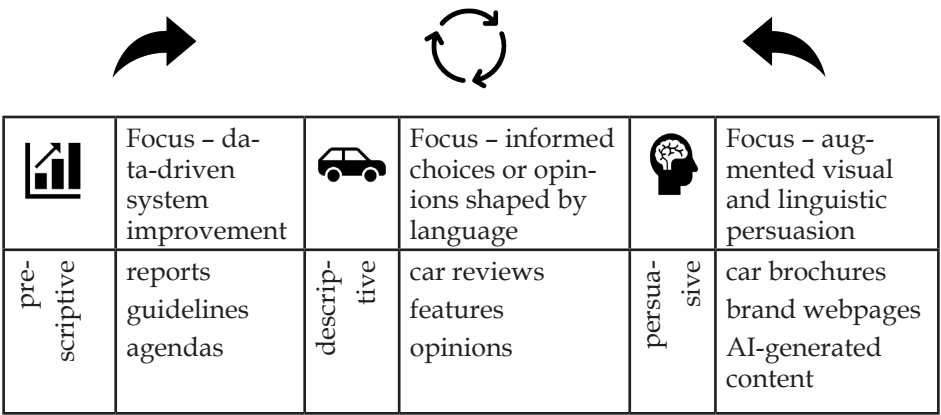


Table 1. Categorisation of EV-themed discourse relational samples

6 Cf. Bax (2011, 20) on the identification of discursive genres.

The first group includes all the official texts which depict the factual state of affairs, including reports, statistics, guidelines, visuals, and agendas prepared by authorities or regulatory bodies. While these documents contain discursive strands, their circulation among the general public is limited; they are intended for decision-makers and policymakers. They do not exert direct influence on non-specialist stakeholders or those who actively participate in the market mechanisms for buyers or users. Strategies and surveys maintain a certain distance from the practical EV narrative. Documents with compiled data use practical language tools for expressing predictability of certain phenomena or agency for the future (*might, will*). Based on the data presented, policymakers can introduce corrections and adjustments. Descriptive texts, in turn, present “things as they are” in a multi-strand reality, equipped with rich attributiveness and references to the non-motoring world of culture or politics. Their readers, who play the most vital role on the market because they make decisions, either decode the multi-layered structure of discourse or fish for the information they find interesting, including performance measurements or broader geographical contexts where test drives are made. Sometimes they follow the views of their favourite staff writers who can shape the perception of trends or give biased opinions on products, narrativized drive reports, features in car magazines or car tests penned by professional reviewers available online or in car magazines. Ultimately, the persuasive group used to include car brochures in their extensive, narrativized and hyper-visual form some time ago, but today, when they have all but vanished, AI-generated content might take over as a linguistic tool for textual persuasion. When compiled skillfully and fed with appropriate input, AI has the potential to influence readers, thus making them change their purchasing choices in line with the AI content fed by pressure groups. It seems that both descriptive and persuasive discourses will dynamically shape the Australian landscape of electromobility.

Discursive categories appear to have been inter-relational. With generative AI textual input, the discourse of electromobility in Australia will get even more diversified in the posthuman era of motoring. It should be the common effort of all the EV stakeholders, however, that the concept of zero emission mobility does not become distorted by AI. Relationality as a concept and model, presented on the prescriptive, descriptive and persuasive model in the contemporary motoring may be adopted in different discursive areas affected by posthumanism.

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# Common Issues of Using English as a Lingua Franca

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**Abstract:** This article examines the historical, geopolitical, and sociolinguistic factors that have shaped the global rise of English as a lingua franca (ELF). It outlines the colonial and postcolonial trajectories of English, its consolidation through American economic and cultural dominance, and its further acceleration in the age of globalization and digital technologies. Drawing on works by Crystal (2003), Graddol (1997, 2006), Jenkins (2014), Seidlhofer (2004, 2005, 2006), and Mackenzie (2014), and others, the article provides an overview of key definitions and conceptual debates surrounding ELF. Particular attention is paid to the question of whether ELF constitutes a distinct variety of English, to the benefits and disadvantages of its global spread, and to the practical issues it raises in intercultural communication. Empirical perspectives are included through reference to corpus-based research (e.g., VOICE, Cogo & Dewey), which suggest that ELF interaction is neither a “reduced” form of English nor chaotic, but often relies on creativity, accommodation strategies, and collaborative meaning making. At the same time, the article highlights concerns about fairness, linguistic inequality, and domain loss in the humanities and social sciences, where reliance on English may disadvantage non-native speakers and marginalize research in other languages. The discussion concludes by suggesting that ELF pedagogy should prioritize intelligibility, accommodation, and multilingual awareness over prescriptive adherence to native-speaker norms. The article also outlines concrete implications for syllabus design and assessment in ELF-informed classrooms. Furthermore, it emphasizes the necessity of shifting traditional assessment paradigms to better reflect the fluid and dynamic nature of modern global communication. By integrating translanguaging practices and acknowledging the multilingual repertoires of learners, educators can foster a more inclusive and equitable environment. Ultimately, embracing ELF as a legitimate communicative resource rather than a deviation from standard norms is essential for preparing individuals to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

**Keywords:** English as a lingua franca; globalization; multilingualism; sociolinguistics; language policy

## Introduction

Globalization, together with the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies, has significantly accelerated the global spread of English. Never before has a language been acquired and used as a second language by such a vast proportion of the world's population. The term *lingua franca* derives from the Arabic *lisan al-farang* and originally referred to a contact language used for communication among speakers of different native languages (Goebl et al. 1996). In the contemporary world, English has come to occupy this role on an unprecedented scale.

Today, non-native speakers of English vastly outnumber native speakers. Crystal (2003) observes that native speakers account for less than a quarter of English users worldwide, which means that most interactions in English now take place in intercultural contexts, either among non-native speakers themselves or in mixed encounters with native speakers. This shift has given rise to extensive scholarly interest in English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) as a mode of communication shaped by multilingual realities rather than by traditional native-speaker norms.

This article adopts the view that ELF can be understood not as a deficient or transitional form of English, but as a functional and adaptive mode of communication, as widely argued in the ELF literature. While the article draws on established scholarship, it also adopts a critical perspective on ongoing debates surrounding the status of ELF, particularly the question of whether it constitutes a distinct variety of English.

Against this background, the article is guided by the following thematic questions:

- How the global rise of English can be understood from historical and sociolinguistic perspectives;
- How ELF has been defined and conceptualized in the literature;
- What major benefits and disadvantages have been identified in relation to ELF;
- What recurrent issues have been observed in ELF communication, particularly in interactions involving native and non-native speakers.

For background, Crystal's (2003) influential volume *English as a Global Language* and Graddol's (1997, 2006) British Council reports on the future of English provide valuable context for the present discussion.

The present article is conceived as a narrative review of selected scholarship on ELF, rather than as an empirical study. Its aim is not to provide a systematic review of all available literature, but to synthesize key theoretical, historical, and sociolinguistic perspectives relevant to four interrelated questions: the global rise of English, the definition and status of ELF, its major benefits and disadvantages, and selected recurrent issues in ELF communication. The discussion is organized thematically and draws on both foundational contributions to ELF research and representative corpus-based and pedagogical studies in order to provide a coherent overview of the field.

### **1. The historical rise of English as a global language**

The international prominence of English has deep historical roots, beginning in the seventeenth century when England transformed into a major colonial power with a dominant navy and extensive overseas territories. English spread globally through colonial administration, trade and later US-led media/technology. At the time, England's priority was to secure trading networks. In such circumstances, the language of the dominant, economically advanced nation often displaced local tongues. As in many empires, political and economic dominance determined which language gained precedence. In the eighteenth century, English became firmly associated with commerce, reinforcing Britain's role in shaping the global economy and international exchange.

