

Security Breach: British Modernism and the Violence of Secrets

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Introduction:
The British Novel, the State, and the Age of Secrecy

The beginning of the twentieth century *is* the beginning of political secrecy: both the formation of Great Britain's Secret Service Bureau (MI-5 & MI-6) and the modernization of its Official Secrets Act occurred within the first decade. In "Security Breach: British Modernism and the Violence of Secrets," I examine how twentieth-century British fiction views the stakes of national security and the degrees of secrecy upon which it is constructed. As these novels attest, an age of privacy – the privacy so central to the conception of a liberal democracy – is simultaneously an era of secrecy. It is here, in the relationship between state secrets and the public, that literature has something critical to say about the political imaginary, and about the security – and insecurity – of citizenship. The novels under consideration delve into the complex affects produced by operations of privacy, secrecy, and deception.

As subject matter for novels, secrets impel plots. Those harbored within the twentieth-century novel, however, are qualitatively different than the secrets we encounter in the works of its nineteenth-century predecessors. I argue that if the cultural imagination begins to transform because of secrets, then the literary history of secrets also demonstrates a modification. The nineteenth-century novel treated secrets that dealt primarily with the family: the truth about parental lineages, mysterious love affairs, and so on. I suggest that the relation between the twentieth-century novel and secrecy takes on a very different form and raises a new set of ethical and political dilemmas. Instead of the madwoman locked in the attic, or the sleepwalking jewel thief, or the undisclosed benefactor of a painter, the literariness of secrets shifts from focusing on individual histories to their potential for group violence within and against the imagined community,

such as undisclosed plans of attack against countries, either through terrorist acts or sharing classified governmental knowledge. Secrets in the twentieth-century British novel, and, more generally in the cultural imaginary, become increasingly political rather than personal. When secrets are political, as these authors portray, they create a different kind of fear: they contain a greater promise for large-scale destruction. Secrets become associated with the state trying to cover its tracks in order to prevent the leak of sensitive information that would damage the public sphere. Secrets now represent a smaller slice of larger military conflict. The twentieth-century British novel marks the beginning of a war of information systems, in which secrets now have a stake in public life.

Secrecy as it appears in the works of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, for instance, is primarily social. Dickens' *Oliver Twist* concerns how Oliver learns the secret of his parentage and subsequently receives his inheritance. In Austen's *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse's romantic matchmaking is thwarted when she learns of a secret engagement between two of her friends, thereby disrupting her social circle. In the twentieth century, secrecy achieves a qualitatively – and narratively – different political life. Consider, for example, the conclusion of James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914), which centers on the revelation of a secret. Gabriel and Gretta Conroy, both affected by an evening overripe with Irish traditions, discuss the life and death of Gretta's first love, Michael Furey. The story of youthful romance, however, takes an unanticipated turn when Gretta reveals to her husband that Furey died after waiting outside her window in the rain – and that even after many years, she still bears the burden of guilt for her role in his death. The unveiling of Gretta's previously undisclosed past disarms Gabriel, pushing him into further contemplation of his own identity, his reliance upon his wife, his vexed

relationship with Irish politics, and, most importantly, the condition of Ireland and a national history predicated upon suffering and marginalized victims, emblemized by the churchyard grave of Michael Furey, covered with “snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead” (225). The secret’s disclosure in “The Dead,” I suggest, is thematically and structurally bound to the recognition of history. Gabriel’s highly emotional exchange with Gretta provides him with the opportunity to view his own location in an historical process, and to sense (without fully grasping) the ways in which history operates upon him. Unbeknownst to Gabriel, Gretta’s affection for Michael Furey derails him by revealing his worldview as romanticized and inadequate. Gretta’s secret, released after years of dormancy, exposes the constructedness of what Gabriel wishes to be a moment of intimacy and punctures their evening with the violence of colonialism and the haunting remnants of English oppression. By invoking “all the living and the dead,” the text turns away from private tragedy toward a sense of how an individual life connects to all of Ireland, thus referencing those who died for Irish freedom under the yoke of British rule. “The Dead,” then, adumbrates the association between secrecy and the state by connecting Gretta’s hidden past with the wider and deeper story of Ireland. Personal secrets have, oddly and crucially, been recast as state secrets, potentially political and having to do with the living and the dead of Ireland, attempting to cover a history too violent to contain.

In the twentieth century, England’s relationship to state secrecy produces a particular kind of anxiety, one that shapes the fiction of writers such as Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, and Ian McEwan. These novelists take up the public

mandates surrounding secrecy. Their characters wrestle with the fact that this legislation prevents the normal, average British citizen from sharing any information about British politics in his everyday life. The political resonance of secrecy takes hold of the world they live in, making life in an age of transparent secrecy a major concern of the novels published in Great Britain during the twentieth century.

Of course, literary critics have long believed that the novel tracks the process through which people become bound, by history, ideology and social life, into nations.¹ The recent turn in literary criticism, though, tightens the novel's focus by turning away from the imaginary construct of the nation and instead drawing attention to the category of "the state": the governmental functions and sovereignty upon which the nation depends. In "Government is Good," Amanda Claybaugh rationalizes this shift and notes the difference between these categories: "instead of asking how literature can make an imaginary entity (the nation) seem real, [literary scholars] are asking how literature can make a real entity (the state) more visible" (164). Utilizing the fiction of twentieth-century British novelists such as H.G. Wells, George Orwell and Rebecca West, to the more contemporary works of Kazuo Ishiguro and David Peace, scholars suggest that the modern and contemporary British novel has something to say about how the state fashions its citizens into subjects.

A similar conversation emerges when one turns to political theory, as the work of government and the work of fiction often coincide. In his recent study, *Secrets and*

¹ Works such as Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration*, Simon Gikandi's *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*, Ian Baucom's *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity*, Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*, Rebecca Walkowitz's *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*, Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature*, and even a study making use of the First World War to examine a legislatively-divided English culture like Vincent Sherry's *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*, demonstrate how "the nation" has proven to be a category whose reference haunts the study of twentieth-century British literature.

Leaks: The Dilemma of State Secrecy, Rahul Sagar examines this abuse of power when state secrecy becomes the domineering framework of our political climate. Sagar articulates that the question central to this debate is not so much whether secrecy should exist, as it is “the regulatory framework” needed to “ensure that state secrecy will be used to protect national security and not to conceal the abuse of power” (3). The problem with its regulation, he asserts, is that the forms of investigating state secrecy are ultimately in conflict with ethical, political, and democratic norms. The British novel exposes such conflict, as characters often go up against the state in order to expose its corrupt practices. Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* features spies living within London and working against the totalizing imperial mindset perpetuated by the English government. Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* explores how feeling compassion for a traumatized war veteran is a subversive political act towards a government that wants to ignore his existence. David Peace’s *Red Riding Quartet* chronicles how detectives challenge the state’s cover-up of a Yorkshire serial killer. These are just a few examples of the novels that portray the ethical endeavors of individuals as they assert agency while living under state power.

Sagar contends it is problematic to simply accept the position that secrecy will remain an impenetrable force that political bodies will always wield, or if we resign ourselves to never fully understanding when secrecy is being abused as a weapon. He argues we must instead “focus attention on the remarkable means by which citizens [...] can be – and indeed are – alerted to wrongdoing” (5). The more important – and effective – line of questioning for literary investigation attends to the ways in which citizens understand the mode of relation existing between themselves and state secrecy. This process of becoming alert is not so much demystifying the work of ideology as it is

ascertaining how citizens can attain agency through information acquisition, particularly in an age of state power when information remains so guarded. Secrets, then, do a particular kind of work for the political imaginary: they elevate information to a hallowed status and turn citizens into its appropriate carriers and receptacles. Or, they can fashion subjects into enemies of the state working against it from the inside out. Secrets establish categories of deviance within the body politic, maintaining a distinction between those loyal to the state and those jeopardizing its survival – those who keep them constitute the former, those who leak them the latter.

My dissertation argues that the experience of secrecy for England in the twentieth century is tightly bound with the experience of state power. British novels of the past century, I contend, chart this power structure. The literary discourse of secrecy exposes how individuals become subject to state power and create alternative forms of agency – indeed, these novels invite us to imagine what it means to be an individual in this context of state secrets. Furthermore, my argument about the twentieth-century British novel is also a claim about the relationship between war and literature: British citizens' experience of secrecy cannot be uncoupled from – and is perpetually haunted by – the threat of total war.

Perhaps it is the threat of war that causes the British novel to connect the secret to the political in important ways.² I explore this political experience as it arises in, and gives body to, a fictional world that is decidedly modernist. In this world, individuals are keenly aware not only of their relationship to each other, but also – and piercingly – of

² Scholarly work on secrecy has focused primarily on the Victorian novel, directing our attention towards the secret's function in light of Foucault's repressive hypothesis, and attending particularly to the nineteenth century's strategies of social discipline. Secrecy is typically associated with mystery through the novels of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, or with social intrigue by way of Jane Austen and George Eliot.

their relationship to their nation, and of their conditions and positions as agents of that nation. Evidenced by Homi Bhabha's 1990 collection of the same name, the framework of "nation and narration" is nothing strikingly new; my project, however, departs from such familiar ground through its particular treatment of secrecy as above all a literary form, one that emerges in all its political potency and narrative force in the twentieth century.

While not explicitly treating the relation between secrecy and twentieth-century history, D.A. Miller's influential *The Novel and the Police* argues that the secret serves a cultural function: it designates a subject's inaccessibility to his surroundings, namely the culture that determines him. Secrecy becomes a process of turning inward in order to resist social totality, an exercise in self-composition in which the obvious goal – to keep something hidden – gives rise to unanticipated formal innovation. One never knows, in other words, how the various contortions of secret-keeping will ultimately look. The function of the secret, though, is the reproduction of social order within the subject whose very objective is to resist it: social discipline has refigured itself as *self*-discipline *through* the maintaining of secrets.³

Literary critics have generally taken Miller's critique to mean that the novel itself is the genre of social discipline. The secret, most critics would agree, plays a part in these disciplinary processes by aiding in character development, as well as the ways we read, interpret and even empathize with characters on the page. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has suggested that our methods of interpretation necessarily invoke the hermeneutics of suspicion and instill paranoid reading practices that anticipate the revelation of surprise in

³ Miller further asserts that although the secret may provide a "refuge" and a "free liberalizing space in which [the subject] comes into his own" (215), it also disrupts the continuity of the subject by assuming the position of what he fights against.

some form.⁴ More recently, Anne-Lise François attends to how the use of free indirect style creates open secrets within texts; such stylizations, however, “relieve characters from the work of self-representation” (14).⁵ The open secret, for François, is a “self-canceling revelation” because it permits the circulation of disclosed information, taking it for granted and releasing characters from the language of duty and responsibility (3).

Oddly, the concept of the secret has often been overlooked as a separate category of literary form and interpretation, since it is often absorbed into discussions of privacy. The idea of privacy, to be sure, shares many of secrecy’s characteristics and often serves as its foundation. Even if articulations of privacy have overshadowed those of secrecy, similar dichotomies remain: self / group, private / public, concealed / open, inaccessibility / accessibility, enabling / disabling. These pairings often become apparent in novels containing secrets that incorporate both private domestic drama and concealing actions performed by the state. For the purposes of this dissertation, though, I maintain a distinction between privacy and secrecy, stressing that my use of “private,” together with its seeming affinity with the secret, is a modern usage.⁶ Patricia Meyer Spacks turns Miller’s Foucauldian framework around, arguing that while privacy offers a space for self-articulation, it does so primarily because it allows individuals to remove themselves

⁴ For an insightful reading that makes use of Paul Ricoeur’s theories to analyze Miller’s place in the history of New Historicist critical practices, see Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling*, 123-50.

⁵ See François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*, particularly chapter 1, “Toward a Theory of Recessive Action,” 1-65, and chapter 4, “Fanny’s ‘Labour of Privacy’ and the Accommodation of Virtue in Austen’s *Mansfield Park*,” 218-68, for further discussion. In the latter chapter, François contends that the inner lives of Austen’s heroines, most notably *Mansfield Park*’s Fanny Price, are revealed by free indirect discourse, thereby releasing them from the imperative to act ethically because their thinking is already narrated for them. Austen’s heroines, in the end, “renounce ambitions of self-expression” and “simply set aside the fantasy of the all-responsible subject” (267).

⁶ If we consider the historical and etymological connotations of “private” and trace its connection with privation / deprivation, then we can see how the conditions of not-having or being-deprived come to be associated with privacy, which, for several of the critics mentioned above, is a productive category. The history from which “private” is derived, and to which the private simultaneously opposes, has mutated in such ways as to turn the private into a desirable state.

from the public arena. Privacy is an enabling category: it allows one to be “let alone” in order to comprehend the powers of authenticity, autonomy, and social responsibility within public domains (Spacks 24). Stacey Margolis asserts that the problematic privileging of privacy creates a “harmful form of liberal ideology” by legitimizing individual tales of pain and suffering at the expense of “structural inequalities and injustices” (12). Reminding us that privacy without consideration for public consequence renders politics inert, Margolis regards privacy less as a place of exposure and discipline than as a condition for a sharper awareness of how one’s actions resonate within the larger domain of group interaction. Deborah Nelson contends that privacy is obscured once it comes into focus as an object of scrutiny; privacy, furthermore, is a space always already “infiltrated by power” and an “illusion [...] instituted in the formation of Enlightenment political institutions” (27). Literature, according to Nelson, aids in perpetuating the myth of the private self.⁷

My own interest in secrecy builds on the insights of Miller, Sedgwick, and François but situates them in a particular historical moment by arguing that secrecy becomes political in the twentieth century. While Miller investigates the Victorian novel, and Sedgwick and François discuss more general reading practices and characterization methods, I examine secrecy’s new association with the state and the ways in which it becomes bound to the discourse of total war. This inextricability, in turn, becomes a literary preoccupation with secrecy that I explore in the context of the twentieth-century

⁷ Although my attention to genre and period is quite different, I am indebted to Nelson’s analysis of Cold War-era American confessional poetry because she argues for an historical perspective that respects the significance of aesthetic form. She begins *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* by declaring, “in order to understand the ways in which privacy was reinvented [...] it is necessary not only to adopt a historical perspective but also to focus on formal questions within that historical moment” (xv). Privacy, in other words, must be imagined “in a history of its form” (41).

British novel, and more specifically within the domain of literary modernism. Given the secret's political turn in modernity, it is surprising that critics like Miller, François, and Frank Kermode have argued that there is nothing inherently *modernist* about the secret.⁸ My dissertation begins with this premise – the premise, in other words, that the secret is not only political but also, and crucially, historical – and asks how the secret brings the novel into modernity. When keeping a secret becomes an issue for the twentieth-century novel, does the modernist dictum “make it new” require innovative styles and methods of narrating secrets? Does the secret cover a history that modernism means to dismantle? Do secrets alter the relationship between aesthetics and politics so important for modernism? If British modernism organizes itself around secret-keeping, what new types of subjectivity and epistemology emerge?

In the following chapters, I answer these questions and argue that modernist literature ushers in a distinct way of thinking about the political relationships governed by secrecy. Within British modernism, personal secrets become political because they subsequently expand the secret's definition, situating it as information, ideology, and above all as *narrative* harbored by the state.

The first chapter, “Conrad's Secret Agency: Or, How Stevie Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,” establishes the project's conceptual and methodological framework by reading Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) alongside Britain's Official Secrets Act of 1910, the nation's preventative strike against pre-war espionage. I

⁸ While Kermode's primary interest with secrecy lies in biblical exegesis, he briefly treats excerpts from Joyce's *Ulysses* and James' *The Portrait of a Lady*; however, “modernism” per se is noticeably absent from his discussion. The nearest he gets to any mention of a literary period and its associated stylistic traits involves “realism” in reference to James and Aristotle: “The more elaborate the story grows – the more remote from its schematic base – the more these agents will deviate from type and come to look like ‘characters.’ The immediate motive may be realism or something else” (77). See *The Genesis of Secrecy*, 49-99, for further discussion.

argue that the novel asks us to view secrecy as a method of understanding individuals' positions within the state in modernity. I assert that *The Secret Agent* envisions how secrecy forms a new model for the relation between the individual and the state. The very title of Conrad's novel forges a relationship between agency and secrecy and invites readers to consider the nature of their connection. The novel claims that the relationship between citizens and the state is one of mutual suspicion: agency and secrecy are the ways in which individuals resist and combat the state. My reading focuses on the novel's composite pathological figure, the nearly-mute Stevie, who turns out to be a suicide bomber. In casting Stevie as its instrument of domestic terrorism, the novel figures agency in warped pathological form. Crucially, the result of this form is destruction by modern warfare.

Chapter Two, "*Mrs. Dalloway* and the Secret Life of Compassion," examines how Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* represents a post-war moment in which citizens' discourses of grief and the state's discourses of bureaucracy problematically intertwine. In this historical juncture, the state had procedures for how it would police the emotional composites of citizens after international crisis. I investigate the pension policies following the First World War and look critically at the term "compassionate allowance" – a bureaucratic category that gave widows of soldiers executed for cowardice a smaller sum than the pensions received by war heroes. I argue that *Mrs. Dalloway* exposes how the political rhetoric surrounding "compassion" is, in fact, anything but compassionate. Through the character of Rezia – the novel's own form of war widow, the wife of traumatized war veteran Septimus Smith – Woolf's novel claims that these women

disrupt conventional notions of Englishness by subverting the narratives of heroism and masculinity perpetuated by the state after World War I.

Chapter Three, “Graham Greene’s Mission: Intimacy Impossible,” explores how Greene’s *The Ministry of Fear* and *The End of the Affair* are indicative of civilian life during total war. Both set during the 1940-41 London Blitz, secrecy is a driving force of their plots: one is a tale of spies and international espionage, another is of an illicit, adulterous affair between a novelist and the wife of a civil servant. While *The Ministry of Fear* makes its concern for secrecy and national security more apparent, *The End of the Affair* makes a more compelling claim about how intimacy comes under attack during wartime. This attack subsequently unravels the very ability to narrate and write a romance story. Focusing primarily on *Affair*, I read the novel alongside British World War II propaganda posters – featuring slogans such as “Loose Ships Sink Ships” – that target intimate spaces between citizens as potential sites for national security breaches. By examining how secret information can circulate when war becomes an everyday occurrence, I argue that the secrets kept or revealed by Greene’s individuals become synonymous with the safeguarding or destruction of England.

My final chapter, “Ian McEwan and the Undercover Work of Modernism,” continues the project’s investigation of the relationship between secrecy, history, and literature. A contemporary work published in our current secrecy-obsessed political climate, McEwan’s 2012 novel *Sweet Tooth* takes a backward glance to 1960s England in order to inhabit a cultural moment of paranoid British sensibilities erupting during the Cold War. *Sweet Tooth*, too, envisions a world where the Official Secrets Act dictates not just the public and private behaviors of citizens, but also how it affects the artistic

imagination. The novel contends that the state ultimately has the final say in how aesthetics shape politics: it tells the story of individuals and the state by suggesting that the very reading practices of the English public always already serve state interests. *Sweet Tooth* is the endpoint of my project's argument because it outlines, forthrightly, how political secrecy and national security govern literary production.