Even when the colonized countries gained independence, trade relations with Great Britain continued to develop, and English remained in use. One reason is that, in some contexts, local languages lacked established terminology for new administrative and commercial domains. Another reason is that English has already taken root in this area and the locals knew it well. In many cases, participation in trade required communication in English.

Another important factor in the emergence of English as an international language was the colonization of North America. The British were not the only settlers. In addition to English, there were also French, Spanish, German, Dutch spoken in America. At the beginning of the 20th century, the question of national unity arose sharply: something was supposed to unite the country and the people who lived in it. In this context, English functioned as a unifying medium of communication.

In the second half of the 20th century, England faded into the background, the era of America began. In the aftermath of World War II, the major powers focused primarily on reconstruction and national recovery. In turn, the United States suffered less than the rest and continued to develop in all directions: economic, diplomatic, political and military. The country was especially active in developing economic relations. America made the right choice, continuing the English tradition. US products dominated many markets. Naturally, a common language is needed to carry out an economic transaction, and again that language has become English. This can be explained by the same underlying mechanism observed in the 17th century, namely the role of geopolitical and economic dominance in language spread.

US influence has intensified over time. But it is not enough just to win the championship, it is important to maintain it. If trade played a key role in England in the 18th century, then America occupied its niche in history for other reasons:

a. The advent of the computer and the Internet

For any nation, having its language achieve international status is a strategic advantage. As one of the leading global powers, the United States actively fostered the worldwide spread of English, aligning its cultural and political influence with linguistic expansion. A key factor was the rise of personal computing and the Internet, largely driven by US industry, which further amplified the global reach of English. These instant messaging tools have greatly contributed to the globalization of the English language.

b. American lifestyle

In the second half of the 20th century, against the background of post-war and dilapidated countries, the United States looked very attractive. The “American Dream” seemed to be an ideal, and people from different countries sought to at least get closer to this ideal, and language is one way to get closer. Films, music, youth movements came to us from across the ocean and brought with them an English-language culture.

| Language                                 | Ethnologue<br>Native speakers<br>(1) | Ethnologue<br>Total speakers<br>(2) | MT<br>Native speakers<br>(3) | MT<br>Total speakers<br>(4) |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Chinese <sup>a</sup>                     | 1,197                                | >1,197                              | 1,161                        | 1,165                       |
| English <sup>b</sup>                     | 335                                  | >765                                | 357                          | 1,123                       |
| Spanish                                  | 406                                  | 466                                 | 401                          | 479                         |
| Hindi/Urdu <sup>b</sup>                  | 324                                  | >387                                | —                            | —                           |
| Arabic <sup>a</sup>                      | 206                                  | 246                                 | 244                          | 272                         |
| Russian                                  | 162                                  | 272                                 | 184                          | 267                         |
| French                                   | 68                                   | 118                                 | 69                           | 260                         |
| Bengali                                  | 193                                  | 250                                 | —                            | —                           |
| Portuguese                               | 202                                  | 217                                 | 209                          | 222                         |
| German                                   | 84                                   | 112                                 | 89                           | 168                         |
| Malay <sup>b</sup>                       | 23                                   | >163                                | 22                           | 158                         |
| Japanese                                 | 122                                  | 123                                 | 126                          | 126                         |
| Turkish/Azerbaijani/Turkmen <sup>b</sup> | 83                                   | >83                                 | 91                           | 102                         |
| Italian <sup>b</sup>                     | 61                                   | >61                                 | 64                           | 77                          |
| Dutch/Afrikaans <sup>b</sup>             | 28                                   | >28                                 | 22                           | 37                          |

Table 1. Worldwide speakers (millions)

## 2. The status of English as a global language

No single factor creates a lingua franca. It is rather a combination of causes and the number of its non-native speakers that determines the fate of a spreading

language. The contributions of many authors make up a long list of factors responsible for language spread, which is by no means complete due to the changeable nature of the phenomenon (see e.g. Ammon 1989, 257).

The table above shows two sets of estimates, one from *Ethnologue languages of the world* (*Ethnologue*) and the other from Melitz and Toubal (2014) (hereafter MT), the source of the data for the relevant study of language learning.

*Ethnologue* classifies Chinese and Arabic as “macrolanguages,” grouping together varieties that are not always mutually intelligible. Such classifications partly explain differences between sources in estimating total speaker numbers. Therefore, as we can see there are more native speakers of Chinese than any other language by far. However, based on Table 1, English is on par with Chinese as world leader in total speakers and all other languages lag far behind. Most important of all, English is way ahead of all other languages as a learned language by non-native speakers, and it is the only one to be well represented in all five continents. In terms of geographical dispersion, only French comes anywhere close to English but is still far behind.

Roughly speaking, every fourth user of English is a native speaker of English, which means that most ELF interactions are controlled by non-native speakers of English (Crystal 2003, 76; Seidlhofer 2005, 339).

### 3. English as a lingua franca, definition.

Jenkins (2013) points out that while English has long functioned as a lingua franca in former British colonies, what distinguishes the current era is the unprecedented breadth of its global reach. Spheres of usage of ELF may be as follows:

#### a ELF in Politics and Other Global Matters

ELF functions not only in informal tourism contexts but also in high-stakes domains such as diplomacy, law, business, media, higher education and research. Kachru and Smith (2008, 3) describe this as ELF’s “mathetic function.” As Mackenzie (2014) points out, ELF diverges from English as a native language: spoken ELF shows considerable variation and non-standard features, while written ELF tends to remain closer to standard ENL norms.

### b. ELF in Local and International Settings

According to Kirkpatrick (2007), ELF operates across different scales — from local to international. The more localised the interaction, the more variation it usually displays, reflecting identity markers such as code-switching and localised norms. In contrast, in international contexts, speakers deliberately avoid these features in favour of more neutral forms. Within this discussion, two related questions are particularly important:

### c. Is ELF a Variety of English?

One of the most debated issues in ELF research concerns its status as a potential variety of English. While many scholars agree that ELF constitutes a legitimate mode of international communication, its classification remains contested. From a prescriptive perspective, ELF is sometimes dismissed as a simplified or deficient form of English, often labelled as “bad English.” Such views, however, fail to account for the communicative effectiveness and systematic patterns observed in ELF interaction.

Barbara Seidlhofer (2006) cautions against treating ELF as a fully fledged variety of English, arguing that such classification would be premature without more extensive empirical description. This position reflects a concern that codifying ELF too early may obscure its fluid and context-dependent nature. At the same time, an exclusively cautious approach risks defining ELF only in negative terms, that is, by what it is not in relation to native-speaker English. From a usage-based perspective, it may be more productive to view ELF not as a codified variety comparable to national or regional Englishes, but as an emergent communicative phenomenon shaped by multilingual practices. Rather than adhering to pre-established norms, ELF users negotiate intelligibility, accommodate to their interlocutors, and prioritize communicative success over formal correctness. In this sense, ELF can be understood as a functional category whose norms arise from use rather than prescription.

### d. Who Is English a Lingua Franca for?

The question of who ELF is for further illustrates its conceptual complexity. Modiano (2009) distinguishes between two broad perspectives. The first treats ELF as a foreign language primarily intended for non-native speakers, to be learned and assessed in a manner similar to other school subjects. The second, more closely

aligned with the World Englishes paradigm, conceptualizes ELF as a flexible communicative resource used in multilingual and multicultural settings.

Modiano himself advocates an inclusive understanding of ELF that recognizes its role as a practical means of international communication rather than a deviation from inner-circle norms. From this perspective, ELF is not owned by any single group of speakers but is co-constructed by its users in specific communicative contexts. This view aligns with the broader argument advanced in this article: that ELF should be evaluated in terms of its functionality and adaptability rather than its conformity to native-speaker standards.