Aside from the novels I examine in detail, others such as *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *The Painted Veil*, *Howards End*, or *The Good Soldier* portray secrets as a means of establishing a conflicted relationship with England. These conflicts manifest within these novels at either the level of content or the form of modernist interiority. The scope of the novels I examine is not so much "modernist" in the sense they are historically confined to the earlier half of the century (which is certainly the case with Conrad, Woolf, and Greene). By including McEwan among this group of authors and texts, I emphasize an *ahistorical* understanding of modernism. Instead of categorizing works of art between the 1900s and 1940s with a periodizing thesis, this *ahistorical* approach attends more to the representational methods used by literature to represent history throughout the twentieth century. The field of Modernist Studies provides a critical backdrop and fertile ground in which to explore these questions, as scholars consistently turn to "the politics of modernism" and the place of "the nation" and "the state" in a body of work that uses "new" aesthetic strategies to mystify these categories.⁹

⁹ I borrow this phrase from Raymond Williams's *The Politics of Modernism*, which examines modernism's reactionary tendencies towards the literary traditions it follows, and submits the paradoxical nature of periodizing, canonizing, and forcing historically-oriented discourses upon an aesthetic category that "stops history dead" and is predicated upon the experience of estrangement and radical departure from anything familiar (34). The so-called "New Modernist Studies" has continued this line of inquiry, as it attempts to locate the political underside to how modernists de-

As any reader and critic of literature understands, intrigue is fundamental to narrative – an intrigue that oftentimes fulfills and sustains one’s impulse to read because of the presence of secrets. Through the shape of secrecy, the British novel of the twentieth century recognizes the network of issues created by intrigue. My project suggests that not only does secrecy bring the novel into modernity, but that it also constructs relations in modernity: associations between characters, between reader and text, and between culture and text. Following Michel Foucault’s cue in “What is Enlightenment?” that conceptualizes modernity less as liberation from the past than as a restrictive process to forge anew, I explore how secrets confine subjects to the task of self-invention. I also examine how secrecy designates a “mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself” in order for subjects to critique the limitations posed upon them in the name of progress (311).¹⁰ By way of examining these novels for how they establish relations through secrets, I ask how is it that cultures in which secrets proliferate also produce subjects that act like spies, terrorists, and traumatized soldiers. Such inquiries are appropriate for this study because individuals no longer simply function along the lines of character and plot, but become emblematic of some form of philosophical and epistemological thinking about England.

Throughout this dissertation, I emphasize an understanding of secrets that is historically specific to England in the twentieth century. Beyond the basic fact of secrets as information that one keeps hidden, my concern is with their entrance into the political domain – how a typically private exchange can now contain potent power and affect what happens in the public sphere. I read secrets, therefore, as both a literary *and* cultural

familiarize and decode, among other things, figurations of national belonging and/or resistance to national affiliation.

¹⁰ See Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” for further discussion.

form: the creation of a grey area within public knowledge, a realm dominated by the exchange (or withholding) of information, and what Hannah Arendt calls “open secrets.” These secrets circulate throughout the public domain because they are known by everyone yet never discussed; their existence, however, harbors the potential for destruction at a much larger scale. In her essay “Truth and Politics,” Arendt acknowledges how the existence of state secrets and their classification are necessary parts of every government. However, what concerns her is the problem of what happens when secret facts become publicly distributed. Arendt’s object of analysis is the hushed whispering between townspeople in Nazi Germany regarding the concentration camps – how everyone knew of their existence (one was usually just a few towns away) yet none spoke openly about them. “The facts I have in mind are publicly known,” she writes, “and yet the same public that knows them can successfully, and often spontaneously, taboo their public discussion and treat them as though they were what they are not – namely, secrets” (236). Acknowledgement of the camps, in other words, became a suppressed fact. Even though it was open knowledge, these facts were treated *as though* they were private secrets (when they were not) because people curbed its *public* transmission. The assertion of these secrets proves dangerous not only because potentially harmful information is disclosed, but also because its mere transmission between persons organizes knowledge in ways that leave it open to manipulation. In order to rewrite history and erect certain images that lead to more favorable views, these open secrets lead to an organized lying that offers a substitute for reality – a substitute now much more in the public eye than ever because of the current mass media and changes in modern technology that have happened since Arendt originally formulated her

critique. According to Arendt, “All these lies, whether their authors know it or not, harbor an element of violence; organized lying always tends to destroy whatever it has decided to negate” (252).

For my purposes, then, secrets evoke violent relationships because of the ways in which they organize history to potentially damaging effect. They raise the question of what poses a threat to the public domain and to the state itself – a state that the twentieth-century British novel exposes as spatially and temporally transitory, and suggesting that “England” is a shifting and unpredictable web of relationships. Nations ultimately become works of art up for re-imagination. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler asks what happens when “injurability and aggression” shape forms of political life (xii). Targeting the emotional cathexes of victimized nations, particularly the reactionary and melancholic politics of how one responds to group-inflicted violence, Butler claims that an event like September 11th in the United States constitutes an act of nation-building because of the shared public perception and experience of loss. When the public psyche gets wounded because of international conflicts, domestic insurgencies, forced migrations, or terrorist acts, what follows the event of injury is a reactionary nationalism. For many “modern nations,” such experiences of distress and disorder dislocate them from First World privilege and potentially inscribe their citizens in systems of conservative revolutionary politics aggressively reacting against those “not like us.” Collective grief gets amplified with the creation of a cult of the victimized; citizens are told what and for whom to feel, ultimately altering the conditions within which ensuing wars are waged and fought.¹¹

¹¹ Other scholars have echoed these sentiments in recent years. Wendy Brown’s earlier version of this analysis in *States of Injury* (1995) wrests injury from an individual basis in order to question how

Following Butler's cue, scholars have turned their attention to this space between individuals and the state constructed by emotional investment, particularly to the production of subjectivities in an era witnessing competing nationalisms and relations established across global terrain through affective engagements with others.¹² Their conversations push towards (as well as against) a consideration of how fiction influences the imaginary construct of the nation and the management of states in crisis, especially when told from the perspective of those unfortunate enough to be casualties of the nation-state.

communities and political identities are created upon a notion of shared injury and collective trauma. The social body becomes injured and injurable by virtue of the individual bodies constituting it; the state itself is in a "state of injury" because of the manner in which political life is imbricated with the combativeness of "collective self-fashioning" (xiii). Brown, though, believes the state of injury to be suspect precisely because a conceptual injury to a group oftentimes relies upon a logic of exceptionality that could further perpetuate violence. Brown uses Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* as a method of identifying when one's political interest influences and dominates one's political identity: the singular "I" becomes politicized by virtue of its victimization, ultimately identifying with others and forming into a collective "we" of the wounded. The danger of these groups is that they run the risk of perpetuating the same subordination and violence to which they claim opposition, possibly "producing a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt)" (Brown 68). Several other works also converse with Butler's claims and inform my readings of these novels through the framework of a reactionary and victimized culture: Paul Virilio's *Pure War*, speculating about how metropolitan spaces have now become the zones in which wars are waged, turning civilians into targets and victims of war rather than the soldiers actually witnessing combat – civilians "have become the enemy to destroy" and "the City-State" has ultimately replaced the nation (210-11); Rey Chow's *The Age of the World Target*, which describes the similar scenario of how war has become "not the cessation of normality, but rather, the very definition of normality itself," and contends how the United States, in its "war on terror," has now taken up the imperialist inclinations of its European predecessors because "war is acted out as a moral obligation to expel an imagined dangerous alienness from the United States' self concept as the global custodian of freedom and democracy" (33-36); Arjun Appadurai's *Fear of Small Numbers*, arguing for the imperative to recognize how "a national ethnos" is the "fundamental, and dangerous, idea behind the very idea of the nation-state," and that the resulting forms of nationalism circulating around "movements, mixtures, cultural styles, and media representations create profound doubts about who exactly are among the 'we' and who are among the 'they'", ultimately running the risk of large-scale violence, civil war, or ethnic cleansing that seeks to "dismember the suspect body under suspicion" (3-5).

¹² See those mentioned in footnote eleven, as well as Claybaugh, John Marx, Matthew Hart, and Bruce Robbins's "Comparative National Blaming: W.G. Sebald on the Bombing of Germany" for articulations of how affects are ministered by relationships with governmental or regulatory structures. Similarly, Wendy Brown's interrogation of "tolerance" in *Regulating Aversion*, Judith Butler's examination in *Frames of War* of how the Western norm of the human institutes the destructive approach towards those believed threatening to its existence, Didier Fassin's study of potentially problematic ideologies underscoring humanitarian interventions in *Contemporary States of Emergency*, and even Jed Esty's analysis in "Virgins of Empire" that suggests how the *bildungsroman* mediates colonial encounters in the combative contact zone, demonstrate how emotional crises and affective instabilities play large parts in the processes of subject formation.

The normative frame of mind encouraged by legislation like the Official Secrets Act demonstrates how England engineers state secrecy in order to govern its peripheries according to political prejudices. The notion of “national security” thus becomes problematic as it attempts to dictate categories of acceptable political behavior, while the marginalized periphery of British citizens project an alternative vision of Britain. Secrets become something harbored by the state and withheld from public knowledge so that confidential information doesn’t rewrite the history the nation-state attempts to build for itself. Arendt’s “Truth and Politics” mimics Benjamin’s famous dictums in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: secrets are documents of both civilization and barbarism, transmitted from one owner to another. Similar to how Benjamin’s historical materialist must “brush history against the grain” (256), Arendt declares, “as every historian knows, one can spot a lie by noticing incongruities, holes, or the junctures of patched-up places” (253). I submit that reading the Official Secrets Act back through Arendt, as well as Walter Benjamin, takes us to fiction. The task at hand thus becomes understanding how literature utilizes secrets as a structuring agent in order to expose these historical blind-spots, shooting through the confidentiality that informs communities. Approaching history from the perspective of fiction, I contend, raises questions about how one acquires agency in modernity because of their relation to the historical circumstances surrounding them.

Chapter One: Conrad's Secret Agency: Or, How Stevie Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

Of all of Joseph Conrad's novels, *The Secret Agent* may be the hardest to put down – his biggest page-turner and the closest thing he wrote to a potboiler.¹³ With its spies, suicide bombers, underground domestic terrorist plots, private familial strife, and villainizing of the police, this novel may also be his most contemporary novel – a twenty-first century work written at the dawn of the twentieth century. We're fascinated with the relationship between individuals and the state as it is mediated by secrets: the government keeps secrets from us, and also tries to keep us from having secrets that affect the government. Yet, few may realize how this fascination began to appear as a concern in Modernist fiction.

¹³Conrad 's ghost currently haunts much of the study of twentieth-century literature. His work, in particular, seems to fit into much of Modernist Studies' inquiries into colonialism, cultural studies, and globalization. We can locate this line of critique starting over thirty years ago with Chinua Achebe's now infamous attack of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which he argues that it "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality," that Conrad proves himself to be a "thoroughgoing racist," and critiques the academy for the novel's canonization (252-57). Although many critics have since responded (almost obligatorily) that Achebe's polemic is grounded in a misreading of Conrad's ironic style, his point is worth mentioning, as it laid the groundwork for postcolonial studies over thirty years ago. Modernist Studies, in turn, has taken up similar lines of questioning with various texts coming out of the imperial mindset. Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, in which he contends the logic of capitalism informs the actions taking place within *Lord Jim*, and that "the sea" becomes a foil for life on land because it appears, initially, to be outside the systems of capital and material exchange; the protagonist's downfall ultimately transpires, then, because of his failure to realize the impossibilities of being outside ideology. Similar to Achebe, Jameson's reading has become commonplace within Modernist Studies because of its influence in understanding the mystifications created through Conrad's difficult style – a style that would become exemplary of modernist aesthetics. Within the past several years, Modernist Studies has refined these canonical readings in order to assert how Conrad is one of the first writers to explicitly consider questions of globalization through the novel genre. Critics such as Sanjay Krishnan, Rebecca Walkowitz, Michael Valdez Moses, and Cesare Casarino have continued to mine the political implications of Conrad's vertiginous and emergent modernist style, arguing that his concern with aestheticizing imperialism smuggles in discourses of the global, cosmopolitanism, apocalyptic failure, and Deleuzean notions of becoming. This imperative to make Conrad "current" is also reflected by a recent collection with the not-so-subtle title *Conrad In the Twenty-First Century*, which contains numerous essays exploring the author's work in the context of immigration crises, the mass media, terrorism, and his influence on the contemporary Indian writers Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Salman Rushdie.

The following chapter investigates *The Secret Agent*'s representation of the fraught relationship between government secrets and public awareness of them. *The Secret Agent* explores how the multifaceted relationships between secrecy and agency begin to rewrite the relationship between individual and state in the twentieth century, a relationship that continues to be explored through the depiction of state secrets and undercover agents today. Preoccupations with hidden information abound in Conrad's novel which features: intelligence gathering, violent political tendencies, terrorist attacks, and renegade spies. This information, and the way it comes to light, describes historically new ways of defining a public and its others. How, then, does *The Secret Agent* make a claim about the ethical and historical investments motivating these secret actions and what precisely are these investments?

My reading suggests that Conrad's novel frames the relationship between the individual and the state as one of mutual suspicion. Through the ideological framework created by early twentieth-century British bureaucracy, secrets come to work for the political imaginary: they make information into something nationally sacred and appropriately carried by citizens. This ideology also implies that secrets can become a weapon wielded by citizens in order to bring down the state from within. Secrets ultimately create notions of both deviance and loyalty within citizens, categorizing those who want to ensure the state's survival, as well as those who wish to jeopardize it.

To understand these ideological implications of the new political life of secrets in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is to conceive of how secrecy is an aesthetic process of hiding. The processes of secret-making and keeping (as well as revealing, for that matter) involve acts of composition and imagination. Secrets call up the creative:

they invite fantasy, innovation, and, ultimately, art. *The Secret Agent* probes such artistry in order to explode the very idea that a nation can be secure. Secrets and their protectors appear in the most unlikely of places and come in the most unexpected of figures. The modernism of Conrad promotes an understanding of “England” as an aesthetic object perpetually under scrutiny, one being dismantled and reshaped, or violently detonated and reduced to tiny scraps of rubble and flesh. Aesthetics is not held sacred or separate from the violent realities of a nation at war; rather, aesthetics becomes a way to approach these realities.

In *The Secret Agent*’s preface, Conrad discusses this relationship between artistic endeavor and historical event. Conrad’s novel includes an episode inspired by a friend’s story about an actual London bombing. Discussing his use of source material, Conrad writes, “I really think that ‘The Secret Agent’ is a perfectly genuine piece of work. Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated in deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity” (251). Only through irony does he feel able to portray a nation under attack from the inside, and its subsequent maintenance of security measures by obsessively policing the activities and behaviors that occur in secret. In Conrad’s eyes, nothing but art – that is, *ironic* art – is able to confuse and misrepresent in order to demystify and expose the ideological work of secrecy. Irony – a way of hiding meaning without entirely hiding it – thus enacts the same movement as state secrecy and invades the aesthetics of the novel.

This statement, though, raises questions about Conrad’s ideological commitment to the issues portrayed in the novel. Irony allows him to take distance from his subject –

to remove himself in order to turn a more critical eye to his characters and the positions they advocate. His proclamation that *The Secret Agent* is a work of “genuine” irony, however, makes his position as an author vexed. His preface suggests a concern that readers will assume that he has taken *too much* distance from his subject – that he has no investment in the characters, thereby making his investment in their matters disingenuous. By stating openly that intentions are true and sincere, the preface, then, attempts to deflect these assumptions. Pity eliminates this distance and irony becomes Conrad’s method of cultural and political critique.

I turn to the novel, then, to discuss the literary imbrications of secrecy and national security, suggesting that Conrad’s work marks a turning point in the history of the novel from a narrative structured around family secrets to one that revolves around *state* secrets. *The Secret Agent*, as this chapter argues, depicts war fought through control of information and represents how secrets now have a stake in public life. The novel asks us to draw a parallel between the mediating work of government and the work of fiction. Conrad’s narrative, like the real stories of contemporary sleeper agents and government surveillance programs, shows a similar preoccupation with the way government fashions citizens as its subjects, who both potentially have secrets and potentially have secrets kept from them.

The Secret Agent’s contorted narrative plays out Hannah Arendt’s claim that secrets, once we live with them long enough and openly enough, become lies. The novel offers up a world in which lies come to organize public knowledge in ways that can problematically re-write history and leave information open to manipulation. But Conrad’s fictional London also sheds light on how international conflict played out on

domestic territory can wound the public psyche, as Judith Butler claims, creating a melancholic, reactionary, and aggressive nationalism against those “not like us.”¹⁴ I bring Arendt’s and Butler’s perspectives to bear on Conrad’s novel, which stages a scenario where citizens become soldiers by acting against their own state during a war of information between rival imperial powers. I use their views in order to see how a fascination with the potential holders of secrets interrupts the imagined community of the nation, even as secrets simultaneously work to secure national boundaries.

By dealing with violence that erupts from within the nation – in London, “the very center of Empire on which the sun never sets” (*SA* 169) – *The Secret Agent* portrays a state on the defensive as it anticipates impending conflict.¹⁵ Although Conrad’s novel depicts the policing of terrorists and anarchist groups in turn-of-the-century industrial England, its fictional scenarios have transformed our contemporary world. The current anxieties over national security mobilize the state’s regulation of behaviors that it deems threatening to its existence: we encounter automated voices alerting us during public transportation to “report any suspicious activity”; we hear of color-coded threat-levels that create structures of feeling and coerce citizens into acting responsibly; and, we read of the debates surrounding the surveillance of private life in order to ferret out would-be terrorists. These twenty-first-century conditions inevitably inform our approach to *The Secret Agent*: it is a prescient novel whose understanding of national security runs so deep that it seems almost predictive in describing a world so close to our own. In the

¹⁴ This reaction is especially potent in Conrad’s novel, given that the police’s response to locating the responsible bomber is to search within London for those who have foreign influence. If *Lord Jim*’s refrain is the obsession with who is “one of us,” then *The Secret Agent*’s can be cast as the preoccupation with who is “not like us.” This form of nationalism is defined in new ways in the 20th century, where the “not us” isn’t always clear.

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*, New York: Penguin, 2007. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

novel, as in our current political climate, the state categorizes members of the population according to the norms of democratic citizenry, ultimately allowing no space for those who endanger its ideals. It must police the secret lives of individuals and exhibit them in the open in order to deem what actions are appropriate for inclusion in the national community. The state, in turn, also keeps its own secrets. Public life, in other words, is shaped by its counterpart, that which is private and must be kept hidden from the view of the demos. Secret information harbored by citizens begins to fashion the discourses of the state, which appears in the novel as manufactured from the inside out, shaped by secrets and classified information that spawn multiple narratives of relations to the nation-state.