#### **4. Benefits and disadvantages of ELF**

This section outlines the major benefits and drawbacks associated with ELF, as discussed in the literature. Perhaps the immediate benefit of ELF is mutual intelligibility, which is usually achieved when speakers adjust their speech to accommodate one another. There are areas of international encounter where the welfare benefits of a lingua franca are evident. For example, a lingua franca is of mutual benefit to everyone in travel and inside the world industry of news diffusion. The growth of multinational corporations has also reinforced the need for a shared language of communication. The political influence of the United States may be important in explaining the convergence on English as the preferred choice of lingua franca in these cases. But by and large, no other choice would bring the world population as much benefit. Van Parijs (2011) highlights distributional issues: native English speakers benefit from having their mother tongue adopted globally but may also be disadvantaged by reduced incentives to learn additional languages. By contrast, multilingual individuals from smaller nations often develop broader repertoires, which can be seen as an advantage.

The British Chambers of Commerce (2003–2004) and some other British organizations, like the Nuffield Foundation (see the Nuffield Foundation Report, 2000), can be understood to lean towards such a view since they deplore the lower possession of foreign languages and the lower attention to foreign languages in school curricula in the UK than most elsewhere in the EU. It is widely acknowledged, however, that the advantages of native English speakers receive the most attention.

If English is adopted as the lingua franca in an international assembly or conference room, native speakers of this language are typically in a better position

than those for whom English is an inferior choice. In this respect, considerations of fairness will occasionally suggest improvements in the operating rules of organisations. Pool (1991), for example, suggests that it is possible to reconcile efficiency and fairness in the distribution of the costs of translation in international organizations. There could also be derogations to the use of English (or any lingua franca, for that matter) based on axioms of fairness as a function of the circumstances (e.g., who the principal interested parties are).

What about the normative aspects of the dominance of English in science and the academic world? In 2006 a group organized by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) to report on the translation of social science texts issued “A plea for social scientists to write in their own languages” at the annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies (see Tymowski 2006; Allen 2007). The group sees no harm if mathematicians and natural scientists worldwide write in English, but does so if social scientists do the same. The idea, therefore, is that the content of social science investigation can only be fully stated in the investigator’s language. If that is the case, the widespread shift to English in the social sciences represents a collective cost and leaves the field unusually dependent on multilingual scholars and professional translators. Yet the only evidence is a reference to the early nineteenth-century writing of about the relation of language to empirical perception.

In embracing the same position, Hamel (2006) refers to the earlier and related philosophical writing of Herder. This position would benefit from stronger empirical support that the social sciences are more reliant on the diversity of languages in the world in communicating their work than the natural sciences and that the strong personal inducements social scientists face to express themselves in English impoverish their contributions to knowledge. In a communication to the same Congress to which Truchot (1996) addressed his paper on the political pressures facing French natural scientists to write in French, Walter (1996) notably points out that the tendency of scientists to veer towards a single language in writing traces back more than two millennia with the language of choice shifting from Sumerian to Greek to Arabic to Latin. From this angle, the twentieth-century predominance of English appears to continue a longer trajectory, while the nineteenth-century coexistence of German, French and English looks more like a historical exception. Perhaps the return to the longer time trend is for the better: information travels faster.

This is not to deny the possible uneven impact of the central role of English on the welfare of scientists and scholars in the humanities. How far do native English scientists and scholars in the humanities have an advantage over the rest

(despite their smaller incentives to learn a second language, to their possible regret outside of their professional life and maybe inside of it too)? A study by Sandelin and Sarafoglou (2004) has some indirect bearing on the subject. The authors assess if native-English-speaking countries generate a higher per capita output of professional publications than other nations in a 30-country sample, considering separately the social sciences, the arts and humanities, and the natural sciences.

They also control for world size of the principal home language (total world native Spanish population in the case of Spain, for example) and GDP. The results show that the native English countries do indeed host a larger number of papers in professional publications by resident scientists and scholars per capita (i.e., in relation to the total national population) than other countries. Interestingly, however, this is true for publications in the natural sciences as well as the social sciences and the arts and the humanities. The coefficient for the natural sciences is around a third as high as for the other two areas, but it is still statistically significantly different from zero at the 95% confidence level. On this evidence, the native English status of a country favours a higher ratio of home-produced publications to the national population in the natural sciences as well as in the social sciences (quite apart from the world population of native speakers of the home language), if only to a lesser extent. This would suggest, without implying it, that the difference in the welfare advantage of the prominence of English to a native English scientist or scholar in the three different spheres is only a matter of degree. To the best of current knowledge, there is limited direct empirical evidence addressing this question. Let us next return to the areas where multilingualism, interpreters and translations are able to overcome the problem of Babel and English is simply “the first among equals,” so to speak. The discussion here has emphasized that the scope is very broad, spanning the press, broadcasting, the Internet, publishing (with translation posing particular challenges), and commerce, aside from three exceptions that will be noted later. In these areas, the evidence would show that, broadly speaking, while English is in the lead, it faces sharp limits and all other major languages are safe.

The evidence concerning language learning is supportive. If English truly endangered other major languages across such domains, one would anticipate that applying the same learning model to the next eight or ten largest languages would yield very poor results. Yet the model does fine. Does any general welfare problem arise from the eminent position of English in these cases? It would seem that the answer is negative. From the standpoint of welfare, there is no

clear basis for advocating any special international effort to promote or demote English in the press, television, the Internet, publishing and trade.

In defence of this view, it can be argued that encouraging foreign language learning in general may be beneficial for wages, trade, and culture. But the place of English relative to other languages is a separate topic. Learning English comes at the expense of learning other languages. For example, the hypothetical argument (which does not seem exactly alien) that everyone should learn English as a second language is quite dubious. The argument would imply that some of the time that is currently spent on learning other second languages by people who do not know English would be better spent on learning English. Yet no one has yet made the case. Invoking coordination failures is not persuasive here, because such failures could equally justify the promotion of several other languages that are also used across vast regions of the world. In addition, the principle of diminishing returns interferes.

Even if English is now the most useful language to learn in one's homeland and occupation, once enough others learn it, the best language to acquire may well become another. Ginsburgh and Prieto (2011) offer labour market support. Interpreters and translations should also be kept in mind. Translation renders much of learning inefficiently costly (mercifully so), which may also argue against learning English (as well as other second languages). The cultural domains of English dominance may provide the strongest basis for the argument that there can be such a thing as 'too much English'. Let us assume a general preference for the use of one's native language in private contexts, in the sense that individuals, even when proficient in a second language, tend to favour their first language in everyday life. The evidence is overwhelming: it comes from the newspapers people read (even if they know a second language), the television they watch, the Internet they use, and many of the facts about edition and trade. Interestingly too, the supporting evidence covers the film and the best-seller as well if only we remember that non-native English people mostly view English-language films that are dubbed or, in the case of the majority only when there is no choice, subtitled, and they mostly read foreign-language best-sellers in translation. The question then is how it can possibly enhance welfare for English to dominate music, film, and popular literature to the extent that it does.

The argument that it is welfare-improving must be that, somehow, foreign-language speakers obtain compensation for their sacrifice of home-language benefits either through higher quality in other regards or else through

lower social costs. Another explanation is market specialization: with comparative advantage and economies of scale, nations tend to narrow their productive focus. In this light, English-speaking countries have carved out a specialization in cultural production. Overall, while ELF facilitates communication and reduces transaction costs across many domains, in science and the humanities it can also create inequalities by privileging native speakers and marginalizing research produced in other languages.