England's Spy Fever

Before delving into the novel, it is important to understand the historical and political context from which it emerged, especially regarding the relationship between the individual and the state. The obsession with staving off damage to the state by means of aggressive nationalism demonstrates preeminently not just the assertion of agency, but also its *perversion*. If everyone regards themselves as protector of the nation's interests, then the notion of collective responsibility diffuses agency. Agency is not only locatable everywhere within anyone, but is also endlessly deferrable: if individuals do not fulfill their patriotic obligation to England, then other dependable citizens will eventually pick up the slack and locate foreign correspondents. It is fairly easy to locate *The Secret Agent*'s historical counterpart in turn-of-the-century anarchist bombing plots – those occurring in London and Paris in February of 1894, and again in Madrid the year before

the novel's 1907 publication.¹⁶ The years preceding the First World War saw a concern with secret agents themselves through the revision of Britain's Official Secrets Act. Parliament initially brought this document into public knowledge in 1889, but re-wrote it in 1911 in order to attend to the increase in German spheres of influence and the looming threat of international war.

Following the Agadir Crisis of 1911, in which a German gunboat appeared suddenly in Morocco's Agadir Harbor and threatened the French and British influence of the area, the British government revisited the Act in preparation for confrontation with Germany – a provocation that would ultimately escalate into World War I. Starting July 1, 1911, Agadir took hold of the public for nearly three months, and, according to historian Geoffrey Barraclough, was seen as “one of the many flash points around the world which might detonate an explosion” (7).¹⁷ What interests me about the Agadir Crisis, though, is not only its status as a moment anticipating the First World War, but also its discourse around secrecy and war. During the time when the public was suddenly clued in to the happenings in Morocco, British newspapers felt the ethical imperative to disclose all forms of information. They repeatedly published stories that detailed the sentiments of military officials – not just English officers, but also those of France and Germany – and the opinions and proceedings of governmental bodies towards the sudden German infiltration. It was not uncommon for newspapers to print mere speculation about what they *thought* might occur within the diplomatically fraught situation. After

¹⁶ On February 12, 1894, anarchist Emile Henry planted a bomb at a café in Paris. On February 15, 1894, a Frenchman named Martial Bourdin detonated a bomb at London's Greenwich Observatory, dying in the process. In February 1906, an anarchist in Spain attempted to assassinate King Alfonso XII by throwing a bomb hidden in a bouquet of flowers.

¹⁷ See his *From Agadir to Armageddon* for further discussion of how the German invasion at Agadir became a watershed moment leading into the First World War.

days of this form of reportage, *The London Times* responded with a lead article announcing, “Negotiations to be Kept Secret,” which declared the following:

It has been decided that for the moment no information regarding the details of the conversations of France with the Powers, including Germany, will be allowed to reach the public [...] Great Britain, through the mouth of the Prime Minister, has reminded all whom it may concern that she has important – perhaps indeed vital – interests at stake, which she manifestly cannot allow to be compromised by any movements of any number of German cruisers. This is the critical situation the diplomatic treatment of which it has been thought wise to withdraw as far as possible in the meantime from public discussion. It remains to be seen whether it will be possible to deliberate for long on such vital matters with absolute secrecy. (5)

While all this was going on, though, correspondence between the British War Office and the home secretary told a much more explicit story about the possible war between Britain and Germany being “as certain as anything human can be.” This story was literally stamped “secret” on its documentation and stressed how “the importance of secrecy in a time of war is greater than in time of peace.”¹⁸ In this rhetoric, secrecy is becoming synonymous with war. The very fact that secrets are being discussed in this public way – and in private War Office Memos – is because of this connection with military conflict. Even though one very clear function of state secrets is precisely to “keep the peace” and to prolong military strategizing for as long as possible, when international tensions flare, the relationship between secrecy and war is laid bare. Secrets thus become hard to uncouple in the political imagination from violence and its threat.

Because of concern for the public distribution of information regarding diplomacy and the military in such times of crisis and paranoia, Parliament brought the Official Secrets Act back into play. The goal of the 1911 Act was to make its 1889 counterpart more effective by strengthening espionage laws, bolstering political surveillance and

¹⁸ Henry Wilson, “Letter to the War Cabinet,” 29 August 1911.

placing restrictions upon non-native Britons. While the 1889 version of the Official Secrets Act declared simply that British citizens remain unaware of governmental secrets, suggesting not to disclose them through the various forms of communication (newspapers, casual conversation, etc.), the 1911 revisions made the sharing of state secrets a punishable offense. The secrets upon which national security rested were now an authorized bureaucratic category within the state; England witnessed a shift from an informal shared-secret culture to one of their legal control. The 1911 version dictates these newly-criminalized offenses through several sections: “Penalties for spying” (targeting the intent of the individual subverting the safety of the state); “Wrongful communication, &c. of information” (detailing the sharing or receiving of sacred information endangering the sovereign); “Definition of prohibited place” (outlining the spaces under sovereign control and thus off-limits to the public); “Attempts to commit offence, or incitement to commit offence, under Act” and “Power to arrest” (concerning incarceration and punishment); “Penalty for harbouring spies” (those extending hospitality to individuals guilty of breaching the act are also punishable by law); and “Search warrants” (if there is reasonable grounds, the state can authorize entry into any premise, by force, and seize any item of suspicion).

What emerges within the cultural climate dictating the Official Secrets Act is a narrative of unwieldy circumstances within the state that needs managing. As the clauses above suggest, national security policy transitioned from focusing on the nation to targeting individuals. Any citizen, by design or carelessness, could now become an enemy of the state, leaking information that is “calculated to be or might be or is intended to be directly or indirectly useful to an enemy” (a formulation that appears twice in the

Act's opening section). This new component to the Act also emphasizes how these offenses are detrimental to the welfare of the state ("any purpose prejudicial to the safety or interests of the State" appears in the same section four times). Making these alterations to the Act exposes the intentions of potential offenders, subsequently making it easier to prosecute espionage. However, the newly revised Act seems to serve the state's interests rather than citizens' – its defensive posturing is based upon animosity towards outsiders and non-native Britons. The Act's revisions are an attempt to contain the new narrative of Englishness that is rapidly being re-written at the dawn of the twentieth century. In doing so, it collects international concerns into individual bodies that it can then prosecute. These individuals are the agents that the state tries to locate and charge criminally because of their speculated relation to impending global conflict. The Official Secrets Act develops a tracking system that fastens actions upon individuals who are ultimately anonymous.

Modern secrecy – that is, state secrecy – thus marries agency with anonymity: no one knows who could be a spy because *anyone* could. Secrecy is no longer the province of specific agents charged with protecting the nation; it is shared, democratic, and demands public vigilance if not widespread paranoia. As methods of spying became more modern, the state required ways of keeping up with them. Labeling the Act "official" legitimates the invocation of a threat to national security – what counts as official is assumed to count as "truth" and mitigates power and knowledge amongst the public. "Spy fever," then, prevailed: the concept of espionage broadened, and punishment for communicating with foreign powers became more severe. The Official Secrets Act invited a particular kind of political imaginary and a collective way of

imagining national security predicated upon xenophobia. In this new imaginary, citizens could be both spy-catchers and possible foreign agents at the same time. The state demonstrated its growing desire to regulate the spread of information as war became foreseeable in the near future.

Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* emerges against this backdrop, being published after the initial passage of the Official Secrets Act, but before its revision. The novel draws our attention to the cultural anxiety around secrecy in anticipation of escalating tensions in Europe. *The Secret Agent*, in fact, occupies a strange place in Conrad's oeuvre, his only work to take place not just on English soil, but in London, the center of Empire. The fictive nature of secrets accompanies this inward turn and feeds the political imaginary because national security requires such fictions to maintain its enemies and ensure the success of the state. Unsurprisingly, the popular novels published during this time included works capitalizing upon jingoism and defensive Englishness. For example, Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), William Le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910* (serialized in 1906) and *Spies of the Kaiser: Plotting the Downfall of England* (1909), and John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) grounded their plots in espionage-related activities.

The cultural moment of *The Secret Agent* designates an inward turn toward the home front of England due to tensions abroad, what the novel thinks of as "an imperfect world [that] should be dealt with special secrecy" (SA 110-11). The text's "special secrecy" is that the state is suspicious toward citizens, and citizens are in turn suspicious toward the state because of its surveillance procedures. *The Secret Agent* maintains that the result of this special secrecy is ultimately destruction. The novel begins with Verloc,

a former spy living in London, recruited in secret by an unspecified foreign embassy to bomb the Greenwich Observatory – England’s hallowed symbol of scientific progress. By the novel’s conclusion, the bomber is revealed to Stevie (Verloc’s simple-minded brother-in-law), who becomes upset by the plight of the lower classes in London and decides to recklessly steal the bomb without Verloc’s knowledge, only to accidentally trigger its explosion at the Observatory. *The Secret Agent* takes up the problem of – and stages in both content and form – what happens when secrecy becomes indistinguishable from citizenship.

The relationship between secrecy, individuals, and the state is voiced by characters. On one hand, this unfolding of events emerges in Conrad’s text as the failure of the state to adequately provide for its citizens or uphold their ideals. “England lags,” Vladimir announces during his diatribe enlisting the services of Verloc,

This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty. It would be much more to the point to have them under lock and key. England must be brought into line. The imbecile bourgeoisie of this country make themselves the accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in the ditches [...] They are blinded by an idiotic vanity. (23-24)

On the other hand, the novel views that more simple acts of domestic terrorism are no longer sufficient to counter the government’s deficiencies – new forms of violence are required to purge the state of its corrupt practices. In the same speech, Vladimir continues, “A bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive” (26). As a result, the imperative to locate these transgressors interrupts state operations. The novel obsesses over the search for the responsible anarchists – “The reports had come in: every anarchist had been exactly accounted for” (78) – and devotes much attention to the police

procedures of Chief Inspector Heat, all the while pointing out, “[h]is career had begun in a tropical colony. He liked his work there. It was police work. He had been very successful in tracking and breaking up certain nefarious secret societies among the natives” (79).

The Secret Agent portrays the state’s reaction to such threats, consistently reiterating the need for “repressive legislations” and revisions of questionable “domestic policies” (24, 110, 176, 224). The British state ultimately tries to expose and punish any dissent attached to internationals living within London. The novel demonstrates a preoccupation with “facts” (14, 20), as opposed to secrets, as a means of solidifying the state’s suspicions. We can also see the suspicion toward secret agents who work against the state by camouflaging themselves within it in order to gain intelligence, as well as possibly distributing false information. It is precisely this familiarity and identification with foreignness that requires the spy be narrated in terms of deception, fear, and aggressive action. The Commissioner declares to his superior at the Home Office,

I should lay it down that the existence of secret agents should not be tolerated, as tending to augment the positive dangers of the evil against which they are used. That the spy will fabricate his information is a mere commonplace. But in the sphere of political and revolutionary action, relying partly on violence, the professional spy has every facility to fabricate the very facts themselves, and will spread the double evil of emulation in one direction, and of panic, hasty legislation, unreflecting hate, on the other. (110)

By highlighting its creation of public menace, the Commissioner implies how the work of the spy is affective in nature because it perpetuates terror and paranoia throughout imagined communities. In doing so, he outlines the similar conditions of domestic hostility Carl Schmitt would theorize in Weimar Germany nearly 20 years later, which mandate how the state can command its members to direct their aggression inwards

rather than outwards against a foreign enemy, ultimately informing a notion of politics that undermines ethical norms.¹⁹

Against this backdrop of secrecy, *The Secret Agent* sets up a default relationship between the state and the individual, in which there is complete overlap between the two. This is most evident in the seemingly endless chain of command attached to the police, those who act as the arm of the state: Michaelis, Karl Yundt, and Ossipon, the anarchist cronies reporting to Verloc, who, acting as double-agent, then reports to Inspector Heat of the police, who monitors the anarchists, investigates the Greenwich affair, and then reports to the Assistant Commissioner, head of the Special Crimes Department, who then reports to Sir Ethelred, implied by the novel to be either England's Secretary of State, or, at the least, one of his employees. The novel's confusion is by design: "responsibility" and indeed individual identity become completely obfuscated in its tangled chain of command.

Yet, we can observe how at least one of the public officials struggles to keep his private life separate from his duties to the state. During an exchange between Heat and the Commissioner in which they discuss Heat's failure to locate the bombing's prime

¹⁹ In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt explores how understanding oneself as a "political" subject can become an abstraction, and claims "the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy" (26). This distinction as "enemy" nevertheless leads to categorizing him as potentially "morally evil or aesthetically ugly" and "existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible" (27). Schmitt's concern, though, lies in what happens when these abstractions become actualized in the case of nations and states that "continue to group themselves according to the friend and enemy antithesis" (28). This scenario, I suggest, is applicable to the internationally focused world of *The Secret Agent* because it reflects the domestic hostility of state citizens against an assumed "enemy" represented by the anarchists. In an interesting turn of phrase, Schmitt associates this enemy with "public" discourse, as if its targeting permeates all aspects of social existence within a given nation and it ultimately cannot be contained by private (or possibly secret) exchanges: "An enemy exists only when [...] one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship" (28). For a useful investigation of this problematic as it influences the Thatcher-era Britain represented by David Peace's novels, see Matthew Hart's essay, specifically pp. 591-94.

suspect, the narrator presents us with an out-of-place aside interrupting the procedure-oriented conversation and detailing the Commissioner's background and vexed relationship with detecting secret behaviors:

The head of the so-called Special Crimes Department debarred by his position from going out of doors personally in quest of secrets locked up in guilty breasts, had a propensity to exercise his considerable gifts for the detection of incriminating truth upon his own subordinates. That peculiar instinct could hardly be called a weakness. It was natural. He was a born detective. It had unconsciously governed his choice of a career, and if it ever failed him in life it was perhaps in the one exceptional circumstance of his marriage – which was also natural. It fed, since it could not roam abroad, upon the human material which was brought to it in its official seclusion. We can never cease to be ourselves. (94)

The narrator seems to work towards defining this character's drive to locate people's secrets and lies, implying how sought-after secrets represent ontological difficulties that fabricate the very nature of one's being. What is striking about these comments are the ways in which they posit secret-hunting as no more than a feature of the agent's personality, how they present an aggressive form of detection in the most instinctive of terms. Because he is prohibited from locating threats out in the field himself, the Commissioner is driven to re-enact such behavior within his own chain of command, as if doing so would bring him closer to solving crimes and locating England's foreign offenders. It also seems important that we are told how these impulses are at odds with his domestic life, as if his marriage could not be read and interpreted as he would one of his targets while spying. State-work, in other words, should not spill over into one's home. The narrator imagines the Commissioner's behavior through terms of the unconscious – explicitly gesturing to it, in fact – and suggesting that the pursuit of “secrets locked up in guilty breasts” creates a psychological model ultimately

commanded by the state. By way of their protectors, then, secrets have an unconscious side that dictates how to act responsibly towards them.

The Stuttering Agent

The action of the novel occurs within this framework that champions the state at the expense of the individual. One could characterize the main tension as the emergence of the individual, the “secret agent,” within this framework. By observing the characterizations of Verloc and Stevie, I will explore how each navigates the relationship between state and individual through secrecy and agency.

The fundamental problems of agency and secrecy represented by Conrad’s novel are declared by its title, which alerts us, even before the novel begins, to the complex relationship of agency and secrecy. The novel forges a tightly-bound relationship between agency and secrecy by drawing our attention to how agency is created *by* and *through* secrecy. We can interpret their linking various ways, such as the secret as a form of agency, and / or agency as a secret in itself. In one sense, if we were to read agency as a modifier of secrecy (a secret’s agency, its force and work in the world), then we can see how secrets have a political life of their own, one that can separate from individuals and dictate action. In other words, secrets have a life of their own, with or without agents to uncover or leak them. However, if we were to read against this grain, to set secret as a modifier of agent, then this relationship becomes much more complex. In this formulation, covert operations lead to the acquisition of agency. Once obtained, agency must remain hidden. In order to effect change, one must conduct affairs in private and never disclosed his personal identity. More importantly, this linkage reminds us of the relationship between identity and anonymity: a secret agent has agency vis-à-vis the

people around him – agency to be anonymous and thus unnoticed, as well as agency to fabricate stories about one’s private life so as to pass as inconspicuous. But that agency is always compromised in some sense – it is never fully one’s own: as an agent of the state, one always acts *on behalf of* someone or something else; there are limits on what one can do, and how one can do it. The agent, in short, always knows his limits.

The Secret Agent dramatizes the anonymity informing the life of the spy, but also grasps how anonymous life reclaims some form of agency nonetheless. The novel makes use of pre-war espionage to interrogate the concern over agency and short-circuit the identification of political acts with the individuals believed to have performed them: a nameless and un-locatable “secret agent” acts on behalf of their nation (or the country hiring them); however, he must remain unidentifiable. The delta symbol associated repeatedly with Verloc’s past ventures presents us with a visual marker rather than a linguistic one, and obscures the naming process by denoting action that cannot be read. Like the symbol itself, the agent is there but partly illegible, a cipher for something much larger than himself. We should also remember that a good portion of the novel’s plot involves Inspector Heat trying to identify the culprit of the Greenwich bombing, tracing the bits of cloth, flesh, and the mysterious address label left at the detonation site back to a source. Indeed, the novel’s suspense focuses on uncovering the identity of the “secret agent,” both for the characters in the novel and for us as readers.

Initially, the novel identifies Verloc as the secret agent. Early in the novel during his first visit to “the Embassy,” we discover the origins of Verloc’s affiliation with this unspecified (“foreign” being the only given detail) national threat when Mr. Vladimir inquires, “So you began your connection with us by stealing the French gun designs.

And you got yourself caught. That must have been very disagreeable to our Government” (17). Barring his capture by the enemy, this mission to acquire military intelligence – here pertaining to the manufacture of weapons – is both defensive and offensive. Verloc learns the enemy’s plans so that he can see the possible attack being prepared by the French and thereby strategize the necessary defenses. He also helps the Embassy’s home country combat potential strikes by wielding their weapons technology against them. Verloc’s capture, however, jeopardizes it all, not just because he could possibly fail to obtain the needed information, but because the opposing nation now knows that it is a target. The government employing him – whichever it may be – loses its advantage and surprise. In this situation, Verloc himself is the secret ultimately revealing itself at the moment of capture. Secrets, in other words, are both protective and disabling, a *pharmakos* of the state.