The argument has merit with respect to film where, in fact, the dominance is specifically American as such, and the British film industry is just as dominated by Hollywood as the French one. Hollywood also rose to world prominence under the silent film, before “talkies”. Thus, one can even make a case that Hollywood is the fundamental factor, not English, although such an interpretation remains open to debate because of the contribution of the French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Spanish and Swedish film in the history of the cinema (see also Francois and van Ypersele 2002). But in the case of the song and the best-seller, the argument seems wobbly. Where is the benefit in quality or the reduction in social costs? One particular ground for suspicion is that in other related cultural areas, like music without words, photography, painting, sculpture and architecture, the native English contribution is closer to what we would expect on the basis of relative population size, income, wealth and tradition.

There appears to be a distinct dynamic at work in cultural markets where language is concerned. It can be argued that there is a possible long-term danger. Suppose that the budding author and popular singer of talent feel under the same pressure as the scientist and scholar in the humanities

to make his/her name in English. Assume also, as seems to be true  
in science, that the outstanding

talents are especially likely to succumb to this temptation. Their odds of success are higher but the lure is at least the same. In fact, we know of several cases of authors in the hall of literary fame who dropped their native language in favour of others with a larger and more impressive literary tradition (with few, if any, well-known examples in the opposite direction since the move away from Latin and the printing press): Conrad, Kafka and Ionesco, to mention three. Gogol evidently seriously hesitated between his native Ukrainian and Russian. This is crucially relevant. The real concern is not that creative writing in other

languages will disappear altogether, but that the highest-quality works may increasingly be produced in English. If this trend is already unfolding, it could shed light on the paradox mentioned earlier. In the case of science, where such a tendency is manifest, there is no harm and indeed even a benefit. In literature, however, we cannot reason the same. Literature is an area where language as such is a source of pleasures and enjoyment, an end in itself, rather than a mere instrument for conveying information, or as an outstanding economic contribution by Church and King (1993) has it, a “communication technology.” Under the previous scenario, English might continue to evolve and to discover new literary veins. But how much comfort is that? If everyone wrote music for the violin, likewise music might still thrive and we might even hear new echoes of the viola and the guitar and who knows what else issuing from violin strings. Still, what about the keyboard, the winds and the percussion? It does not seem plausible to argue that there would be no loss. Overall, the impact of ELF appears to be context-dependent, involving both communicative advantages and structural inequalities. Against this background, it is possible to identify a number of recurrent issues in ELF communication.

## 5. Common problems of ELF usage

Researchers set about identifying features that appeared to be specific to individual ELF ‘varieties’ along with features that seemed to be shared across many of these ‘varieties’, just as features had earlier been identified both within and across outer circle English varieties. And perhaps unremarkably, many of the shared expanding circle features thus identified were found to be shared also with outer circle Englishes.

Typical ELF patterns include pluralizing normally uncountable nouns (e.g. *staffs*, *feedbacks*), omitting the third-person -s (*she think*), or inserting extra prepositions (*discuss about*). In a much-quoted article drawing on several projects conducted on VOICE data, Seidlhofer (2004, 220) presents a number of “regularities” that had been observed across ELF users from different first languages and which, although typical errors in native English, were not found to impede success in ELF communication. These potential features of ELF were as follows:

- a. ‘Dropping’ the third person present tense -s
- b. ‘Confusing’ the relative pronouns *who* and *which*

- c. 'Omitting' definite and indefinite articles where they are obligatory in ENL, and inserting them where they do not occur in ENL
- d. 'Failing' to use correct forms in tag questions (e.g., isn't it? or no? instead of shouldn't they?)
- e. 'Inserting' redundant prepositions, as in We have to study about...
- f. 'Overusing' certain verbs of high semantic generality, such as do, have, make, put, take
- g. 'Replacing' infinitive-constructions with that-clauses, as in I want that
- h. 'Overdoing' explicitness (e.g. black color rather than just black)

Previous corpus-based research drawing on datasets such as VOICE (Vien-na-Oxford International Corpus of English) and studies by Cogo and Dewey (2012) suggests that ELF communication often relies on collaborative strategies such as completing utterances, negotiation of forms, and backchanneling. These features suggest that ELF interaction should not be viewed as a "reduced" form of English, but rather as a dynamic process of co-constructing meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. These findings challenge deficit-oriented views of non-native English use by demonstrating that communicative success in ELF settings depends less on formal accuracy than on speakers' pragmatic competence and willingness to cooperate. Rather than treating such features as deviations, ELF corpus research suggests that they constitute systematic and interactionally meaningful patterns.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the historical, geopolitical and sociolinguistic forces behind the rise of ELF, outlined the main conceptual approaches to ELF, and critically reviewed debates concerning its benefits and drawbacks. It has argued, in line with previous research, that ELF communication, far from being a "reduced" or deficient form of English, relies on collaborative strategies such as accommodation, creativity and the co-construction of meaning, which enable speakers to manage linguistic diversity with considerable effectiveness.

Historically, the expansion of English was driven first by colonial trade, later by US geopolitical dominance, and most recently by the digital revolution. Sociolinguistically, this expansion has resulted in a communicative landscape in which non-native speakers vastly outnumber native ones, contributing to the

emergence of new norms of intelligibility and interaction. From a pedagogical perspective, these developments suggest that English language teaching should move beyond prescriptive native-speaker models and place greater emphasis on learners' ability to negotiate meaning, adapt to diverse interlocutors, and draw on multilingual resources.

At the same time, important caveats remain. The dominance of English in science and the humanities raises persistent questions of equity and the risk of domain loss for other languages. While empirical research indicates that ELF does not hinder communication, it does generate structural asymmetries between those who participate in global networks with English as a first language and those who invest substantial time and effort in acquiring it. These issues are particularly acute in disciplines where language itself plays a central role in knowledge production and cultural expression.

Future research should therefore build on existing corpus-based work, such as studies drawing on the VOICE corpus, while extending the analytical scope beyond European and academic contexts to include digital communication, workplace interaction and cultural production in a wider range of world regions. Comparative research is especially needed to assess whether ELF practices systematically disadvantage particular language communities or, alternatively, create new opportunities for multilingual engagement.

In practical terms, an ELF-informed pedagogical approach should prioritize intelligibility and accommodation, foster awareness of linguistic diversity, and encourage translanguaging as a communicative resource rather than an obstacle. Ultimately, the central question is not whether English will continue to function as the world's lingua franca — it is highly likely to do so — but how it can be used in ways that promote inclusion, fairness and creativity across global communicative contexts.

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## The 33rd Annual Conference of the Polish Association for the Study of English (PASE) / Crossroads 5 Conference, Białystok, 4–6 June 2025

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The 33rd annual conference of the Polish Association for the Study of English (PASE), held jointly with the *Crossroads Conferences*, took place on 4–6 June 2025 at the University of Białystok. Hosted by the English Philology section at the Faculty of Philology, the event brought together scholars working across linguistics, literary and cultural studies.

The conference theme, *“Voices of the Earth: literary and linguistic perspectives in environmental humanities”*, situated the conference within the expanding field of environmental humanities. The call for papers stressed that human activity is making the planet increasingly uninhabitable, pointing to climate change, pollution, and mass extinction. It also argued that scientific perspectives alone are insufficient, calling for approaches that engage cultural narratives, ethical frameworks, and modes of representation. The conference thus aimed to foster interdisciplinary dialogue and to explore how literary, cultural, and linguistic inquiry can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ecological crises.