Verloc has several qualities that enable him to succeed as a spy, including his ability to blend in and remain indistinct. This quality is evident in his statements about his national origins: “‘I’ve been charged with several missions to London while His Excellency Baron Stott-Wartenheim was still Ambassador in Paris. Then by his Excellency’s instructions I settled down in London. I am English [...] A natural-born British subject,’ Mr. Verloc said stolidly. ‘But my father was French, and so –’” (18). Verloc migrates because of his profession, which forces him to rehearse his nationality without any feeling or certitude whatsoever. His repetition is telling, exposing his fluctuation between being “English” or “British,” between being part of the center or a member on the periphery. Anything else, any other nationality, only clutters a portrait he would like to draw in minimalist terms, though he can’t entirely resist – even as he cuts

off – the urge to broaden the framework to include his father’s French nationality. The brief, interrupted mention of this more complicated family line reminds us that nationality is itself an incomplete project, one rendered unstable because of its international affiliations. Verloc’s position as its inhabitant of an uncertain lineage, one that is not quite as “natural-born” as he would like, suggests his ability to mask himself and engage in new forms of political action and subjectivity. Conrad’s treatment of Verloc fits with the trend toward cosmopolitanism within London. The novel emphasizes heterogeneous and disparate nationalities as the new condition of England at the onset of the twentieth century.²⁰

Because of those associations, though, Verloc is able to adapt himself to a changing London: “Mr. Verloc, cosmopolitan enough not to be deceived by London’s typographical mysteries, held on steadily, without a sign of surprise or indignation” (12). Here, Verloc’s flat affect seems to be attributed to his cosmopolitanism: after witnessing what being abroad has to offer, we are led to assume, London presents more of the same, being a mere continuation of “mystery” and international intrigue. Verloc’s background invites a distinct approach to the changes within the body politic initiating such disciplinary methods. While first narrating his relationship with his family’s shop, the

²⁰ Although it is now commonplace to discuss post-WWII British literature in the context of cosmopolitanism and the increase in immigration following the disintegration of Empire, Conrad scholars have begun to study how *The Secret Agent* suggests the already-becoming-cosmopolitan nature of London at the turn of the century. In fact, the novel is keenly aware of this turning tide in a scene when the Assistant Commissioner visits an Italian restaurant in Soho, and the narrator describes the encounter as if the restaurant were in danger of losing its cultural significance and being consumed by a British totality: “On going out the Assistant Commissioner made to himself the observation that the patrons of the place has lost in the frequentation of fraudulent cookery all their national and private characteristics. And this was strange, since the Italian restaurant is such a peculiarly British institution. But these people were as denationalised as the dishes set before them with every circumstance of unstamped respectability. Neither was their personality stamped in any way, professionally, socially, or racially. They seemed created for the Italian restaurant, unless the Italian restaurant had been perchance created for them” (118-19). See Walkowitz, Valdez-Moses, Allen Macduffie, and Raymond Williams’s “Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism” for further discussion regarding new internationalisms and the imperial logic of metropolitan space in London at the beginning of the 20th century.

novel references Verloc's mobility and ease with which he is able to cross boundaries and intrude upon spaces: "Mr. Verloc was an intermittent patron. He came and went without any very apparent reason. He generally arrived in London (like the influenza) from the Continent, only he arrived unheralded by the Press; and his visitations set in with great severity" (5-6). By introducing the protagonist without ascribing intentionality to his actions, the narrator seems to want to make Verloc's presence arbitrary and lacking in focus, yet imbricated with some form of suffering – here, the flu epidemics that ravaged the metropolitan centers of Russia, Germany, Paris, and Spain in the 1890s. Verloc invades the home front without notice, passing under the radar while leaving traces of destruction behind him.

By cataloguing Verloc's "thorough domestication" throughout the text, *The Secret Agent* constantly erects a boundary between professional spy work and family life at home and illustrates how Verloc shuttles between each of these spaces. The novel stresses that he does have, in spite of other qualities, some political investments – his "mission in life [is] the protection of the social mechanism, not its perfectionment or even its criticism" (12) – while at the same time it acknowledges how his family life serves as a cover for this persona. When running through his list of suspects, Inspector Heat rehashes Verloc's statement to the police: "He said that he was married and settled now, and that all he wanted was not to be interfered in his little business" (104). This "business" is not that involving nations, states, and military secrets, but the secrets involved in running a pornography shop in Soho with his wife, who knows nothing of the extent of his double-life until the novel's final section. Verloc, in fact, debates whether or not to tell his wife of his bombing affairs because of the threat of losing "the

sacredness of domestic peace,” deciding instead to “[bear] his sufferings silently in the drowsy silence” of their bedroom, the most intimate and unsullied space for Verloc in the novel (143). It is in the breaking of this drowsy silence that Winnie discovers Verloc’s secret political endeavors, leaked when he mumbles the word “Embassy” in his sleep (158). Verloc also realizes dishearteningly, “It was his marital affection that had received the greatest shock from the premature explosion” when the bomb unexpectedly detonates, taking his brother-in-law Stevie with it and igniting the fuse of cultural fear (183).

Despite Verloc’s suitability for spying, the novel undermines his identification as the secret agent. As critics have often noticed, the narrator is particularly ruthless towards Verloc when it comes to his ability as a government operative.²¹ Aside from the numerous references to his being “thoroughly domesticated,” the narrator seems to want us to think that Verloc is a figure devoid of suspicion and utterly benign: “[n]either his spiritual, nor his mental, nor his physical needs were of the kind to take him much abroad” (5, 201). The narrator also points out his idle nature that prevents him from actually partaking in anything effective, and snidely remarks that Verloc has become “rusty,” “[h]is idleness was not hygienic, but it suited him very well. He was in a manner devoted to it [...] Born of industrious parents for a life of toil, he had embraced indolence from an impulse as profound as inexplicable [...] He was too lazy even for a mere demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labour. It was too much trouble” (10). Shortly thereafter, the narrator even interrupts description with the first-person in order to

²¹ Mark Wollaeger claims the narrator “polices characters who threaten to grow into full-blooded Forsterian roundness by flattening them into satiric reductions” (52). Such satire indicates the “controlling authorial presence” of the narrator and ultimately serves as a stand-in for Conrad – not so much because they share political views (they don’t), but because of Conrad’s concern with “authorial efforts to master the audience” (40-41). For Wollaeger, *The Secret Agent* represents a time in Conrad’s life during which he struggled more than ever with the relationship between authorship, readership, and financial gain.

make a direct claim about Verloc: “What I want to affirm is that Mr. Verloc’s expression was in no way diabolic” (11). We can assume, then, that there is significant motive behind this statement to enforce a certain way of viewing Verloc. The narrator emphasizes that he is a man that shouldn’t garner our interest and thereby remain unidentifiable. Here, the novel deconstructs the spy, the avatar of confidentiality, through a clash between his fictional Conradian form and the preconceptions of how a spy is *supposed* to act. Readers of the novel will notice these remarks as merely a few of the many subtly pugnacious comments aimed at Verloc, and designed to make him unfit for service, a far cry from the able-bodied, smooth operators of more typical espionage novels.

This ironic representation of Verloc as the fat and lazy anarchist is meant to direct our attention elsewhere. I suggest that the novel offers Stevie as another possible identification for the secret agent. Beloved brother of Verloc’s wife, this man-child revolutionary of the proletariat, the native Briton turned domestic terrorist and suicide-bomber, is a composite pathological figure who cannot fully speak for himself: His most striking trait is his stammer, which renders him largely speechless. He becomes nervous when interacting with anyone in the outside world, seems to have no prospects (or potential) for the future, and appears stuck in the state of a becoming-subject. Stevie is ultimately, I claim, the secret agent that the text refuses to divulge – the novel’s personification of secrecy’s struggle with agency. *The Secret Agent* opens, in fact, with a line that directs our attention to Stevie’s responsibility (a degree of agency) – “Mr. Verloc, going out in the morning, left his shop nominally in charge of his brother-in-law”

(3) – only to later thwart these associations when it introduces him to us and catalogues his physical handicaps and nervous mental tics.²²

While *The Secret Agent* is vague concerning the actual nature of Stevie's affliction, it carefully describes him in terms of mental illness: he "prowls" around his home "like an excited animal in a cage" (44), forgets his address and needs it sewn into his clothes, "stutter[s] to the point of suffocation" when asked a question (8), and finds solace in furiously drawing circles in arbitrary spots around his home. The only instance in which we see him venture out in public, "excitement as usual had robbed him of the power of connected speech" (125). Although readers feel Stevie's presence in nearly every chapter of the novel – when he is not there, someone is worried about him – he in fact has only around fifteen lines of dialogue throughout the entire novel. All of these lines are the repetition of single-syllable words ("bad," "no," "poor," "shame," "hurt") or simple phrases he hears spoken by his sister, and the novel gives only a small handful of brief paragraphs depicting his thoughts. Like a secret, then, he remains both inarticulate and unarticulated by the novel, yet always present.

Stevie, then, presents us with another vantage from which to examine the novel's sense of agency: a figure who acquires his agency either as a type of sacrificial victim, as the anonymous soldier for the proletariat, or as the mad artist who constructs his death as

²² The narrator treats us to the following lines upon Stevie's introduction within the novel: "For he was difficult to dispose of, that boy. He was delicate and, in a frail way, good-looking too, except for the vacant droop of his lower lip. Under our excellent system of compulsory education he had learned to read and write, notwithstanding the unfavourable aspect of the lower lip. But as errand-boy he did not turn out a great success. He forgot his messages; he was easily diverted from the straight path of duty by the attractions of stray cats and dogs, which he followed down narrow alleys into unsavoury courts; by the comedies of the streets, which he contemplated open-mouthed, to the detriment of his employer's interests; or by the dramas of fallen horses, whose pathos and violence induced him sometimes to shriek piercingly into a crowd [...] When led away by a grave and protecting policeman, it would often become apparent that poor Stevie had forgotten his address – at least for a time" (7-8).

his grand masterpiece. The novel ironically throws him into the role of “secret agent” by having him as the sole character that forcefully acts upon his political inclinations (his concern for the lower classes) by setting off a bomb at the Greenwich Observatory, the limit event imagined by the novel as the most viable method of creating public terror. Because *The Secret Agent* stages an incompetent becoming a successful suicide bomber (and, thus, the instrument of domestic terrorism within the text), I suggest the novel re-conceptualizes “secret agency” by casting it in pathological form – within a form that’s anxious, nervous, stuttering, and acting destructively without rationale. Conrad himself also declared this re-imagination as “[the] ironic treatment alone [that] would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity” (Preface 251).

In Stevie, we find the most undiluted formulation of Conrad’s “scorn” and “pity,” which combine with destructive force in a young man trying to understand his place in a culture and to determine his political position within it. During his excursion through London while delivering his mother to a new place of residence with Winnie, Stevie encounters a down-on-his-luck carriage driver who ferries the family across the city. The driver mentions his difficult situation at home with his wife, four children, and all-too-modest income that isn’t enough to support his family. Stevie takes in the man’s story, his cockney accent, and above all, the fact that he whips his horse. To this act of perceived aggression, he reacts like a frightened child, sympathizing with the horse and fearing the driver, whom he imagines is using the creature to vent the frustrations of his difficult station in life. Stevie’s anxiousness quickly transforms into anger upon realizing the pain experienced by the horse, the cabman, and the family for whom the cabman

provides. He also becomes acutely and suddenly aware of his own powerless to affect the situation.

The narrator, though, is quick to point out, “Stevie was not wise enough to restrain his passions,” indicating not only that these emotions will somehow get the better of him, but also that Stevie will fulfill the role of a “holy fool” and some form of irresponsible action lies in store for him (134). The narrator continues,

The docile Stevie went along; but now he went along without pride, shamblingly, and muttering half words, and even words that would have been whole if they had not been made up of halves that did not belong to each other. It was as though he had been trying to fit all the words he could remember to his sentiments in order to get some sort of corresponding idea. And, as a matter of fact, he got it at last. He hung back to utter it at once.

“Bad world for poor people.”

Directly he had expressed that thought he became aware that it was familiar to him already in all its consequences. This circumstance strengthened his conviction immensely, but also augmented his indignation. Somebody, he felt, ought to be punished for it – punished with great severity. Being no sceptic, but a moral creature, he was in a manner at the mercy of his righteous passions. (136-37)

Stevie, here, seems as if he were a kind of sleeper agent: the passage initially presents him as benign and unthreatening (as well as a highly unlikely source of action, given his mental states repeatedly emphasized by the novel), but actually harboring secret intentions of his own, motivated by his newfound political awareness of class oppression.

He experiences difficulty forming his thoughts: mere words circulating aimlessly in Stevie’s mind have to exert great effort to attach themselves to verbal expression.

These mismatched words are able to collect themselves through a statement of political inclination. His statement, however, is a fragment without a subject. Stevie locates an object being acted upon – “poor people” – but he is unable to formulate *who* actually does the acting, who it is creating this “bad world.” In other words, all of Stevie’s

mental work, like the continuous proselytization of Verloc and his fellow anarchist agents, still fails to attribute action to a definable source.

Furthermore, the narrator's reference to these words swimming around and crashing against each other is the most transparent representation of Stevie's mental processes. Rather than just spitting out terms with unfavorable associations as he tends to do, the novel gives us the steps Stevie has to take in order to produce his fragmented and freighted words; his concentrated psychological story is told here amidst the larger, more dominant political plot of *The Secret Agent*. This passage's second half, I would add, inserts Stevie into this narrative: as soon as he utters the phrase and "expresses" his thoughts, he is ushered into a recognizable ideological space. For Stevie, the experience of pain in itself becomes ideological because he readily identifies it with the "consequences" of being politically subjugated. His thoughts try to place blame upon a source, working towards attributing some kind of agent so that there can be punishment. And if this "circumstance" of acknowledging inequality is what exacerbates Stevie's anxiety, together with his sense of justice, then we could even go so far as to say his drawings are precisely what Theodor Adorno would later refer to as "committed" art that attempts to grasp suffering. The narrator describes, "Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of mad art attempting the inconceivable" (36).²³ It is in this way

²³ Theodor Adorno has examined numerous times how modern art begins to realize the relationship between itself and bourgeois society, and argued that it must aim at opposing and changing social conditions by registering the "suffering" associated with living under capitalism. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he proclaims "Surely it would be better for art to vanish altogether than to forget suffering, which is art's

that the text begins to unpack a puzzling conception of agency in relation to Stevie: his potentiality achieved through political awareness and (future) action is paradoxically acquired in his desire to locate an agent of class suffering. Stevie's agency, in other words, is missing a center and predicated upon absence.

A question of morality, however, frames this search for accountability: the narrator emphasizes Stevie as a "moral creature" who is also "at the mercy of his righteous passions": whether he likes it or not, he *will* act. Through this mention of emotion giving rise to action, the narrator seems to offer an explanation for why Stevie behaves the way he does, as if this alone is what establishes his "moral" center. Instead, this simple statement about feeling dissolves any degree of psychological complexity the novel could bestow upon him. What, then, is the purpose of rendering Stevie mute, in making him anti-narrative, of establishing his character as a zone of negative capability? If he is this "moral creature" within the novel's cast of characters, is he not also the text's ethical subject? I claim that Stevie acquires an ethics unlike the other "secret agents" within the novel because his strike against the state, as this scene demonstrates, is motivated *not* by monetary causes, personal gain, or professional reputation (in contrast to Verloc), but rather by emotional strife and a "convulsive sympathy" for those afflicted and marginalized by governing bodies enforcing a certain way of life (133). This, the novel suggests, constitutes action in its purest form.

expression and which gives substance to its form. Suffering, not positivity, is the humane content of art" (369). Similarly, his essay "Commitment" outlines his theory of "committed" literature, and submits that art should remain politically ambiguous and withhold from announcing the definitive social ends towards which it endeavors. Committed works of art stand in opposition to "the work that wants nothing to do but exist"; committed art considers those works "a fetish, the idle pastime of those who would be happy to sleep through the deluge that threatens us," and inhabits "an apolitical stance that is in fact highly political" (76). For Adorno, the works of Samuel Beckett represent committed literature *par excellence* because they stress the "negativity of the subject as being the true form of subjectivity – a theme that calls for the radically subjective figuration" matched by how Beckett's distinct style attempts to negate its content (*AT* 354). See in particular chapter 12 of *Aesthetic Theory* ("Society," pp. 320-69), for further discussion.

We would do well to remember, though, that Stevie's action ultimately fails. Despite his political conscience being awakened by his affective response to the urban working class, Stevie *does not* realize he carries a bomb and he only succeeds in blowing *himself* up. He misses the novel's intended target of the Greenwich Observatory – the symbol of empirical thought in turn of the century London. Stevie carries anything at all and walks through Greenwich Park because Verloc has him do so, because of his admiration for Verloc, because of his desire to replicate Verloc's hostility towards dominant socio-cultural discourses. The novel emphasizes the nature of this mimetic relationship between the two men, as someone else's point of view typically intervenes to comment upon it. For example, Winnie expresses her concerns over Verloc hosting meetings with his anarchist cohort at their home because Stevie will overhear their discussions. She views Stevie as being too "willing and docile [...] affectionate and eager to please" (47); she later tells Verloc "You could do anything with that boy [...] He would go through fire for you" (146). The narrator also remarks "nothing could stand in the way of Stevie's belief [that] Mr. Verloc was obviously yet mysteriously *good*" (140), and that Stevie always glances at him with "great and awed regard" and "respectful" and "reverential compassion" (139-40).

Stevie's death, then, is not so much a result of being indebted to a cause as it is an act of *imitation* – Stevie, the man-child unknowingly and ironically thrown into the role of martyred suicide-bomber, is the poor copy of Verloc's once suave and notorious but now obese and inert secret agent. In the novel, characters are obsessed with potentiality – an eagerness at the prospects of doing violence to England through an attack on its ruling class. Everyone has potential, but in the end, no one actualizes it. People talk big games,

but there's no walking – except for Stevie, who acts by imitating, who is asked to do something and does it in a gesture of obedience rather than will. Such a view, in fact, helps us understand Winnie's excessive concern for his surroundings and her worry that he will simply absorb the values she finds harmful, adapting consequently to a destructive environment. To see Stevie in this way is to also distinguish a potential purpose for his animal-like status within the text: his "prowling" around (44), how he "moped in the striking fashion of an unhappy domestic animal" (147), how he needs to be removed from the problematic urban stimuli of London and taken "into the country" in order to "leave him all safe" (150), and how his actions suggest "an impulsive man" to the Assistant Commissioner of the police (174). By describing him as an animal affected by his surroundings, the novel suggests that Stevie has no potential for an action of his own accord.²⁴

In the confluence of secrecy and agency, then, does Conrad imagine the work of a secret agent as action (regardless of its motivation), or the mere *ability* to act without necessarily following through? Or, does Conrad emphasize the odd division of agency into something either visible or concealed, that one has agency by virtue of harboring secrets and performing a certain identity, yet no agency in one's own desires to reveal

²⁴ Sanjay Krishnan also notes the prevalence of animal likenesses in *Lord Jim*, examining how certain figures within the novel, predominantly the Malaysians, "partake of certain attributes of the human without entirely belonging to that category" (135). Marlow's characterizations of the Malaysians repeatedly call to mind the "conventional characterizations of an animal's relation to the world": like the animal, the Malay "can make choices but is not altogether capable of rational deliberation" and does not possess "the faculty of imagination" (136). Lacking reason, interiority, and history, the animal is unable to access the world and "serves as a placeholder for the line that separates European from native, historical from nonhistorical societies" (139). Marlow's global perspective – a major concern for the novel – is thereby a skewed project packaging some in relation to ethical and historical action, while boxing others into the category of inadequacy. I find Krishnan's analysis particularly compelling and useful because it draws parallels between Jim's Marlow and the narrator of the Secret Agent: both engage narrative agendas that consider what's "proper" to the faculties of the human. Stevie, we are made to believe by these animal-like traits and actions, repeatedly obfuscates such categorizations. See Krishnan's *Reading the Global: Troubling Perspectives on Britain's Empire in Asia*, pp. 133-64, for further discussion.

one's true self to another? *The Secret Agent* provides an additional way to frame these questions because the novel asks whether agency involves the ability to be concretely read and attributed to a source, or if it entails a necessary illegibility. This indecipherability reimagines the conventional understanding of action in order to make political efficacy secret and anonymous. Through Stevie, the novel ultimately implies that to be a copy of someone else is to be unreadable. Hampered by his inability to speak or think properly, Stevie demonstrates that he can *only* act by imitating those around him: when words fail him, he turns to bombs. This layering of potentiality and actuality with imitation revises the novel's position on "secret agency": that it understands agency to inhabit not what or who is being imitated, but it lies rather in the act of reproduction, with the copy who has no choice but to mimic others. The novel's treatment of Stevie is significant because it offers a striking perspective for understanding individuals' positions within the state in modernity. Specifically, it envisions how notions of self-making are reconstituted in pathological form. This idea is grounded in the character stammering to the point of exhaustion, crippled by the thought of others' unfortunate circumstances, horrified by the meekest of transgressions, and impulsively imitating the actions of others without regard for their consequence.