The programme reflected this agenda. The papers explored environmental justice, climate trauma and migration and intersections between ecology and race, gender, and colonial histories. They also addressed representations of non-human entities in discourse. Other contributions examined ecodiscourse, ecolinguistics, ecostylistics, eco-translation, and ecological approaches to teaching and learning. The sessions demonstrated both the diversity of current research and the growing centrality of environmental concerns within English Studies.

The plenary lectures further developed these perspectives. Professor Katarzyna Więckowska (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń) delivered a talk entitled *“Displacement, Violence and Toxicity: Readings in Geontopower”*. Drawing on Elizabeth Povinelli’s concept of geontopower, she examined how distinctions between life and nonlife are mobilized within late liberal frameworks and how they intersect with the legacies of colonialism. Focusing on Anglophone African

fiction, including works by Imbolo Mbue and Ben Okri, she explored how environmental degradation, displacement, and toxicity shape human and non-human futures. Drawing on thinkers such as Rob Nixon and Achille Mbembe, she showed how ecological crisis is entangled with histories of exclusion and uneven distributions of vulnerability.

The second plenary lecture was delivered by Daniela Francesca Viridis (University of Cagliari) and was entitled *"Ecostylistic Approaches to Landscapes: Between Theory and Practice"*. Drawing on recent work in ecostylistics, Viridis outlined key analytical tools from stylistics such as foregrounding, point of view, metaphor, framing, and corpus-based approaches, and demonstrated their use across environmental websites, literary prose, and media discourse. She showed how linguistic choices shape representations of nature and encode underlying ideologies, demonstrating how discourse shapes representations of the environment.

Beyond the plenary lectures and papers delivered during thematic sessions, the conference created space for sustained exchange, with discussions extending across panels. Overall, the event emphasized both the breadth of current research in English Studies and the growing importance of environmental humanities as a shared area of inquiry.

The conference concluded with a closing session in which the organizers thanked participants for their contributions and engagement. The Białystok meeting confirmed the relevance and value of interdisciplinary approaches to environmental questions and underscored the role of PASE as a forum for scholarly dialogue across linguistic and literary domains. During the General Assembly, it was announced that the 2026 annual PASE conference would be hosted by the University of Rzeszów.

**Šárka Bubíková, Olga Roebuck, 2023, *The Place It Was Done: Location and Community in Contemporary American and British Crime Fiction*  
(Jefferson: McFarland)**

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Since the Golden Age of detective fiction in the 1920s and 1930s, we have witnessed another surge in the genre's worldwide popularity among readers in recent decades, a phenomenon fuelled by a boom in crime fiction by Scandinavian authors of so-called Nordic noir. The Nielsen Bookscan data at the London Book Fair reveals that in 2017, for the first time since Nielsen's records started, crime fiction sales have overtaken sales in the "general and literary fiction" category. Since 2015, sales of crime novels have increased by 19% to 18.7 million, compared to 18.1 million books that were sold in 2017.

Academic interest in crime fiction did not lag behind for long. Šárka Bubíková and Olga Roebuck's *The Place It Was Done: Location and Community in Contemporary American and British Crime Fiction* is undoubtedly a worthy contribution to this trend, focusing solely on the geographical setting of the crime fiction and how it shapes both the genre's narrative possibilities and its thematic depth. The authors take on an ambitious task to explore how place and space function in modern crime narratives, also incorporating sociocultural perspectives. Inspired by the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Lawrence Buell, Walter Benjamin, Edward Soja, Bertrand Westphal and others, the authors deliver a multifaceted, yet accessible analysis that avoids the pitfalls of excessive theoretical jargon even as it maintains methodological precision. The monograph is structured into three major chapters, each focusing on a specific spatial category—city, countryside, and wilderness—and it provides a comprehensive study of how crime fiction engages with its settings and the communities that inhabit them.

The book's greatest strength lies in its wide-ranging yet coherent discussion of the spatial dynamics of crime fiction. The first and longest chapter, "The City," offers a rich exploration of urban crime fiction, tracing its evolution from Victorian London, through the Golden Age's shift to the English countryside, to

the contemporary dominance of city-based crime narratives. The discussion of London-based crime fiction, particularly the juxtaposition of David Galbraith's series with Ian Rankin and Christopher Brookmyre's Edinburgh-set works, is particularly interesting. The analysis highlights the impact of post-industrial changes and Thatcher-era policies on Scottish crime fiction, emphasizing noir sensibilities and social critique. A comparative perspective between British and American urban crime settings further strengthens the discussion, providing insightful contrasts and parallels.

One of the most interesting aspects of this chapter is its approach to the interplay between protagonists and their urban settings. Galbraith's juxtaposition of London and smaller communities through the experiences of Cormoran Strike, a Cornish outsider, and Robin, his middle-class assistant, serves as a compelling study of insider-outsider dynamics. The exploration of Edinburgh's duality in the works of Rankin and Brookmyre, contrasting the city's historical grandeur with its dark, crime-stained face, further enriches the discussion. Nevertheless, the organization of the chapter, while thematic, might have benefited from a clearer division between English and Scottish crime fiction, allowing for a more straightforward comparative analysis. A concluding summary at the end of this extensive chapter would have been useful in consolidating the key insights and reinforcing the parallels between British and American urban crime fiction.

The second chapter "Countryside" investigates crime fiction's shifting portrayal of rural settings. Moving away from the idyllic, nostalgic depictions characteristic of the Golden Age, the analysis emphasizes how contemporary works depict the countryside as a space plagued by many dangers, social tensions, and hidden darkness. This is an important and necessary corrective to the traditional view of the countryside as a mere background for crime disruption and resolution. However, the selection of examples—Martha's Vineyard and the Amish community—feels overly narrow. While these settings are undeniably fascinating and offer unique perspectives, they may not necessarily represent the broader spectrum of rural crime fiction, making it difficult to draw generalized conclusions. A more balanced approach would have included a discussion of rural crime fiction set in more conventional, widely recognized countryside settings. Incorporating examples from English village mysteries or contemporary rural noir, for instance, could have provided a broader perspective on how the countryside is depicted in crime literature. Moreover, the countryside chapter is notably shorter than the other two, leaving certain themes underexplored. The

contrast between rural crime fiction and urban narratives, for instance, could have been more explicitly articulated, particularly in terms of how rural communities respond to crime differently than their urban counterparts. Additionally, the absence of a summary at the chapter's conclusion diminishes its cohesion, leaving the reader without a clear synthesis of its key findings.

"Wilderness," the third chapter, focuses predominantly on American crime fiction, which is justified given the United Kingdom's lack of vast, uninhabited regions. The discussion of the paradox of setting crime narratives in the wilderness—considering the Wilderness Act of 1964's definition of such spaces as untrammelled by human influence—is particularly thought-provoking. By drawing on Roderick Frazier Nash's conceptualization of wilderness as both a physical and symbolic entity, the chapter explains this paradox and sets out to explore, at least partially, Western literature's traditional wilderness areas: ocean, desert, forest, and mountains.

The examples in this chapter are particularly well-chosen, demonstrating an awareness of the different ways wilderness is represented in crime fiction. The discussion of Dana Stabenow's *Kate Shugak* series and Anne and Tony Hillerman's works provides a nuanced examination of how crime fiction interacts with indigenous perspectives, environmental concerns, and frontier mythologies. The chapter also highlights how authors such as Nevada Barr depict wilderness with deep ecological awareness, while others reduce it to a mere setting for criminal activity. The contrast between how different crime novelists approach wilderness is particularly compelling—while some embrace it as a space of spiritual regeneration and raw natural beauty, others use it as a site of violence, isolation, and environmental exploitation.