In his essay "What is Enlightenment?" Michel Foucault provides a framework for understanding the relationship between modernity and the self.²⁵ There he suggests modernity is less a liberation from the past than a restrictive process to forge anew, then the secretive side to agency confines subjects to the task of self-invention (312). Foucault asserts that the imperative of modernity to make things "new" (the mindset that

²⁵ See Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in his *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, pages 303-20, for further discussion.

would give rise to modernism), is not the break from tradition that we conventionally believe. Instead, modernity is a discursive framework that produces a subject who feels compelled “to face the task of producing himself” (312). Agency is not so much one’s position of power from which to effect change as it is a position which we are forced to acquire – in other words, we are always already in the process of attaining agency. The task at hand for Foucault, then, becomes understanding how modernity places limitations upon subject formation and critiquing how it operates systematically.

The Secret Agent, I suggest, submits secrecy as this method of critique, and presents the pitfalls and perils of what happens when one tries to remove oneself from this framework. The novel views secrecy as a method of what Foucault calls the “rupture and deviation” inherent to modernity (310). Such deviation occurs when the novel’s process of self-making involves actions that must be performed indirectly (such as copying another), or by covert means (such as acting anonymously). Secrecy ultimately characterizes anonymity as a “mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself” in order for subjects to critique the limitations posed upon them in the name of progress (311). An anonymous life thus becomes a form of agency – a life without content, a life whose actions have no imperative of their own, and that is absorbed by a national totality and understood through pain and victimization.

The Secret Agent stages an assault on the systems of self-understanding so important for modernity, as the predicament of Stevie’s bomb short-circuits the possibility for human beings to evaluate their historical existence. Bodies become little more than a means to a destructive end; or, as Conrad’s novel puts it, we run into the problem of “too much flesh” (92), the fragments of Stevie’s body strewn throughout the

text, a conversion of his body into an anonymous corpse, the pieces of which are left to be assembled and managed by others following his death. Whenever the text invokes Stevie's dismembered body, it makes sure to obscure the victim, to graphically dissemble him into parts in order to keep him unidentifiable (although we know early on just who this body belongs to, it's somewhat of an open secret that the deceased bomber is Stevie, as I will soon discuss). The chief police inspector surveying the crime scene observes, "'Well, here he is – all of him I could see. Fair. Slight – slight enough. Look at that foot there. I picked up the legs first, one after another. He was that scattered you didn't know where to begin.' [...] The echo of the words 'Person unknown' repeating itself in his inner consciousness" (71). And when he visits Verloc's shop to investigate a possible connection to the bomber, the same character callously tells Stevie's sister, "Blown to small bits: limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, splinters – all mixed up together. I tell you they had to fetch a shovel to gather him up with" (166). And after learning of her brother's gruesome demise, Winnie can't even bring herself to speak his name, exclaiming to Comrade Ossipon, "Oh Tom, they had to gather him up with a shovel" (220).²⁶ The sacred and beloved brother becomes just another piece in England's pile of refuse, a gruesome emblem of society's vulnerability to anonymity. The lack of identification – the "him," the "he," the scattered legs and feet, the "person unknown" – disrupt, serving as a literal reminder of Foucault's modernity, with its dynamics of the liberal self. Modernity is not simply the advent of the new; it is the arrival of new ways of dying.

²⁶ For an astute reading of this shovel, see Sarah Cole's essay "Dynamite Violence and Literary Culture," in which she suggests the shovel "becomes the metonymical trace of a physical situation almost too gruesome to contemplate" (316). Rather than describing Stevie's death forthright, the novel repeatedly returns to the shovel as the reference point of his demise. "When pain becomes unimaginable," claims Cole, "the imagination turns to what it knows" (316).

The Secret Agent matches this innovation with not only Stevie's body – the sort of surrealist, Dadaist, or futurist experimental aesthetic that assaults the sensibilities of those who view it, acting as both spectacle and slaughter – but also with the larger implications played out by the figure of the suicide bomber. Destruction and artistic production are twinned in the novel: Vladimir says to Verloc, “bombs are your means of expression” (27); Stevie's drawings suggest “cosmic chaos” and are “typical of [his] form of degeneracy” (36-37); and the Professor obsesses over locating “the perfect detonator” (55), bestowing upon bombing an aesthetic dimension, reminding one of much of modernism and modernity when he describes it as a “combination of time and shock” (61).

Recently, Terry Eagleton has gone so far as to claim suicide bombing “as a murderous version of the artistic avant-garde, a [...] conjuring of the chaotic, ineffable, and unintelligible from the anaemic certainties of the everyday world”; it de-familiarizes by transforming what is familiar to us into the “monstrously unrecognizable” (92).²⁷ Following Eagleton, then, we could view how suicide bombing becomes the aesthetic act *par excellence* in the space of Conrad's novel, as characters often suggest, but it also becomes a radical and paradoxical means of attaining agency: the self becomes extinct at the very moment it assumes its supremacy and breaks out of anonymity. Action is both affirmed and proclaimed futile in the same instantaneous flash. *The Secret Agent* suggests that suicide bombing is a method of violating human life in order to create political change through the artistic medium of the human body. Giorgio Agamben's “man without content” similarly articulates this violation, what he calls “the artist [...] who has no other identity than a perpetual emerging out of the nothingness of

²⁷ See his *Holy Terror*, particularly pages 90-127, for further discussion.

expression,” who creates “art [that] does not die but, having become a self-annihilating nothing, eternally survives itself” (55-56).

Secret Bombs & the Form of War

My argument thus far has relied upon the agency of spies, but I will now turn to the significance of the suicide bomber within the novel. The idea of secret agency changes when the secret isn't information regarding national security, but something hidden underneath one's coat, a concealed trigger that can turn bodies into weapons and potentially create panic and destruction. The suicide bomber achieves this position of agency I'm suggesting by keeping secrets from his surrounding targets, the secret that, unbeknownst to them, he wields the power to end their lives. *The Secret Agent's* representation of the suicide bomber suggests there is agency in wielding the power of anticipation. I wish to focus on how a literal manifestation of violence within the novel brings us back to an historical inquiry and how *The Secret Agent* uses varying types of secrets to play with history, brushing it against the grain.²⁸

Such forms of bombing involve belatedness – a central foreboding quality created by the anticipation of impending violence as time ticks away. This delayed shock becomes an organizing structure for Conrad's text and informs our understanding of the rupture within the novel's chronology. I submit, then, that this violence to the history presented *within* the novel in turn produces an anachronistic method of reading the history *surrounding* the novel.

²⁸ This well-known phrase is intended to echo Walter Benjamin's seventh thesis in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in which he famously advances, "There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another. The historical materialist thus moves as far away from this as measurably possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (256-57).

Jacques Derrida provides a way of viewing how anticipation becomes a rhetorical condition that forms the narration of future events. In “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” Derrida, writing in 1984, contends that the global pre-occupation with “nuclear war” is concerned with the “non-event” of the apocalypse: one that has yet to happen, relies upon being imagined, and, thus, is immensely textual and literary. Nuclear conflict – the dropping of bombs, the decimation of cities, the eradication of life – can only be “the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or text” (393). Since nuclear war has not taken place, one can only speculate its occurrence through writing and speaking about it: it becomes a performative apparatus because its anticipation installs a rhetorical condition affecting methods of communication. For Derrida, the “fright of imaginary anticipation” of our lives extinguished by war becomes “a phantasm [that] conditions every discourse and all strategies” (393). Derrida’s conjectures invite us to read *The Secret Agent*’s concealed bomb in the same manner: as the source of a shared temporality, in which secrets are revealed and bombs detonated. Conrad’s gradual revelation of a central foreboding mystery, then, takes on a new sense of urgency.

The curious non-linear arrangement of *The Secret Agent* unveils its own preoccupation with keeping secrets from its readers as it builds suspense and releases tantalizing bits of information in order to reveal their significance later. The novel’s first three chapters depict the Verloc family’s domestic and professional lives around London: the Soho pornography shop, Mr. Verloc’s employment by anarchists to bomb the Greenwich Observatory and Winnie’s protection of Stevie. Beginning with its fourth chapter, however, the novel jumps abruptly to the critically-discussed pub scene in which

Comrade Ossipon and the Professor address the social and aesthetic dimensions of suicide bombing, pointing out a story in the newspapers: “There’s a man blown up in Greenwich Park this morning” (56). Although this conversation draws attention to how knowledge made public by newspapers creates a spectacle, it implies something else: the planned attack the previous chapters seemed to establish as the major event to unravel over the course of the novel has suddenly *already* taken place. Contrary to the expectations of what the plot will give us, the explosion of *The Secret Agent* is a silent one, an event absent from the space of the text, a gap between narration and imagination. A post-detonation scenario continues throughout the ensuing three chapters, during which we view members of the London police squad surveying the crime scene, discovering the unidentifiable corpse of the perpetrator (or rather what’s left of it), suspecting certain individuals and organizations of the terrorist act, and railing against foreign agents in England whose “existence [...] should not be tolerated” (110). At the opening of chapter eight, though, Conrad inserts a flashback that rewinds the plot to the time and setting of the novel’s earlier chapters, placing us back in the Verloc household – with all its family members intact – and fleshing out the relationship between Stevie and his surrounding environment. The remainder of the novel then lets the pieces fall into place as we watch the family *implode* after Stevie *explodes*: Verloc feels guilt and confesses to Winnie that he feels responsible; Winnie then fatally stabs him in a fit of anger and flees with his money, only to later drown herself in the Thames River. The novel, in other words, sets up the terrorist attack but then elides it: the bomb’s detonation is never in the present; it exists only in the past or future, as if the text functions as a means to go back and undo the event itself.

This flash-forward within the text, I would add, is marked by an even more curious introduction. The chapter preceding the plot's chronological rupture concludes with Winnie's fervent desire to keep her brother out of harm's way. Speaking ill of the press and their preoccupation with gruesome news stories, she proclaims,

It's silly reading – that's what it is. There's no sale for it. The other day Stevie got hold of one, and there was a story in it of a German soldier officer tearing half-off the ear of a recruit, and nothing was done to him for it. The brute! I couldn't do anything with Stevie that afternoon. The story was enough, too, to make one's blood boil. But what's the use of printing things like that? We aren't German slaves here, thank God. It's not our business – is it? [...] I had to take the carving knife from the boy [...] He was shouting and stamping and sobbing. He can't stand the notion of any cruelty. He would have stuck that officer like a pig if he had seen him then. (48)

There are several things worth emphasizing in Winnie's outburst, first among them how the newspaper draws attention to foreign affairs, specifically the placing of military information into public knowledge. Secondly, she notes the brutality and cruelty exhibited between soldiers, resulting in body parts strewn about. Furthermore, she highlights the soldiers' nationality, implying the influence of Germany on the British imagination. Lastly, she mentions Stevie's reactive, uncontrollable proclivity for violence. As any reader of the novel knows, Winnie's remarks are not-so-subtle foreshadowing elements that anticipate what will later happen to Stevie. We could even say that receiving these details is similar to what the narrator means when he states, immediately following the text's return to the Verlocs' after jumping ahead, "the shock of the information was so unexpected" (121). How, then, do we account for such partial revelation and the anticipatory framework in a novel concerned with how secrets are kept between nations and their foreign operatives, how confidential information is released amongst the demos, and how mystery pervades each character?

The open secret of the bomb, its explosion within and against imperial Britain, I would then claim, becomes a structuring factor for the text. Although critics have recently investigated the historical and political significance of bombing within *The Secret Agent*, I wish to pay more attention to its temporal dimension and the significance of having us wait for the bomb to go off.²⁹ As readers of the novel, we anticipate the violence because we know it's going to interrupt – we're just not exactly sure *when*. Attending to this temporality and anticipation will ultimately demonstrate how the text is historical in ways not readily associated with it, particularly when it comes to the gradual surrender of secret information.

Rather than suggesting how a rampant nationalism tends to follow politically oriented violence, therefore, the historical context of Conrad's novel suggests that a certain kind of nationalism *anticipates* it. Political secrets – keeping them, sharing them, and acting upon the intelligence they contain – are the first steps toward conflict. The novel registers this anticipation not just structurally, as the text folds in upon itself in order to present a foreseeable death by way of the bomb, but also at the basic level of plot, as it ends with a scene suggesting future violence.

The final sentences of the novel describe in detail the Professor meandering through the crowded London streets, explosives strapped to his chest, contemplating death as a social exfoliate: "His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable – and terrible in the simplicity of his

²⁹ See Cole, Wollaeger, and Eagleton's *Holy Terror* for the cultural significance – one specifically *modernist* – of bombing toyed with by *The Secret Agent*; however, I'm more concerned with the relationship between bombing's temporality (the proleptic tick-tick-ticking away) and the foreboding anticipatory nature of an unfolding history. Paul Saint-Amour gestures to this connection in his highly insightful essay "Gothic Temporality and Total War: Collins, Conrad, and Woolf," but falls just short of explaining what place "history" has in relation to these authors' conceptions of temporality, and doesn't unpack what the category of "total war" means for Conrad's text in particular.

idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men” (246). Notice the abrupt conclusion of the passage, as if the text suddenly interrupts the inevitable flip of the switch and expectations are teased and left dangling.

Shortly before these bleak concluding lines, we encounter a conversation between the Professor and Comrade Ossipon that clarifies how anticipation relies upon the puzzling relationship between past and future. Following Winnie’s demise, the two men discuss the significance of the events that had just transpired: Verloc’s mission with the Embassy, his failure to attack his target, Stevie’s death, Winnie unraveling from losing her brother, her murder of her husband in an act of revenge, and her fear of the gallows and subsequent suicide. While Ossipon wants to maintain that the oppressed still have some fight in them despite these unfortunate losses, the Professor finds this series of affairs indicative of mankind’s weaknesses, and sees resistance to oppression as ultimately futile. The Professor rationalizes his disdain through the belief that violence always begets more violence and the progression of history always erases what comes before it. He toasts an impending wreckage: “‘Prophecy! What’s the good of thinking of what will be!’ He raised his glass. ‘To the destruction of what is,’ he said calmly” (242).

Although the Professor appears to celebrate such historical turbulence without batting an eye, reveling in the act of “extermination” (240), the narrator makes sure to turn inward and demonstrate how unsettled he is by his own words: “He drank and relapsed into his peculiarly close manner of silence. The thought of a mankind as numerous as the sands of the seashore, as indestructible, as difficult to handle, oppressed

him. The sound of exploding bombs was lost in their immensity of passive grains without an echo. For instance, this Verloc affair. Who thought of it now?" (242). The Professor's silence allows for the contemplation of another silence: that of what "this Verloc affair" will soon become; the looming prospect that "what will be" is "the destruction of what is." His thoughts suggest historical rupture by way of erasure – what has already occurred, what is happening now, and what lies in wait are collapsed together and lose their significance. An unavoidable future threatens to nullify the gravity of these events and absorb its human factor into the war machine. The business involving the Verlocs will be just another event involving anonymous bodies destroyed by modern warfare, sacrificed by the state for the cause of the nation. The Professor's thoughts, then, are reminiscent of the logic informing Arendt's "open secrets," almost as if "this Verloc affair" will soon become a secret lost in the folds of Britain's historical and political self-perception. The acknowledgement of history's dirty laundry, in other words, is organized around this event in order to forget it, manipulating recognition of its actually having taken place [memory and amnesia?]. Individuals eradicate an unfavorable past in order to protect the status quo, which requires and produces more violence, forging ahead towards the next conflict.

It's not by accident, I believe, that Conrad's essay "Autocracy and War," composed in 1905 while he was writing *The Secret Agent*, looks ahead forebodingly to some form of war. Following the dissolution of Russian autocracy in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War (the focal point of the essay), Conrad notes how the anticipation of conflict becomes a principal condition of everyday life – "Europe is preparing herself" –

and that states inevitably fall back on aggression as a form of action.³⁰ The obsession with espionage, secret information and the foreign agents bearing it is simultaneously a method of knowledge production regarding oneself and one's potential opponent. "Espionage," as Srinivas Aravamudan reminds us, "is the precondition to arming oneself."³¹ Secrets in peacetime, then, are ultimately a preparation for wartime. The anticipation of injury changes the meaning of peace into a condition of non-war, in which the next conflict – a matter of when rather than if – could erupt at any time. Through fiction, *The Secret Agent* articulates how the public life of peace is shadowed by what Conrad calls "the right of war":

Never before has war received so much homage at the lips of men, and reigned with less disputed sway in their minds [...] It has perverted the intelligence of men, women and children, and has made the speeches of emperors, kings, presidents, and ministers monotonous with ardent protestations of fidelity to peace. Indeed war has made peace altogether its own – it has modeled it on its own image: a martial, overbearing, war-lord sort of peace, with a mailed fist, and turned up moustaches, ringing with the din of grand maneuvers, eloquent with allusions to glorious feats of arms; it has made peace so magnificent as to be almost as expensive to keep up as itself. (Autocracy 89-90)

The moment of danger becomes perpetual and the combativeness of collective self-fashioning spills out into civilian life; a melancholic nationalism aggressively and continuously asserts itself in order to protect the state from impending external threat. Public thought becomes combative within English space as the reactionary tendencies towards outsiders (and especially those suspected of working for the outside) aid group-formation *prior to* the infliction of wounds. When secrets are political and serve the demos, the disclosure of certain forms of knowledge is inimical to national security.

³⁰ Conrad, "Autocracy and War," page 83.

³¹ Aravamudan, "Introduction: Perpetual War," page 1507.

Secrecy thus becomes a necessity for protection and a proleptic defense strategy for ensuing combat – a preemptive strike from within against enemies of the state. The imperative to revise the Official Secrets Act, then, signals a change within public thought requiring some form of address that looks ahead to the First World War.