The exploration of how indigenous characters interact with their wilderness setting is another strength of the chapter. The contrast between Hillerman's Navajo detectives, who view the land with deep reverence, and the character of Ella Clah in Aimee and David Thurlo's series, who remains distanced from her cultural heritage, provides an insightful commentary on the intersection of identity, tradition, and place. Similarly, the discussion of Alaska as a frontier space dominated by its unyielding mountains and extreme conditions exposes the naturalistic indifference of a landscape which can both sustain and destroy. Unlike the previous two chapters, "Wilderness" includes a helpful concluding summary, reinforcing the argument that contemporary crime fiction has increasingly come to approach wilderness through the prism of ecocriticism.

Despite its strengths, the book would have benefited from a final concluding chapter that would synthesize the findings from all preceding parts. While each chapter successfully analyses its respective setting, a more explicit contrast between urban, rural, and wilderness crime fiction could have provided a clearer picture of overarching trends. For example, an exploration of how each setting may also affect the type of crime depicted—organized crime in urban environments, community-based conflicts in rural settings, and environmental or survival-based crime in the wilderness—would have provided an interesting addition to the discussion.

Additionally, while the book does an admirable job of integrating theory without overwhelming the reader, a brief recap of key theoretical insights in the final section would have reinforced its academic framework. The methodologies employed, particularly Bertrand Westphal's geocritical approach, are applied effectively throughout the book, but a final reflection on how these methodologies have shaped the study's conclusions would have been beneficial.

Overall, *The Place It Was Done: Location and Community in Contemporary American and British Crime Fiction* is a valuable contribution to crime fiction studies, offering a thorough and engaging examination of how various settings shape the narrative. The book fulfils its promise of employing a cultural studies approach to explore the interplay between space, crime, and community while maintaining an accessible and engaging style. Despite some unevenness in chapter length, a few overly specific examples, and the lack of an overall conclusion, the monograph remains an insightful and rewarding read for scholars and crime fiction enthusiasts alike. Its nuanced exploration of the evolving role of setting in crime narratives ensures its place as an important reference for future studies on the genre.

For future editions or expansions of this study, it would be interesting to explore additional dimensions of crime fiction's spatial dynamics, such as the role of suburban settings, transient spaces like highways and borderlands, or the increasing prominence of digital and virtual spaces in contemporary crime narratives. Nevertheless, the book stands as a significant academic contribution, offering a fresh and thought-provoking perspective on how crime fiction continues to be shaped by the spaces in which it unravels.

**James F. English and Heather Love (eds.), 2023,  
*Literary Studies and Human Flourishing*  
 (New York: Oxford University Press)**

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 Dr Ujjwal Jana, University of Delhi, Delhi**

Departing from the oft-quoted function of literature and literary criticism, of manufacturing discomfort, of acting as “an axe to break the frozen sea within readers,” writer Leah Price argues that the function of literature of/for human flourishing is to act as an “icepack.” The ameliorative aspect of literature and its curative power form the basic framework of the edited volume, as it takes into account the multiple lines of thought emerging from within literary studies that appear to converge towards a plane of negotiated existence with the “positive” science of well-being. The otherwise antagonistic position that literary studies has taken to positive psychology is subordinated in the interest of finding ways in which the two can conjoin in productive ways to break new theoretical ground for reconciling the “philosophical and methodological differences that separate” literary scholars from becoming a part of an “interdisciplinary conversation about human flourishing” (English and Love 2). The edited volume is organised into ten chapters across five sections and is preceded by an Introduction.

The editors, James F. English and Heather Love, establish a truism at the very outset of the Introduction, declaring “literature provides an imaginative access to the inner lives of others, widening our capacity for empathy and mutual understanding,” which is invoked time and again in the sections that follow, to draw on the connections between literary studies and human flourishing, and how the seemingly irreconcilable twain shall meet (2). The grounds of engagement for the two nonetheless remain vague, with chapter authors treading two lines simultaneously, one of literary studies’ theoretical engagement with human flourishing. The other is dealt with in Sections IV and V, of how the intersection of literary studies and human flourishing can contribute to all kinds of health benefits (assist with ageing), and repair trauma and generally be a great source of well-being. Admittedly, the volume pays much more attention to the former, with only Beth Blum’s chapter on “therapeutic redescription” attempting to

engage with the latter. She discusses *Meditations* at length, to underscore how the Stoics, in Foucault's words, used "reductive description" and "description that aims to discredit" to generate an alternate view of things. Therapeutic redescription has been particularly fruitful in the field of cognitive-behavioural therapy and Gestalt psychology, which emphasise "modifying language for therapeutic benefits" (Blum 186). Blum's project here then extends to incorporating the use of re-descriptive language into analytical thinking, to bring out the dormant therapeutic elements coiled within literary studies.

In the section titled "Happy Reading: Literature without the academy," Leah Price's chapter "Bibliotherapy and Human Flourishing" opens with the different ways, often not so flattering, in which books have been blamed for "tired eyes, hunched backs or fevered minds," before proceeding to its more contemporary understanding of tools that help "mitigate anxiety and depression" (25). The section also details *science's* enquiry into the correlation between literature and theory of mind, particularly, the act of fiction reading and the sophistication of mind, insofar as subjects' ability to "identify the emotions expressed on faces or understand others' false beliefs is concerned. It further builds on Steven Pinker's correlation between the "decline in violence with an increase in fiction reading" (25). Post-globalisation, in the era of the internet, *Goodreads*, the online book rating platform, has emerged as a rich source of data for researchers working on mapping out the reading habits of readers online, and the possibility

or otherwise, of eclecticism that the internet, with its democratisation of access, provides. Common sense dictates that, with so much information and access, the reading habits of the readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might be more eclectic, and the readers themselves more omnivorous. But the chapter titled "Bad Habits on Goodreads" utilises readers' data from Goodreads to analyse how the digital platform, besides being an e-library catalogue, also affects reader preferences, consequently advancing "entire schemes of values, preferences" (English et al. 36).

Christopher Castiglia's chapter opens with a rather bizarre sentence, which on cursory glance might seem antithetical to the project the volume puts forward. He writes, "Flourishing is a possibility that haunts me" (65). "Flourishing spirits" speaks of séances and of spirits, particularly of the spiritualist doctrine of the mid-1800s. His argument hinges on the power of belief, which is foundational to the world of death and beyond, and its invocations in séances and the implications it had on the wider socio-political happenings of the mid- and late 19th-century American society. Riddled with problems of sexism, discrimination,

and slavery, these séances often served as platforms for conversations about reformation. Using excerpts from spiritualist newspapers like *The Banner of Light* and fiction, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), Castiglia offers a perspective on performing a balancing act between reason and “the willing suspension of disbelief,” to show how relying on the latter can be ameliorative and even reformist. While critics of séances have often been dismissive of the performance as nothing more than “private theatricals,” Castiglia’s writing shows how the belief induced by these practices enabled the “real fight” to make the world otherwise than it was (73). The caveat, however, that is re-emphasised, is that belief should not encumber morality, but the cost of morality and reasoning should also not be an abandonment of belief and imagination. The evolving nature of imagination and hope is what holds the key to human flourishing.

The editors call for a reconfiguration of the Aristotelian eudaimonic view, which regards well-being as the telos and primary motivation for human action, to better account for the “concomitant realities of poverty, violence, and mortality” (12). The reconfiguration is meant to blunt the overwhelming force of language and ideas infused with superfluous buoyancy. This sits at odds with David James’s chapter on the Literature of Uplift that makes a case for the necessity of literature that is “upliftingly ‘redemptive’ in its confrontation with mental illness” and a well-spring of hope (James 108). While “uplift” is geared specifically towards charting buoyant experiences, Janet Lyon’s chapter on disability studies’ place within the eudaimonic turn yanks our attention to representations of disability in literature and to the various ways the condition of being disabled and its lived realities are described. Lyon maintains that disability is value-neutral and neither “de facto tragic, nor inherently pathological” (144). This position allows the writer to gaze beyond the binary logic of either/or. However, positive psychology’s preoccupation with “productivity” rather than well-being often hinders meaningful engagements with non-normativity and the field of Disability Studies. This chapter’s project extends to making disability visible within studies on/of human flourishing and to finding ways in which the concept of well-being can engage with non-normative models of health and embodiment.