The framework through which we can read *The Secret Agent*, then, is one attending to these various degrees of anticipation. By “anticipation,” I mean both the preparation for conflict by means of espionage, as well as the tensions between nations that will inevitably erupt. But the novel also views anticipation as the ticking away of narrative time until bombs detonate – until Stevie, as the bearer of his time, is blown up. Because of the various tropes the novel utilizes – anxiety over young male family members, explosions resulting in their deaths, destroyed and unidentifiable bodies, and German antagonism, to name a few – I would suggest the text is shadowed by another history: the crisis in agency surrounding the First World War. As any basic chronology dictates, the historical events of World War I are not readily apparent in turn-of-the-century London, especially within the pages of a novel devoted to ironically portraying the proletariat’s disdain for the upper classes. I wish to examine what happens when we walk the moment of “the Great War” backwards in order to view how *The Secret Agent* looks ahead to a distinctly modernist eradication of life. Can we brush history against the grain by folding these moments into the same plane of occurrence, similar to the ways in which Conrad’s novel flashes forward in order to portray a post-detonation moment and then returns to the unaffected states existing before the hackneyed terrorist attack? In doing so, we would articulate a critical space for a temporal reversal that speaks to history and its relationship to modernist literary production.

While the period following the publication of *The Secret Agent* looks ahead to the large-scale annihilation of life on the battlegrounds of the First World War, it also encounters the subsequent cultural and artistic difficulties of memorializing mass death. The novel's confusion over Stevie's body evidences an anxiety over what to do with bodies that fall victim to the new forms of death in modernity. When a grieving culture attempts to designate an aesthetic object as the site of loss, the specter of anonymity haunts its construction as countless British bodies are projected into a single form. One could recall the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – the grave of a single unidentified combatant that commemorates, and stands in for, so many unidentified war dead – which was originally conceived in Britain in 1916 as an idea for a national monument, and soon after adopted by numerous countries of the Western Front. This public memorial fastens indeterminable identities of the countless lives lost to a material structure and perpetuates the specter of anonymity. An unidentifiable and anonymous body, though, undoes the very notion of how one can adequately grieve for loss.

The connection between the Official Secrets Act, soldierly life, and a gesture like the “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” is that they all assign identity to subjects who are unknown and unknowable – they assign, in other words, a suffering identity without attributing individuality. The Official Secrets Act anticipates the Tomb, as both imagine unidentified, and unidentifiable, individuals. The Tomb is a melancholic response that longs after an individual that cannot be recovered because of the immensity of modern warfare. The goal of the Act, in a conversely related gesture, is to legislate that these bodies and agents can be located.³²

³² My gratitude goes to Daniel Block for helping me parse out this relationship.

As this chapter has argued, the secret agent, by definition, has to assert his presence while ascertaining that his target culture can never directly know his presence. His achievement remains undisclosed while the intel he gathers subsequently protects his nation – “the bringing to light of a distinct, significant fact” (SA 14). His discoveries cannot, nor ever be, attributed to a specific identity.

The Secret Agent establishes a fine line between maintaining one’s composure on behalf of the state in order to gain information, and the paranoia of the discovery that would cause his identity to unravel. The effects of such unsettling impulses are suggested in the passages detailing how Verloc keeps his professional endeavors secret from his wife and views domestic space as an area to be navigated as if it were spy work: “[Winnie] was mysterious, with the mysteriousness of living beings. The far-famed secret agent Δ of the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim’s alarmist dispatches was not the man to break into such mysteries. He was easily intimidated. [...] He forbore touching that mystery out of love, timidity, and indolence. [...] For several minutes he bore his sufferings silently in the drowsy silence of the room.” (143); and when he suspects that Winnie knows too much, the narrator tells us, “Mr. Verloc seemed scared and bewildered beyond measure” (158). These instances illustrate how two forms of private life threaten to collide, as the home suddenly seems coterminous with the field. Suffering in silence becomes a method of upholding one’s collectedness so that these two domains remain separated. We could even diagnose Verloc’s suffering, in fact, once the novel presents us with certain symptoms: “For the first time in his life he was taking that incurious woman into his confidence. [...] *his nerves had been tried to the utmost*. After a month of maddening worry, ending in an unexpected catastrophe, the storm-tossed spirit of Mr.

Verloc longed for repose. His career as a secret agent had come to an end [...] *only, now, perhaps he could manage to get a night's sleep at last*" (190-91, emphasis added). The novel implies that the paranoia of discovery, of spy-work spilling over into one's home life, is a neurosis that Verloc must manage. Strangely enough, we encounter near-identical descriptions of characters within works saturated with the experience of the First World War, such as *Mrs. Dalloway*'s Septimus Smith, *The Return of the Soldier*'s Chris Baldry, or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*'s Clifford Chatterley. Likening his vulnerability to what will soon become the commonplace signs of soldiers recovering from shell-shock, Verloc's coming-clean is briefly a moment of working-through (ending, though, with his murder at the hands of Winnie). The nervousness created by the fear of one's secret being discovered serves as a placeholder for the line dividing anxiety from agency.

By inhabiting this perspective, the novel establishes a link with the discourses proliferated during World War I and identifies how anonymity informs the confines of spies and soldiers in modernity. To see Verloc as one whose political life must remain indeterminate, untraceable, and traumatically obscure, as I have suggested, is to bring into view espionage as a distinctly pre-war space and construct new affiliations within the text. As many historians and literary scholars of the First World War have discussed, at the center of soldierly existence was a similar dilemma of agency, demonstrated in particular by the distressed pronouncements of a masculinity defending its home country; however, men quickly saw themselves absorbed into the war machine and appropriated by the death count.³³ As much as they wanted to believe their actions were meaningful to

³³ This version of reading masculinity under erasure has become a foundational argument within literary scholarship of "the Great War." See Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Modris Eksteins's *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Samuel Hynes's *A War Imagined: The*

a political cause, soldiers discovered the irony and futility of patriotic sacrifice when it happened in unforeseen levels of destruction and to hordes of bodies lumped together. The anxiety of trench life was precisely about the inability to be ready for attack and the impossibility of mastering the resulting nervousness. The prospect of agency became a question of managing worried sensibilities and a matter of endurance and endless waiting.

Perhaps this nervousness is why the novel seems so concerned with Stevie, the son who will soon be lost in the battle between classes and become an unidentifiable body destroyed by war. Stevie's stutter is indicative of how the novel itself stutters regarding his fate. One can lose track of the amount of times the text references "poor Stevie" – (never simply "Stevie," always "poor Stevie"); when the novel first introduces him, in fact, it uses the phrase three times in the space of three sentences. One could also repeatedly notice the amount of times Stevie himself feels "anxious," or another character experiences "anxiety" while thinking of his well-being. Repetition implies a working-through of some form of incommensurability. Conrad's ironic presentation of Stevie as the novel's secret agent challenges modernity's idea of agency because it casts him in relation to the British state wishing to keep him secret in a position of instability and anonymity. Stevie ultimately illustrates the political condition of a human form giving itself over to violence. Stevie loving the bomb is a strange love indeed, a relationship poeticizing pain and imagining it through the undecidability surrounding the distinctions between sufferer and oppressor, self and other, inside and outside, and particularly

First World War and English Culture, Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*, Sarah Cole's *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War*, and Santanu Das's *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, for further discussion.

through what happens when our fear of outsiders is transformed by “one of us” (to quote the famous refrain from *Lord Jim*) – here, the most unexpected of Londoners. This unexpected encounter in London, though, is of a different sort altogether when it is taken up and explored by Virginia Woolf. Her *Mrs. Dalloway* acts as an echo to this refrain and asks how should one feel when “one of us” suffers in secret.

Chapter Two: *Mrs. Dalloway* and the Secret Life of Compassion

It might seem an odd choice to consider Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* a novel about state secrets. Characters certainly harbor secrets at the personal level, both past and present relationships intertwining as individuals refuse to speak what is on their troubled minds. After considering the spies of *The Secret Agent*, it might prove difficult to imagine how state secrecy becomes an anxious concern of a novel where a woman shops for flowers and plans a party in post-war London. In this chapter, then, I examine how *Mrs. Dalloway* represents the crisis of living in the shadow of total war when the discourses of grief and the state merge. The chapter is further concerned with the process through which political and military decisions mask deep social issues—a process that took shape, in the most bureaucratic of ways, in the pension policies following the First World War. In particular, I look critically at the idea of the “compassionate allowance,” a bureaucratic category that gave widows of soldiers executed for cowardice a smaller sum than an ordinary pension. This chapter thus investigates how compassion becomes a key term in the formation of a social and political world, and how its role cannot be uncoupled from the material – and more specifically, the financial – realm. The term *compassion* here comes to function as an open secret, as the government’s way of distinguishing real heroes (those whose widows receive full pensions) from cowards

(those who were shell shocked and fled, then executed by the British military). In giving lip service to compassion without actually feeling it, the state, in its rhetorical handling of shell shock (and the so-called cowardice it induced in some soldiers) is anything but compassionate. Compassion thus takes on a secret life, becoming thoroughly politicized as the state uses it to cover its low regard for some lives, and deaths, in wartime. This false act of feeling for another therefore becomes a confidential action the state performs to categorize and marginalize certain citizens. Its secret abuse of power differs greatly from the state-oriented world of Conrad, in which spy hunting, terrorism, and xenophobia run amuck. State secrecy does not always concern defensive measures against foreign enemies. In this historical moment, it is just as much about policing the affects and emotional composure of citizens following a period of international crisis.

Woolf's novel, significantly, features its own form of war widow: the character of Rezia Warren Smith, wife of the traumatized veteran Septimus Smith. Here I will show how Rezia's place in the novel resonates powerfully with the vexed position of war widows in England after 1918. While critics have paid little attention to Rezia, whom they often read as a flat and marginal figure, I argue that she in fact emerges as a key ethical subject. Her distress bears witness to the novel's blind spots, to the oversights that arise in the name of compassion, and to historical injustices perpetrated by Great Britain during the postwar years. By portraying the moments leading up to her husband's suicide and her interactions with government figures, *Mrs. Dalloway* suggests that women like Rezia disrupt the conventional narratives of heroism and masculinity that began to unravel following World War I. Her ethical status within the text testifies not

only to the slow death of Septimus, but also to how those associated with the disenfranchised soldier suffer at the hands of the state.³⁴

“For There She Was”

Mrs. Dalloway ends, famously, with a moment in focus, with the framing of this moment and the recognition of the individual at the center of it all. Peter Walsh glances at Clarissa Dalloway during her party, contemplating the possibilities of what a relationship between them would entail. “What is this terror? What is this ecstasy?” Peter thinks, “What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was” (194). Given that the novel closes with a declaration of personhood, it is easy to claim that the text is about the process of becoming a subject—that Woolf is examining how a woman discovers her identity at the onset of modernity. More specifically, the novel tells the story of an individual traveling from being a *Mrs.* Dalloway to becoming a *Clarissa*, and presents the problem of what it means to be a woman in the modern age. Seen through the eyes of Peter Walsh, she is detached, at least momentarily, from her label as someone’s wife and steps into the space of autonomy. *Mrs. Dalloway* is rife with examples of what becoming a woman might look like: Sally

³⁴ Lauren Berlant’s work on compassion structures my reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* (as I will soon demonstrate), but her recent work on “slow death” also plays a large part in how I understand its representation of Septimus and Rezia as stand-ins for cultural “types” in England during the 1920s. Instead of being concerned with “spectacular” notions of trauma and catastrophe, Berlant refigures our understanding of them around the notion of “slow death,” which “prosper[s] not in traumatic events, but in temporal environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself, that domain of living on, in which everyday activity, memory, needs, and desires, diverse temporalities and horizons of the taken-for-granted are brought into proximity” (759). Slow death becomes the condition of a population that “wears out in the space of ordinariness”; it is a “disease of time . . . a condition that can never be cured, only managed” (761-63). See her article “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)” for further discussion.

Seton, Lady Bruton, Miss Kilman, and even Elizabeth Dalloway seem to have some role to play in the novel's composite portrait of womanhood in the twentieth century. In this chapter, I consider how Woolf offers Clarissa's story as just one instance of what it means to become oneself, to emerge ultimately as a self, in the postwar world.

Additionally, the novel's final line—"For there she was"—puts its heroine on display, focusing the attention on her solitude at the party: Clarissa, surrounded by others, stands alone, open both to admiration and to possible judgment. Despite the tendency to read this statement as belonging to Peter Walsh, it is, in fact, quite difficult to know for certain who is speaking. The novel removes the line from Peter's thoughts, separated by a line break and set in contrast to what precedes it. *Mrs. Dalloway's* trademark style of narration—one that jumps from character to character, thought to thought, especially when groups of people clustered together are observing something singular—suggests that it could very well be from the perspective of another party guest, or from the narrator herself. This moment of perceiving Clarissa, standing there as "she was," could belong to anyone. It extends beyond the initial parameters of being solely from Peter's perspective and marks itself as a moment of generalized awakening to another's subject position—of possibly understanding the interiority of another human being.

What I wish to underscore, then, is how the novel closes by emphasizing a moment of recognition—of witnessing Clarissa herself become an autonomous subject—as well as the larger powers of how we recognize and perceive others, of how we understand another's becoming. Such an individual could be standing before us at a party, walking by us in a park, or passing us while shopping for flowers on a crowded city street. But as any reader of *Mrs. Dalloway* knows, the novel's great tragedy is that

this recognition does not hold true for every character. Often its truncated narratives short-circuit the possibility of recognition. For example, Clarissa may achieve recognition at her party, but what of Septimus's constant appeal for others to "see" him? Taking such unfulfilled appeals as a starting point, this chapter considers how the failed perception of certain characters demonstrates that, in a bewildered and crowded modernity, some individuals will be recognized while others are not.

Although the novel's final line offers a way of thinking through the "Mrs." of *Mrs. Dalloway*, we should also remember the other Mrs. referenced repeatedly throughout: Rezia, "Mrs. Septimus Warren Smith." Rezia ultimately represents a female experience the novel cannot entirely absorb; she simply vanishes—a casualty in the wake of her husband's terrible fate—as the novel comes to a close. As much as the novel is about wives, we must remember that it is also about war and its aftermath. Rezia, this chapter submits, is important precisely because she represents the intersection of these two strands of the story. Other than her husband, Rezia is the character holding the most intimate knowledge of what happens when the war comes home. What would it mean to read the novel through Rezia? Her subjectivity is a critical one, and the text begs us to pay attention to her own process of becoming—that is, of becoming a war widow. If Mrs. Dalloway becomes Clarissa ("for there she was") over the course of the novel, Rezia in contrast becomes a widow. We become witness to her relationship with her husband and his slow death through war trauma. Rezia's "becoming" is also her bereavement, her transition to this new status as the widow of Septimus—and ultimately, her transition out of the novel entirely, outside the realm of what its fictional world will imagine.

The moment of Rezia's introduction ultimately structures her place in the novel. Her first appearance heralds how *Mrs. Dalloway* questions the multilayered nature of what it means to "look at" and "see" another individual. As she walks her shell-shocked husband through the busy London streets, Rezia watches the random passersby and imagines that they, too, are looking back at her. Her thoughts interrupt Septimus's, as the narrator quickly jumps from inhabiting his mind to hers. She ponders,

People must notice; people must see. People, she thought, looking at the crowd staring at the motor car; the English people, with their children and their horses and their clothes, which she admired in a way; but they were "people" now, because Septimus had said, "I will kill myself"; an awful thing to say. Suppose they had heard him? She looked at the crowd. Help, help! she wanted to cry out to butchers' boys and women. Help! (15-16)³⁵

The usual interpretation of this scene is that it exhibits Rezia's shame at being married to an invalid and demonstrates her insecurity and self-indulgence, her worry that others are watching and judging *her*, not her husband.³⁶ But this passage, I want to emphasize, *interrupts* Septimus, and in doing so it suggests a definitive link between his traumatized subjectivity and how the narrator represents her thoughts. Instead of viewing this as an instance of Rezia worrying that passersby cannot help but see her husband's disturbed state, we might shift the emphasis from a descriptive to an imperative tone: "People *must* notice, people *must* see." Read in this light, Rezia's thoughts become less a concern over appearances and, more powerfully, an ethical imperative for Londoners to consider her

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, New York: Harcourt, 1990. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

³⁶ Most Woolf scholars throughout the years have used Rezia as a foil for Septimus's suffering in that she represents England's willful indifference to and disavowal of returning shell-shocked soldiers. While foundational works such as Maria DiBattista's *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels* examine how Septimus's plight overshadows Rezia, others such as Karen Levenback's *Virginia Woolf and the Great War* and Mark Hussey's *Virginia Woolf and War* examine the novel's composition in the wake of the government's work on shell shock in 1921. In the more recent *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*, Christine Froula claims, "the heroic social script is ventriloquized by Rezia" (114).

husband's condition at closer range. Thus, rather than viewing this as a passive situation in which Rezia is merely the object of others' observations, I read her remarks as a desperate need to impose Septimus's (and, most importantly for this chapter's purposes, her own) subjectivity upon others. The occasion for Londoners to potentially see her provides the opportunity to appeal to them for some form of recognition—that being in a public space could instill some sense of compassion within onlookers for the soldier's (and his wife's) pain.

It is not incidental, moreover, that Rezia is the novel's only non-English character: *Mrs. Dalloway* makes much of the fact that she is an Italian immigrant. She feels constantly out of place and removed from the culture in which she has suddenly been immersed because of her marriage and subsequent relocation. But despite her alienation, Rezia's observations here show her as a newly English presence in the novel, one who catalogues the details of her surroundings (the motor car, the children, the horses, the clothes, the streets) to qualify those around her as "people." She is enveloped by the things she had once known only from afar and now grasps them ("they were 'people' now") as part of the environment that will fashion her as a subject. Notice, however, the curious placement of her husband's suicidal tendencies in this passage: she arrives at this realization "because Septimus had said." The English "were people" only because they could potentially hear Septimus's and her own muffled cries for help. Rezia presents a view of English culture that is shaped by a missed encounter of how to recognize another's suffering: "she *wanted* to cry," yet she did not. She is newly part of a national community that she hopes will "see" her and her husband, yet strangely she silences herself.

The significance of having Rezia rather than Septimus narrate this moment raises the questions of why and to whom she makes her appeal. What is it that she believes “people must see”? What is her subject position that needs recognition? What kind of cultural figure might she represent? What might Britain owe to the wives of its soldiers—here, a woman soon to become a war widow? What can we make of a simple matter of compassion for another’s suffering? These questions are central to my examination of *Mrs. Dalloway*. I use this scene of Rezia’s cry to help answer them and suggest how compassion, in fact, plays a large part in structuring her appeal to others. This chapter submits that the larger problems of perception and recognition within *Mrs. Dalloway* entail how one is able to be compassionate to another. Rezia’s imperative—“people must see”—is more than a call for Londoners to look in her direction: it is an appeal for compassion and a restructuring of what it means to notice someone else.

I wish, then, to look critically at how compassion, as an affective state and a political instrument, both shapes and is shaped by this historical moment and how it becomes central to the type of modern subjectivity proposed by Woolf’s novel. As a result, I read Rezia against the grain of most critical interpretations, which dismiss her as just a minor character. The significance of having Rezia make this claim instead of Septimus (the emblem of the shell-shocked individual) redirects compassion toward not only the soldiers and victims of war, but also their wives and widows. If we were to attend to the moments in which the novel’s narrator inhabits Rezia’s thoughts, we would see that she has just as much narrative space carved out for her as Septimus. The novel, in fact, seems to account for her madness as much as his, often emphasizing how she experiences opposing intensities of feeling within just a few words. Rezia’s thoughts

jump from extreme adoration for her husband to anxiety and shame about his condition: she feels nostalgic for the early days of their marriage in Italy, only to immediately feel that the present moments between them are highly sacred; she wants to believe that Septimus's doctors will help cure him, only to later find them repugnant human beings, their diagnoses utterly devoid of any real compassion. And she shifts from the profound desire for Septimus to be healed to wishing he would kill himself to end his misery. I submit that Rezia's appeal, in calling attention to the plight of bereaved spouses (and implicitly, war widows), thus widens the net of responsibility in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and potentially transforms those who "see" her from spectators to actors.

Compassionate Allowances

Compassion itself is a slippery term because it tends to unravel the very emotional investments it aims to explain. Compassion opens us up to feeling for another, to being touched by another's pain and suffering, while motivating action that will help free the unfortunate from their subject position. Because it finds its basis in fellow-feeling, compassion often becomes synonymous with empathy and sympathy. But both Woolf's novel *and* the government narratives of its time suggest a crucial distinction between empathy and compassion. Empathy structures human relations through a pre-ideological, even naïve, framework: it is the mode of understanding that reveals the moral obligation one may have toward another and involves such responses as actually feeling another's emotions or inhabiting another's experience. Empathy designates the foundational relationship of self to other, the fundamental link of an individual to a larger community,

an identification with others outside the self that is “basic to ethical human experience” (Woodward 64).³⁷

Compassion, on the other hand, is the result of empathy. It is, in other words, empathy’s next step: the pointed response following identification with another, one that calls for action on behalf of the suffering party. This response may take the form of groups appropriating compassion for political means, as a result of which it can become rife with structural problems. Compassion as a form of social operation has received a good deal of attention in recent years from cultural theorists and literary scholars, most notably regarding the ways in which it is deployed within the American political sphere. In the past decade, both the left and the right have appropriated “compassion” for their purposes, although with wholly separate ideas in mind. Kathleen Woodward notes how in the liberal narrative, “‘compassion’ is used primarily as a noun or a predicate adjective in relation to people. A person feels compassion or is compassionate. Compassion is a feeling, and it is embodied” (73). Within the conservative narrative, on the other hand, we have the “compassionate conservatism” put forward by the Bush administration, wherein compassion is used strictly in an adjectival sense, something to describe an ideological position, or policies and programs. Compassion becomes detached from its referent, leaving people behind as it focuses instead on economic concerns. The quantitative results of being compassionate thus take precedence over the feeling itself.

This is not, however, to suggest that the liberal narrative is without its own concerns. To experience compassion in the liberal sense is ultimately to denote

³⁷ I take this overview of empathy from Lynne Henderson, Martha Nussbaum, and Bernard Williams, as well as its critique from Kathleen Woodward. See her essay “Calculating Compassion” for further discussion of how empathy in fact eradicates notions of difference and creates the moral conundrum of producing sameness between individuals.

superiority and privilege over another. Compassion is felt by those free from distress: the sufferer exists outside of me while I, in feeling compassionate, seek somehow to lessen his pain since I have resources he does not. Compassion is thus a form of “emotionally gratifying condescension” (Garber 20). As Lauren Berlant points out, compassion makes use of its “scene of distress not as a judgment against the distressed, but as a claim on the spectator to become an ameliorative actor” (1). Much of the recent critique of neoliberalism has been predicated on the self-serving and narcissistic impulses of compassion, especially when the state privileges itself as the moral, economic, and military actor on behalf of the disenfranchised, fashioning itself in the image it wishes its citizens to consume and absorb.³⁸ Compassion as a social transaction raises questions first about the ways in which our culture constructs us, both socially and morally, to feel such responses and be interpellated by collective norms of obligation, and second about its political efficacy because of the uncertain and tenuous connection between feeling and action.

The place of literature (and particularly the novel genre) alongside the politics of compassion becomes relevant when we account for the following: regardless of its political orientation toward the left or right, compassion’s goal, ultimately, is to recognize and draw attention to injustice. Literary texts are often historically situated, openly declaring their social concerns to their readers. Scholars such as Berlant, and before her Jane Tompkins, have famously examined how *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* played a large role in the abolition of slavery because of compassion, as its readers were impelled to recognize suffering characters, resulting in an empathetic response understood as a lesson in “moral

³⁸See David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Judith Butler’s *Frames of War*, Mary Favret’s *War at a Distance*, Bruce Robbins’s *Feeling Global*, and Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect* for further discussion.

pedagogy” (Woodward 62). The novel called on its readers to bear witness to and feel the pain created by slavery. This is not to elevate compassion’s literary manifestations; on the contrary, Berlant’s goal is to cast aspersions on the ways in which sentimentality meets politics. While some acknowledge how forms of sentimental fiction can do important cultural work, the identification attempted by these texts is shot through with a fundamental non-universality: they expect all readers to be moved, when not all readers are ultimately in a position to be moved. Fiction’s ethical imperative toward social transformation thus becomes stagnant because the passive ideal of empathy replaces its political potential. The private world of thoughts, inclinations, and interior gestures eclipses the public domain wherein action can occur.³⁹

Judith Butler understands this passivity as a problem of perspective and the difficult positions from which one narrates suffering. Butler interrogates the “universality” causing individuals to link themselves with scenes of distress, arguing that such processes of identification are determined by norms. Any “I” that narrates its existence is always already embedded within the social conditions and historical circumstances surrounding its emergence: as soon as it speaks, any moral inquiry attached to it becomes implicated within the normative framework imposed by culture. The questions of empathy and compassion, of asking myself how I should feel and act toward another’s suffering, thus become bound up in the problematics of power as well. Since no point of speaking can stand separate from the norms that characterize it, Butler’s form of ethics involves the narrating “I” liberating itself from those norms by *becoming*

³⁹In *Cosmopolitan Style*, Rebecca Walkowitz argues that evasion of politics through interior thoughts is precisely the ethical and political imperative of Woolf’s fiction. Examining Woolf’s story “The Mark on the Wall,” Walkowitz contends that the chaotic spaces of one’s mind become a place for reflection and political transformation regarding the First World War, imperialism, and other fraught events throughout England’s history. See her chapter “Woolf’s Evasion” (79-105) for further discussion.

critical of the framework creating it, a process that ultimately dispossesses the “I” from its social conditions. Butler observes that these norms must be in place for one to question and subsequently critique their operation; norms, in other words, make possible the development of an ethical encounter. Ethical deliberation is the task of asking and interrogating, of the suffering “I” understanding its social genesis by creating a speculative space within its narration. This exposes its own inability to give a true account of itself: “to call into question a regime of truth [. . .] is to call into question the truth of myself and [. . .] to question my ability to tell the truth about myself, to give an account of myself” (23).⁴⁰ Ethics is thus an aesthetics of the self that maintains a critical relation to existing norms by drawing attention to how they govern and limit the potentiality of an individual.

For the purposes of my argument, the logic of Butler’s view of ethics establishes compassion as a mode of relation rather than a passive space of feeling. The ethical act of feeling for another, of recognizing another’s pain, of experiencing compassion, initiates an understanding of *how* understanding operates in itself. Butler writes, “I come into being as a reflexive subject in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me” (15). Compassion creates a narrative space between people in which one form of address leads to another—the narrative of the appeal exists in relation to the narrative of the response. The emotion is predicated not only on how “I” can get someone to hear “me,” but also, more importantly, on how there is a *structure* to that call. The question raised by compassion then becomes one of how we can productively engage the appeal on which it relies, the social and historical conditioning that gives it shape.

⁴⁰ See Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 2005.

This structure to compassion is precisely what *Mrs. Dalloway* performs and then exposes. The text creates a scene of address that exposes the limits of how one can address another by focusing on a figure like Rezia, whose message and role seem so confused. She exhibits the tension between wanting someone else to recognize her suffering *and* wanting to conceal it herself. More importantly, we must recognize Rezia as a minor character and understand that this dilemma becomes crystallized in a character who is overshadowed by more dominant presences in the novel. In his study *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, Alex Woloch explores this dichotomy between “major” and “minor” characters. Woloch highlights how novels give reference to secondary characters (here, Rezia), only for them to be later overwhelmed by primary characters (Septimus and Clarissa). The ways in which novels attend and give space to the development of characters demonstrate “how living persons get rendered into literary form” (11).⁴¹ The identities of minor characters revolve around their subordinate position, while they are further “absorbed” into the plots of the protagonists.⁴² Woloch contends that if both these character types represent ideological positions, then the minor characters ultimately expose the workings of systems through their very absorption. For *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is a tension between the voice of a central character on one hand, and the refraction of the shared experience of war through numerous individuals on the other. Minor characters step in because feeling for those affected by war requires more than one solitary voice—we need to hear the echoes of war throughout a community. Voices of dissent are the ways of understanding compassion as a political tool.

⁴¹ See Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, 2003.

⁴² See Woloch, page 4.

At the same time, *Mrs. Dalloway* is not simply about characters feeling for each other: it also highlights a much more complex process of what it means to appropriate the rhetoric of feeling for political ends. Reading the novel through Rezia and the figure of the war widow offers a way of looking at how compassion circulates throughout postwar British culture, and particularly how it is wielded in the realm of government. For the compassion that Rezia seeks has its historical counterpart in the British government's policy of a "compassionate allowance," which gave pensions to widows of soldiers executed for desertion (that is, cowardice), while masking the fact that these sums were, in fact, smaller than those pensions granted to women whose husbands had died "honorably." The compassionate allowance permitted the government to draw distinctions between heroes and cowards in the First World War, but at the same time to hide those distinctions—in word, if not in deed—from the public, or at least from the widows.

Yet what was hidden—the judgment of a man's character, expressed in financial form—was concealed in plain sight: the women receiving the sums were in fact well aware they had been awarded less than the wives of non-cowards. They knew, in other words, that a compassionate allowance was decidedly *not* a pension. In this context, politics and emotions collide because compassion becomes a political tool. Political power does not so much quash emotions as harness and manipulate them for the benefit of the nation-state, which can maintain its position on cowardice while simultaneously demonstrating its compassion. Here I wish to draw the connection between the fictional life of Septimus and Rezia and the historical circumstances of soldiers and their widows in order to shed light on the political life of compassion (something wholly different from

its emotional life). Attending to the plight of soldiers through fiction is nothing new when it comes to Woolf's political concerns. There has been much discussion of her representation of shell shock within her novels, a common topic among critics for some time. Given the cultural awareness of war neuroses during the immediate post-World War I years, most interpretations contend that Woolf posits an ethics of recognition regarding her soldierly characters—Jacob Flanders of *Jacob's Room*, Andrew Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*—and, most notably, Septimus Smith. Upon returning from service, British combat veterans ultimately found themselves neglected by the state for which they had fought. The Ministry of Pensions and the Treasury refused to claim responsibility for disabled men by restricting their financial assistance: employment offers were withheld, rehabilitation plans were noticeably absent, and payments to the families and dependents of deceased soldiers were highly evaluative and selective. The majority of recognition and aid for veterans, in fact, came from philanthropic groups and public acts of charity directed in anger against the state's failure to take care of its veterans.⁴³ It was not until the War Pensions Act of 1921 and the War Office Committee's 1922 publication of its report on shell shock that the British government began working toward the acknowledgement many citizens felt was imperative.

⁴³In her historical study *The War Come Home*, Deborah Cohen argues that "the public became the disabled veteran's best ally against the state" (47). Cohen further contends that this view of the relationship between returning soldiers and the public is quite different from how modernist writers—like Robert Graves and Rebecca West—conveyed it. Cohen asserts, "Their opinion that the returning soldier was suspicious, even hostile, toward his fellow citizens, was an idea that scholars have tended to accept. Yet my research in disabled men's own writings and, more broadly, in the documents of the veteran's movement, calls into question how widely such views were shared. The figure of the disgruntled ex-serviceman aptly conveyed literary modernism's alienation from the post-war world, but it tells us much less about veterans' perceptions more generally. Ex-servicemen were angry at the state, that is indisputable—they despised generals in plush chairs behind the lines, Whitehall bureaucrats, profiteers—but their attitudes toward the general public were benign when not sympathetic. It was true that the war had resulted in an undefinable cleft of experience separating soldiers from those who had stayed at home, but that did not mean the public's benevolence was worth any less" (47).

The compassionate allowance, then, emerged as a problematic of payment amid all the financial support given to soldiers' widows and children. Correspondence within the Ministry of Pensions demonstrates that these payments were in fact meant to be distinctly separate from conventional widows' pensions on the grounds their husbands were "cowards." During World War I, British soldiers caught deserting (or attempting to desert) the army would be "shot for cowardice," meaning they would be either executed or sent into No Man's Land during battle, effectively assuring their deaths. The phrase "shot for cowardice," in fact, appears repeatedly throughout the government documents as if it were a justifiable cause of death. Because these men were killed while serving the crown, their families were still entitled to some form of pension from the British government, but legislative groups decided that their payments would be less than that to the families whose husbands and sons had died "honorably."

Examining the circumstances involved in these decisions makes it clear that legislative groups did not want to recognize these men, thereby forcing them into narratives that strategically avoided full governmental responsibility. In a 1917 letter detailing the origin of the compassionate allowance, Minister of Pensions John Hodge distinguishes between soldiers' deaths, valorizing one form and denigrating the other to decide which payment their families would receive: "I think it [the compassionate allowance] has not only the merit of satisfying the necessities of the case, but also the greater merit of discriminating between the man who deserts at the supreme moment and the one who prefers to make the supreme sacrifice rather than to risk national humiliation as a consequence of his cowardly conduct."⁴⁴ In the same letter, Hodge further differentiates the payment made in "compassion" to the grieving family of the executed

⁴⁴ John Hodge, "Letter to Mr. Barnes," 11 January 1917.

soldier from the conventional war pension: “[P]ensions as such are a reward for service and *not merely* grants paid in compassion to the relatives of a deceased soldier” (emphasis added). With his “not merely,” Hodge trivializes the act of compassion by linking it with the coward—the man who cannot tolerate battle is undeserving of state support, and, as a result, is bestowed an obligatory financial symbol representing something less than sympathy, though more than outright indifference.

Given the ideology of a nationally oriented masculinity in which the British military was firmly entrenched, a “coward” was just as bad as (if not worse than) a traitor, and so attempts were immediately made to conceal his fear-torn affliction and subsequent death with this small “compassionate allowance.” A 1918 letter documents Hodge’s concern for what would happen should the memory of the executed be mistaken for one of heroism:

I am really afraid that the decision above [...] will result in elaborate In Memorium Cards containing the deceased’s photograph, and some verse of poetry as to a hero’s death, and the purchase of expensive mourning, whereas the truth cannot be hidden except for a few weeks, just time for one of his mates writing home saying “I was very sorry for poor X who was shot for cowardice.” What a double catastrophe for the widow and family.⁴⁵

This letter demonstrates the grand cultural narrative surrounding the war dead: they always met an honorable death in battle, thus achieving the status of a hero worthy of praise and commemoration because they defended their country. Hodge’s words, however, also indicate the anxiety over this myth going awry and the measures necessary to manage unwanted narratives that develop during and after war. The compassionate allowance, I wish to suggest, emerges as a method of doing so: it participates in constructing the heroic account of war and installs a norm, ultimately refusing to

⁴⁵ John Hodge, “Letter to the War Cabinet,” 9 January 1918.

recognize soldiers who do not conform to a narrative of heroism. The claim put forward by the compassionate allowance is, bluntly stated, “We recognize your husband is dead, but we also recognize that he is a coward.” It acknowledges the grief of the bereaved, while simultaneously expressing and suppressing a judgment of the deceased. The state recognizes the soldier through a form of payment, but it is a form of recognition that maintains the government’s disdain. Compassion becomes a means of both masking and articulating derision.

In rare instances, however, the policy of awarding compassionate allowances was not received without question. These cases are important to examine because they have much to tell us about the secrets harbored by the state during the time of Woolf’s novel. The military quelled the voices of certain soldiers—and their families—because their lives and actions during wartime contradicted the ideals of Englishness it wished to perpetuate. Yet these instances of the marginalized also expose the corrupt workings of state power. To illustrate, I want to look briefly at a case in which the wife of an executed soldier contested the pension form given her. In particular, this case exemplifies the criteria by which the government evaluated its dead soldiers, as well as its dismissal of struggling widows, to maintain the normative account of the war dead and support the narrative of heroism. The case in question involves a soldier named Harry MacDonald, who was shot for desertion in 1916. The following year, his wife appealed her compassionate allowance, claiming that she deserved a widow’s pension instead. Her argument hinged on the fact that her husband was no coward but a casualty of shell shock: he was ill, she maintained, and “not in mental health at the time of his desertion,

and . . . this should have been taken into account by the Court Martial in mitigation of his offence.”⁴⁶

The case examination continued to probe the psychological state of MacDonald and reviewed several factors: 1) his ability to return to duty after being identified as suffering shell shock; 2) evidence of his diagnosis in relation to the date he absented himself from battle; 3) any record of his ever being wounded and treated; and 4) the “incoherent” style of the letters he wrote to his wife possibly suggesting mental illness.⁴⁷ The case concluded by disregarding the widow’s claims and preserving MacDonald’s status as deserter and coward: she would receive the compassionate allowance after all rather than the standard widow’s pension. The state defended its characterization of MacDonald with the following rationale:

It only requires the desertion of a certain number of men to demoralize the army and make us lose the war. Desertion has therefore been adjudged a heinous criminal offence and the relatives of the man who commits it are in the same position as the relatives of a man who for other reasons incurs capital punishment. A time may come when the State will feel it has a special duty towards the unfortunate dependants of such men but that is not yet.⁴⁸

The extreme penalties the state bestowed on deserters—extending to the families still associated with them after their deaths—disregarded any heterogeneous experience of war. These widespread punishments endorsed a nationalist project that categorized, shaped, and ultimately ignored its citizens because of how they responded to a crisis. Even though war had become a defining condition of historical existence for the British population at this time, the government removed agency from those not responding to the war in the normative, heroic manner. Giving these men equal privileges “is really to put

⁴⁶ Matthew Nathan, “Letter to General Childs,” 9 November 1917.

⁴⁷ Nathan, “Memo to the Minister of Pensions,” 19 November 1917.

⁴⁸ Nathan, “Memo from the Minister of Pensions,” 28 June 1917.

the coward on the same footing as the hero, and will have a very bad effect.”⁴⁹ The state, then, judged one form of life over another and directed life in such a way as to leave the war widow in the position of collateral damage: “Generally I think we shall have to [...] leave the poor women who suffer by them to charitable assistance.”⁵⁰ The particularities of MacDonald’s case were eclipsed by the fear of the general—that such cases would not be considered individually but cumulatively and would erode the army. This fear, and this logic, made a case-by-case judgment impossible. The individual case of MacDonald’s widow, too, was subsumed by the logic of the general, as the letter brushed her aside to be taken care of by “charitable assistance,” thereby absolving the state from worrying about individual cases. The logic of representative thinking, then, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recognize the individual case for what it is. The most important thing for the state to do was to keep it a secret: here, the fact that shell shock was not just an occasional matter but a widespread phenomenon.