While it’s easy for literary scholars to launch into a diatribe against positive psychology, the volume proposes ways in which the two can coexist in an interim symbiosis. It also stands to reason that literary scholars should remain wary of studies on human flourishing, since they are riddled with stigma, exclusion, and various forms of inequality. However, as the contributors who come from

varied disciplines, seem to be suggesting, it can be mitigated, provided the right methodological frameworks are worked out. There is much that the intersection of the two disciplines has to offer. The contributors make an outstanding effort to collate and make sense of the otherwise the subject matter that always seems to be slipping into inaccessible nooks and crannies as it grows rhizomatically. The volume sets out on the arduous task of asking thoughtful questions, gathering novel perspectives and breaking new theoretical ground in studies on human flourishing. This is executed with perfect structural harmony, dialectical disagreements and rigorous editing, resulting in a fine collection of essays.

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**Jens Martin Gurr, 2024, *Understanding Public Debates: What Literary Studies Can Do*  
(New York: Routledge)**

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The monograph attempts to synthesise insights from philosophy, contemporary political discourse, and the public humanities to demonstrate how literary studies can illuminate and potentially rationalise political debates within pluralistic societies. This approach positions the book as a fresh and vital voice within the emerging field of public humanities. It examines various fields of inquiry, including narratology, philosophy, music, odes, and Cli-fi novels, to underscore how literature can proffer a platform that facilitates constructive debates through multiple perspectives, narrative situations, and ambiguities. This work unifies three key areas: the examination of societal debates and conflicts within pluralist societies, insights into the societal roles of literary and non-literary narratives, and broader considerations of literary studies' functions in relation to a world in constant flux. In doing so, it examines how literary and non-literary narratives shape public discourse and the role of literary studies in understanding these debates. By historicising and contextualising conflicts, the monograph explores how literary studies can investigate, mitigate, and even ameliorate social fissures. The book is divided into six distinct chapters, along with an introduction and a conclusion.

The chapter titled "The History of Ideas and the Long Shadow of Plato" expounds on the works of Plato, John Milton, and Percy Bysshe Shelley to scrutinise the shaping of the modern American political divide between the conservatives and the liberals. It also provides a playing field for the social and historical forces present during different times of history to reveal themselves, which in turn helps contextualise the deep disagreements that inform the two antithetical standpoints. The chapter examines the potential challenges to demands for unimpeded democratisation that arise from the conservative front, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. The chapter defines the contours of the conservative worldview, which, as Sullivan puts it, is "inherently a philosophy of human imperfection...[that] has traditionally been marked by a largely

pessimistic understanding of human nature" (Gurr 20). This undermining of human rationality as limited, and therefore something that warrants restrictions on individual liberties, is where the liberals disagree with the conservatives. This sets the stage for furthering the debate on more fundamental contentions like Berlin's negative and positive conceptions of liberty and Rousseau's distinction between *the volonté générale*, the idealised sense of what would be best for the collective, vs the *volonté de tous*, the demand of the majority, which, as Gurr, drawing on history, seems to suggest, is often misguided. Gurr subsequently fleshes out the Platonic body politic analogy to demonstrate how even the most radical thinkers who adopt the body politic standpoint cannot help but be influenced by the conservative overtones that the body politic analogy is infused with.

The second chapter, titled "Complicating the 'Culture Wars': Rereading the Human Stain," focuses on discussing Roth's novel as a model that explores the challenges and pitfalls of manic pivoting on half-baked ideas of political correctness. Gurr argues that while *The Human Stain* has largely been seen as a "conservative critique of political correctness," he aims to show in the chapter how Roth's novel is "a remarkably even-handed dissection of the... 'culture wars' over a complex set of issues, including those related to identity politics, political correctness, and cancel culture" (Gurr 8). *The Human Stain*, which follows the life of a man initially portrayed as Jewish, takes a dramatic turn when, halfway through the novel, it is revealed that he is in fact an African American. The chapter uses this as a starting point to comment on the broader implications of the persecutory aspect of political correctness and of the limitations and pitfalls of identity politics, which Roth's novel seeks to address. It employs these complex themes to observe how "attention to literary forms and questions of perspectives, rather than being an escapist exercise," are in fact a productive platform to engage with the fundamental conflicts in the public sphere. Additionally, the chapter considers the divide between the world of fiction and reality by posing a fundamental question. Quoting Daub, Gurr asks, "Can a novel logically be adduced to 'prove' the existence of real-world issues" (67). Ultimately, the chapter purports to highlight how literature can serve as a means of learning about and practising engagement with different outlooks, ambiguity, and complexity without, as Keats suggests, any irritable reaching after fact or reason.

The third chapter, titled "America the Beautiful? Neil Young's exploration of genocide, racism and the foundation of 'America,'" deals with Young's songs and their engagement/negotiation with America's deeply troubling genocidal and

racist past. His songs, like “Southern Man” and “Pocahontas,” carry within them snippets of the past, which animate conversations around the history of slavery and the genocide of the Native Americans. Neil Young, as a Canadian-born US citizen, is in a unique position as an “Inoutsider,” and as a cultural icon, the chapter suggests, “who has fans across the political spectrum, may be an occasion for conversations for people who otherwise have little to say to each other” (Gurr 101). In other words, what the chapter seems to put forward, and rather convincingly so, is that music (Young’s) has the potential to create dialogue between two factions who might otherwise not engage with each other, and also stresses the importance of utilising music as a tool that aids in commemorating disturbing histories.

The fourth chapter, titled “Edward Young’s Abysmal ‘Sea Odes’,” talks about the lesser-known 18th-century odes and how reading them into the present-day context can help illuminate modern debates on globalisation. The odes, the chapter argues, can also be read to gather fresh perspectives on how the two competing doctrines of mercantilism and free trade operated in the 18th century and their continuing influence on present-day debates over the modern socio-economic organisation of state/trade in a rapidly globalising society. Gurr suggests that prophetic proclamations about “imperium pelagi” that appear in the odes seem to prophesy the growing Chinese domination over the seas. The fifth chapter, titled “Cli-fi Novels as a Model for Climate Change,” posits that climate change communication has reached what appears to be a *cul-de-sac*. Utilising three contemporary novels written in the 2020s, titled *Migrations* (2021), *The Ministry for the Future* (2023), and *Deluge* (2023), and drawing on model theory, the chapter suggests how the theory of models can help inform the functions of literary texts in modelling and furthering societal debates on climate change and beyond. The final chapter, titled “Understanding Conflicts Through Conflict Narratives,” explores the concept of “narrative path dependency” to analyse long-standing conflicts like the Israel-Palestine conflict. The chapter suggests that examining the chances of/for compromise from a narratological perspective clarifies the mechanisms by which conflicts emerge and escalate, and the role that narratives or stories might play in managing them once they have intensified. It focuses on how storytelling and narrative mechanisms influence political and historical conflicts and whether they make reconciliation more or less feasible.

Ultimately, *Understanding Public Debates* is a theory-, history-, and philosophy-dense scholarly work. Non-academics might find certain chapters difficult

to engage with. The chapter on Mercantile Sea Odes is particularly suited to scholars working in the field of blue humanities. The chapter on climate fiction is useful for academics working in the field of environmental humanities and/or examining post-anthropocentric futurities in literature. The chapter on the Israel-Palestine conflict is essential reading for researchers in conflict and peace studies, and/or for those broadly interested in novel perspectives on the evolution of the conflict's narratives. The monograph's strength lies in bringing together so many disparate fields of inquiry into a cohesive, linear, meticulously structured, well-argued text. It is an essential read for those interested in dipping their toe into the emerging field of public humanities, its scope, and its potential to shape and understand public debates.

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**Krzysztof Fordoński, 2025, *E. M. Forster:  
A Bibliography of Critical Studies, Translations,  
and Adaptations*  
(Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego)**

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Krzysztof Fordoński's *E. M. Forster: A Bibliography of Critical Studies, Translations, and Adaptations* (2025) is an ambitious contribution to Forster studies that aims at consolidating years of dispersed scholarship into a single, accessible resource. It compiles scholarly studies on the British writer, Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970), from 1975 up to the year 2025. Apart from listing literary reviews and analysis, the volume includes translations into over 40 languages and various adaptations in the fields of film, theatre, music, or television. As a Forster scholar myself, I can see the *Bibliography* as a comprehensive research tool for all those who need to find their way through the vast and increasingly interdisciplinary body of scholarship surrounding Forster. Importantly, the publication caters not only for experienced researchers refining their work but also for newcomers to the field who are beginning their research.

Fordoński's project responds to a clear scholarly demand. Since the late twentieth century, Forster criticism has expanded significantly. This constantly growing body of Forster-related texts reflects the shifts that in the meantime have occurred in literary theory and cultural studies. Among them, there are postcolonial readings of *A Passage to India*, queer reinterpretations of *Maurice*, and renewed attention to adaptation studies. Yet, this expansion has also resulted in fragmentation. Earlier bibliographies, especially those compiled in the mid- to the late twentieth century, can no longer adequately represent the field's current scope. And clearly, Fordoński's volume addresses this gap by focusing primarily on academic scholarship published from 1975 onwards. This limitation to published scholarship, however, does not mean a lesser scope of coverage. The incorporations of translations and adaptations apparently broaden the field and at the same time illustrate its redefinition.

As for the structure, the bibliography is both logical and user-oriented. The

volume is divided into three main sections that group sources according to a medium-based principle: critical studies (written scholarship), translations (linguistic re-mediations of texts), and adaptations (transformations into other media such as film or theatre). This tripartite organization shows a certain tendency in Forster studies, namely that Forster's legacy extends beyond *stricte* literary criticism. Nevertheless, the first section (13–146), on critical studies, forms the core of the book. It catalogues a wide range of academic publications, including monographs, journal articles, and edited volumes. The entries are arranged alphabetically, by author, allowing for straightforward, user-friendly navigation. Section two (147–186), devoted to translations of Forster's literary and non-literary texts, covers over forty languages. Such a range highlights the international reach of Forster's work. When it comes to section three (187–196), dedicated to adaptations, it is the shortest, yet equally interesting. This part is arranged thematically and broadens the presented scope further by documenting various representations and re-interpretations of Forster's oeuvre or works inspired by said oeuvre in the field of music, film, television, and theatre.

One of the volume's key strengths lies in its scale. Fordoński displays an impressive commitment to inclusivity. He brings together materials from diverse geographical and intellectual contexts. Among the conferred sources there are English language canonical studies as well as lesser-known critical works of non-English traditions. Subsequently, such an approach encourages a more global perspective which in turn corresponds with the questions Forster pursued in his texts, namely the questions of empire, culture, and cross-cultural encounter. What is more, the amount of international scholarship featuring in all three sections implicitly invites readers to reconsider Forster not merely as a British author but as a figure of transnational significance.

Another notable feature of the volume is the inclusion of various types of adaptations. They apparently indicate a rich afterlife enjoyed by Forster's works. By documenting these adaptations alongside critical studies, Fordoński acknowledges the interplay between academic criticism and popular reception. The adaptations section undeniably enhances the bibliography's interdisciplinary claim and makes it relevant not only to literary scholars but also to researchers in film and media studies.

One more aspect of the book that needs to be highlighted is its accessibility. As an open-access publication, it not only removes many of the barriers that traditionally limit the use of specialized reference works, but also invites readers to widen their research through links to online sources added to listed titles

whenever it was possible. By making the bibliography freely available, Fordoński contributes to global scholarship and supports the ongoing internationalization of Forster studies. Importantly, such an easy access to the data can be helpful to both established scholars and those researchers who are just embarking on new Forster-related projects. For the former, e-bibliography provides a convenient means of verifying references and discovering materials that might otherwise remain obscure, whereas for the latter, it offers an indispensable starting point that enables them to situate their work within existing scholarship. In any case, this online publication facilitates connections between different aspects of criticism.

When compared to the previous bibliographies dedicated to Forster, his life and his oeuvre, this volume, as Fordoński notes himself in the Introduction, is characterized by the absence of annotations. It seems quite understandable considering the scale of the completed project; however, incorporation of a selection of annotations or thematic indexing might be considered in future editions to heighten steering through the material. Nevertheless, at its present form, the volume offers entries in a concise, reference-oriented format. Additionally, this approach allows for the inclusion of a greater number of items and maintains the book's function as a bibliographic tool, a tool that is apparently quite powerful. For it not only presents research trends, but also participates in shaping literary canons. Thus, Fordoński, by deciding what gets included, how it is categorized, and how it is accessible, certainly goes beyond recording scholarship; he actively organizes the field for us, that is scholars, researchers or Forster enthusiasts.

As a result, the reading of the bibliography is twofold. First, we can look at it simply as an excellent source of feedback on frequently cited authors, recurring journals devoted to the writer as well as well-represented topics, or, conversely, the areas that are neglected and therefore wait to be expanded (like ecocritical readings or digital humanities approach), since the bibliography incorporates marginalized voices, lesser-known publications, or non-traditional formats which can help diversify the canon and open up the field. Second, Fordoński's rich collection of Forsterian data, thanks to its temporal framing, invites pondering over the shift that has occurred in interpretative patterns. The focus on post-1975 studies of the work and life of Forster allows one to gauge the impact of newer theoretical approaches, including postcolonialism, queer theory, and adaptation studies.

And last but not least, Fordoński effectively continues from where Frederick P. W. McDowell stopped. He replaces, however, McDowell's highly

commenting, documentary and thus interpretative approach with an enumerative one. Such a way of presentation reflects best the reality of information overload. As we can read in the Introduction to Fordoński's volume, the bibliography is composed of nearly 2,000 entries and it is continuously growing: "In the recent years, their number has settled at approximately 50 publications yearly (2021 was exceptional with 72, while in 2024 there were exactly 50), or one almost every week. The present bibliography includes 1,880 entries but, regardless of all efforts, it is still incomplete as new publications continue to appear". It becomes harder and harder to keep pace with the steady proliferation of scholarship on Forster, whose critical reception continues to expand across disciplines, languages, and media, making any attempt at bibliographic completeness necessarily provisional.

All in all, *E. M. Forster: A Bibliography of Critical Studies, Translations, and Adaptations* by Krzysztof Fordoński represents a significant and timely contribution to the field. It succeeds in its primary aim of consolidating a vast and dispersed body of scholarship, offering researchers a reliable and comprehensive reference instrument. Ultimately, the bibliography testifies to the enduring relevance of E. M. Forster and to the continued vitality of the scholarly discussions surrounding his work. It is likely to become an essential resource for anyone engaged in the study of Forster and his legacy.

The book is available at <https://www.wuw.pl/product-pol-20769-E-M-Forster-A-Bibliography-of-Critical-Studies-Translations-and-Adaptations-EBOOK.html>

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