By drawing attention to MacDonald, I am not suggesting that his case and Septimus’s are identical. What I am proposing is that their lives, represented in the pages of fiction and of government documents, tell a similar story about recognition and suffering in the postwar years. Neither man was killed in battle, yet the government labeled both “cowards” through either the compassionate allowance (MacDonald), or the doctors’ visits that led to Septimus’s constant self-flagellation (which I will soon discuss). Likewise, both women associated with these men appealed for a public form of compassion: Rezia with her insistence on looking and seeing, and MacDonald’s widow in her attempts to combat the bureaucratic diagnosis of “cowardice” through recognizing

⁴⁹ Edward Stanley, “Letter to John Hodge,” 26 December 1917.

⁵⁰ Nathan, “Memo to the Minister of Pensions,” 19 November 1917.

mental illness. The government gave them compassion, but only as lip service. Attending to the language exhibited by the Ministry of Pensions, we see how this acknowledgment was anything but compassionate. The state used the emotion to reinforce policy without, in fact, engaging in the emotion at all. “Compassion” disguised the government’s disdain for these losses and how they required acknowledgment, but also needed to be kept secret.

Covering Septimus’s Crime

During Septimus and Rezia’s first meeting with doctor Sir William Bradshaw, the physician questions Septimus about his medical history and previous military service and briefly mentions the financial status of ex-soldiers. Bradshaw, however, associates this status with that of a war hero. Although the compassionate allowance might mean one thing in historical documentation, it can convey something quite different in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Indeed, a close reading of a scene from the novel reveals this empty, bureaucratic compassion coming to the surface. This scene illustrates how war can haunt and subsequently restructure the relationship between a husband and his wife. More specifically, I wish to emphasize how this scene also elaborates Rezia’s function as a marginal-yet-integral subject.

Bradshaw begins by asking simple questions about how long Septimus had been seeing other physicians, what they had prescribed, and so forth, before inquiring into his time in the British army. It is worth quoting this scene at length to see how the conversation unfolds following the reference to Septimus’s wartime experience:

“You served with great distinction in the War?”
 The patient repeated the word “war” interrogatively.
 He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind. A
 serious symptom, to be noted on the card.
 “The War?” the patient asked. The European War—that little
 shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder? Had he served with
 distinction? He really forgot. In the war itself he had failed.
 “Yes, he served with the greatest distinction,” Rezia assured the
 doctor; “he was promoted.”
 “And they have the very highest opinion of you at your office?” Sir
 William murmured, glancing at Mr. Brewer’s very generously
 worded letter. “So that you have nothing to worry you, no
 financial anxiety, nothing?”
 He had committed an appalling crime and had been condemned to
 death by human nature.
 “I have—I have,” he began, “committed a crime—”
 He has done nothing wrong whatever,” Rezia assured the doctor.
 (96)

Bradshaw’s questions follow a peculiar line of thought: from military service, to
 decoration, and finally monetary compensation. Why would a doctor ask a patient about
 his relationship with the state rather than further investigate his “serious symptoms”?
 Why would “financial anxieties” be a concern of medicine? In emphasizing
 compensation over symptoms, Bradshaw allows the government to do his work for him:
 the War Office and the Ministry of Pensions set the terms of his examination. Here, the
 novel intimates how an official narrative is established and then corroborated in
 Bradshaw’s line of thinking: that Septimus served England in battle without any
 problems (as a “hero” should), and will therefore be receiving his military pension. Their
 conversation progresses as if it were the kind that might determine what kind of soldier
 Septimus was (and continues to be). Since the result of Bradshaw’s evaluation could
 potentially place Septimus under the domain of the compassionate allowance, the

interests of medicine become those of government bureaucracy—to manage and control those unruly cases requiring attention, classification, and then abatement.⁵¹

Because of Bradshaw's disinterestedness—evidenced by his misguided and abrupt examination of Septimus—several other narratives emerge from their conversation as well. Septimus ultimately has his own account of war that refuses to square firmly with the experience of war the government wants to force on him. His exchange with Bradshaw tries to bring out something the novel wishes to push away. This scene compounds the mysteriousness of Septimus's injury because it reveals a new layer of his military experience. As this and other moments throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* demonstrate, clearly something has happened to Septimus during the war, something so grave that it explains both his handicap and his paranoia toward having his undisclosed secret revealed. Yet neither Septimus *nor* the novel allows us to understand what that something is, exactly. The novel refuses to think about Septimus's moment of injury. It flees at any mention—Septimus's thoughts quickly wander in another direction and short-circuit any further explanation of what happened—even though it gives us more detail here than elsewhere. War, what he comprehends as “that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder,” defines Septimus's very existence, yet he has difficulty recalling his role. The military reportedly decorated him, yet he feels like he “failed” for some unspoken reason—a reason the novel leads us to suppose is “an appalling crime” requiring the logic of justice.

⁵¹ When she hears of Septimus's suicide, Clarissa voices an opinion of Bradshaw upheld by the narrator throughout the novel: “. . . Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it—if this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they made life intolerable, men like that?” (184-85).

But is there even a crime involved? Because Septimus's thoughts are so erratic, we are not sure what to believe. Although the novel maintains that Septimus did not desert, this does not necessarily mean that feelings of cowardice do not haunt him. This scene outlines his condition more concretely than elsewhere in the text, yet ultimately his condition goes unrecognized because the military discharged him honorably instead of accounting for madness and the wounded British masculinity evidenced by Septimus. Cowardice can *only* be detected in desertion, and thus in death. Cowardice, then, is a judgment rather than a feeling—a judgment clear and unyielding because it ends with a dead soldier, a body “executed for cowardice.” It cannot possibly be felt: Septimus's condition has no evaluative measures, and self-reporting will not make it clear to others. These feelings of cowardice are thus something secret he must harbor and take to his grave (precisely what Septimus actively does when he leaps from his window), rather than reveal.

In a related manner, the compassionate allowance hides a similar secret: that the widows and family members receiving such an allowance are, in fact, related to cowards condemned by the military. Because the government does not want to admit such cowards exist (as Hodge argues in the Cabinet exchanges above) since it would alienate the citizens on the allowance's receiving end, it offers instead this narrative of “compassion” to substitute for the more painful reality. “Compassion” ultimately complicates pension. Individuals *do* know that a compassionate allowance is not the same as a pension; it is, however, the government's way of saying that even though they do not deserve a pension, “compassion” is better than nothing. Bradshaw's interview presents itself as though Rezia and Septimus were asking for (even *begging* for) a

compassionate allowance—something that would recognize, in some way, the fact that he survived the war without feeling heroic. They ask for compassion for his cowardice in the same fashion as Rezia when she implores privately, “People must see.” The unfortunate occurrence here, however, is that the doctor does not give it to him, instead forcing Septimus to view himself as a hero.

Existing on the periphery of this moment of self-recognition is Rezia, who steps in to answer Bradshaw’s questions when her husband cannot, tidying Septimus’s war story for him. Through her “assured” remarks and attempts to clarify potential confusion, Rezia is the vehicle for understanding Septimus’s war experience. She is how we come to know the details of his traumatic past when he is unable—or unwilling—to remember them. I would like to note, however, the strange tenor in which she supplements Septimus’s thoughts when they begin to wander, casting his history into a particular narrative form. The bureaucratic language emerging in this scene frames a certain way of looking at Rezia. Her answers to Bradshaw’s questions seem scripted, merely repeating his inquiry and attempting to improve on it (“Yes, he served with the greatest distinction”). It is as if Rezia knows exactly what to say, as well what to avoid saying, in order to adhere to unmentioned standards prescribed by Bradshaw. She knows the prescription, it seems, because she is all too familiar with the script. Given how she rushes to agree with his statements disguised as questions, Bradshaw’s approval seems imperative in this scene, although the novel does not tell us why Rezia and Septimus need it. The repetition of “Rezia assured the doctor” indicates that she is like an echo: she vocalizes and then confirms something already set in place. If she were to voice a different answer—something that would place Septimus outside the narrative of

heroism—she would counteract and derail Bradshaw’s examination. She does not just “say,” “speak,” or “tell” this information about Septimus’s past to “the doctor”; rather, she “assures” him—she speaks to satisfy the desires motivating his inquiry, securing and guaranteeing a future event that relies on her responding this way. If this backstory of which the novel gives a glimpse is true, she does not provide detail or describe more than she needs to; on the other hand, if it is false, her claims are succinct enough to make it believable for the task at hand. The staleness of her narration suggests that she speaks for some other reason—one possibly not her own—rather than on her or her husband’s behalf. The scene, then, trivializes Septimus’s war experience by reducing it to another’s truncated understanding and expectations of his service. The singularity of Septimus is lost because Rezia forces him into a framework presupposed by Bradshaw’s bureaucratic line of questioning.

Furthermore, Septimus seems about to reveal something of great magnitude, or at the very least express some form of profound feeling or deep regret: “I have—I have . . . committed a crime—.” But the novel interrupts this revelation. Rezia’s interjection is only the second time she speaks in this scene, and she does so to keep Septimus from saying something that might possibly incriminate him. This interruption, I contend, dismisses anything that could fall outside the norm of a soldier’s war experience. Septimus’s shame over the unspecified “crime” would categorize him as the non-normative soldier, one who does not regard his war experience as the British government feels he should. By dismissing what he is about to say for the sake of Bradshaw’s approval, Rezia strangely supports the kinds of normative behavior that the state—via a doctor like Bradshaw—forces upon ex-soldiers. Her quick “nothing wrong whatever”

acts as a catch-all phrase that collects and marginalizes any kind of heterogeneous subjectivities following war. She seems to imply that no matter how severe Septimus's supposed "crime," in fact it is little more than a figment of his damaged imagination. She interpolates Septimus through the ideology of the upstanding and honorable soldier who just happens to be afflicted with an unfortunate injury. The public logic of heroism is applied to anyone who comes home: those who survived the war could not possibly be cowards.

I suggest that we understand Rezia's rationale through how the logic of the compassionate allowance mandates how certain behaviors embody grief following national injury. By privileging one form of response to war over another, it ultimately leads to the construction of problematic facades. I do not mean to imply that this exchange between Rezia and Bradshaw is a straightforward depiction of the scenario of a compassionate allowance and that she answers the doctor's questions because she wants or needs financial compensation from the state. I contend, rather, that the existence of something like the allowance frames the way we can view a response representing one's life following war when the individual in question cannot. Both bureaucracy and a history of selective welfare infect Rezia's manner of speaking in this scene: she passes judgment in a general way while keeping her husband's secret bureaucratically (even though his and the secrets of others openly exist in public). She arrests the revelation of war and establishes that we view it in a certain way. After World War I, England demands that a wife must now be careful when presenting her soldier-husband to the state, and so Rezia turns Septimus's soldierly life into a secret to be kept. Her rhetoric alters how we view "compassion" in itself when it arises through a scripted response

describing crisis and bereavement—here, a generic tale of soldierly life concealing the true nature of the past. The novel does not imply that Rezia collaborates with the doctors: in each of her appearances, she clearly knows that something afflicts her husband because she repeatedly laments his condition. Instead, she performs these postwar norms on behalf of Septimus so that they do not become marginalized subjects. War does not just result in shell-shocked men grappling with depression, hallucinations, and nightmares—it also produces subjects at the disservice of the state.

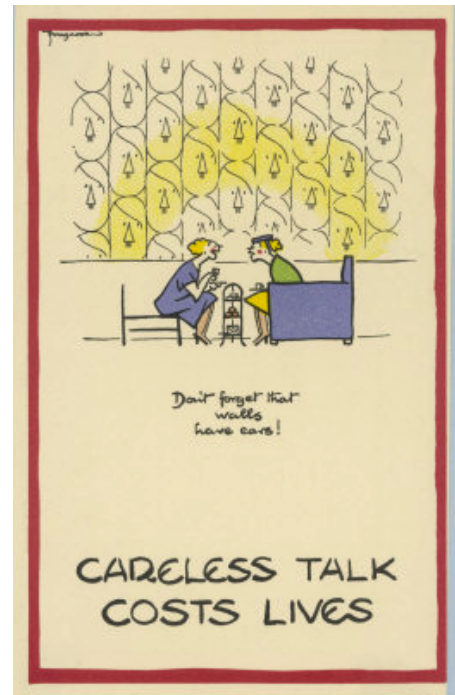
The compassionate allowance thus represents the idea of an “open secret”: those secrets that pass through public knowledge – always acknowledged yet never discussed – and contain the potential for further destruction because they disregard the well-being of British citizens. Rezia *is* the novel’s secret in that it dispenses with her (as the text turns to Clarissa, she is never seen again), similar to the government’s actions toward the widows who receive a compassionate allowance. Much like the Ministry of Pensions, the novel doesn’t quite know what to do with her. As a result, it writes her out of its pages and turns her into someone else’s (and some other novel’s) problem. Rezia, though, is also the figure who helps to perpetuate official secrets, to invoke the public narrative of heroism in covering up her husband’s shame – the shame, that is, of feeling like a coward while being regarded as a hero. Rezia, therefore, occupies an ironic position in the novel because she calls for our compassion – “people *must* see” – and asks us to avert our eyes at the same time.

Chapter Three: Graham Greene's Mission: Intimacy Impossible

British citizens during the Second World War were reminded, regularly and publicly, that the conflict was a war of words. Among the many images of the war on the home front, some of the most memorable, and artful, remain those of the posters imploring citizens to mind their tongues at a time when anyone could become an unwitting informant. The most famous of these poster campaigns was “Careless Talk Costs Lives” by Cyril Kenneth Bird (popularly known as Fougasse). His poster series depicted individuals on city buses and trains, in phone booths and restaurants, having casual conversations while caricatures of enemy foreign leaders sit close by. The speakers in these posters are always women. In one, we see two women sitting side-by-side on a public transport system, adorned with their colorful overcoats, purses, and bouffant blond hairstyles underneath their posh hats. Their femininity is clearly stressed not just by their appearance (their uncovered legs extending from their coats, their high-heeled shoes, and the flush of pink on their cheeks), but also the manner in which they speak to each other while leaning in, clearly indicating that conventional “female” gossip is occurring. Caricatures of Hitler and Mussolini, fully recognizable in their military uniforms, sit two rows behind, peering at the women in front of them as if though attending to their every word. Beneath this illustration is the warning, “You never know *who’s* listening!,” followed by the slogan’s bold capitalized letters, “Careless Talk Costs Lives.”

Another of Fougasse’s posters portrays a similar scenario of two women sitting over tea and cakes, leaning forward to indulge in the latest gossip. Behind them is a wall etched with numerous caricatures of Hitler’s face. The eyes of each are directed towards

the women and their conversation. The poster warns, “Don’t forget that walls have ears!,” suggesting that even the most domestic and benign of interior spaces can fall prey to an international threat, here, the watching eyes and listening ears of German intelligence.



These and other poster campaigns were commissioned in the 1940s by Great Britain’s Ministry of Information, all based upon the theme of “careless talk.” The imperative of this propaganda campaign was to ensure British citizens would refrain from speaking about sensitive information while in public spaces, so that Axis spies would not overhear sensitive, and potentially damaging, information. What is so striking about these posters is not only their appeal to ordinary citizens to see themselves as part of the war effort in this very private, ordinary way, but also the way they sexualize the threat to national security. In so many of these warnings, women – and often sex – represent the heart of this vulnerability; they are the gossips and the seducers, and their talk is the

careless kind.

This poster series ultimately signals how ordinary life becomes rife with anxiety during wartime: even the most casual encounter is understood through the context of war and international threats. The posters suggest that what should be benign encounters are instead transformed by a culture at war precisely because of their intimate nature. Information becomes a potential weapon, regardless of the scenario in which it is shared. The close ties between intimacy and information in the World War II propaganda speaks to how war encompasses and totalizes the everyday. Ordinary life becomes rife with anxiety not just because of bombing threats during the Blitz, but also because England transitions into a culture in which everyone is responsible for national security. The threat, in other words, is not just from the air, but from the ground, the inside; it issues from encounters that had once seemed entirely innocuous. In this chapter, I will turn to the fiction of Graham Greene to draw out the imaginary world that these posters call to mind, specifically his novels *The End of the Affair* and *The Ministry of Fear*. I will explore how the intimate encounters between men and women now bear a strong relation to how the nation must defend itself. By creating frameworks of love and sex in wartime, Greene's novels expose the link between intimacy and national security. The tendrils of state secrecy work their way into what seem to be the most benign interactions – that even a romantic fling can be a threat to the nation. Greene's novels ultimately posit the idea that intimacy – and with it, romance – comes to suffer because of its problematic link to secrecy and national security.

In his study *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature*, Patrick Deer examines how 1940s England produced dominant and competing notions of

culture during wartime. He refers to the way in which anxiety became a regular feature of daily life as “modern war culture”: the threat of a bomb dropping or the need at any moment to take cover imbued even the most mundane activity with a sense of dread. For Deer, what is crucial is how these cultures derived from the normalization of conflict, the processes of war-making, the militarization (and subsequent colonization) of the everyday. As a result, the ways in which war is viewed, represented, and interpreted by civilians becomes monopolized by dominant culture's propulsion of the war machine. War cultures are predicated upon “official efforts” to define a strict, normative understanding of war through propaganda campaigns, public speeches, film and radio programming, newspapers, and, of course, censorship of anything that falls outside of the dominant representation of war (Deer 4). These official efforts, according to Deer, were “the overpowering [...] visions of patriotic Englishness, fortified masculinity, compliant femininity, [and] of a disciplined Home Front and Loyal Empire at war” (5). Taking a cue from Foucault's *Society Must Be Defended*, Deer contends that war offers a framework for understanding the discursive production of the social world. By extension, the state's use of the war effort during the London Blitz became a means of disciplining and regulating everyday life.

Deer's argument provides a framework through which I will further examine England's poster campaign, and specifically, the way it generates fear around – and seeks to regulate – intimate encounters. Similar to the Fougasse posters discussed above, Gerald Lacoste's “Keep Mum She's Not So Dumb” campaign considers the relationship between gender and information exchange; however, it makes the implicit connection into its focal point. Lacoste's poster picks up on the images of Fougasse's “female

menace,” but turns them in a different direction. Revolving around the idea of “keeping mum,” it took the female characters in these illustrations and emphasized the dangers posed by femininity to the state. Lacoste’s women aren’t the mindless gossips in Fougasse’s series, but calculated spies. His “Keep Mum, She's Not So Dumb” portrayed a seductively dressed blonde surrounded by high-ranking British military officials. Dressed in a strapless ball gown, with a diamond necklace and bright red lipstick, the woman sits in the center of the poster looking directly at the viewer with a knowing, even triumphant, expression. The men around her are clearly enamored with her presence as they lean over her, each of them pressing their bodies against her chair. None of the men, however, look at her: their faces and eyes are directed at each other as they share drinks, cigarettes, and military stories. The men's postures suggest that they experience the woman as an accessory, rather than as someone’s potential accomplice: a woman as lovely as that can’t possibly be listening. The Ministry of Information's rationale for this poster is that British soldiers and ranking officials can unknowingly divulge classified information about England's war effort while simply engaging in their “conventional” behavior at parties and other social situations. The women they may be engaged with are not dumb blondes but femme fatales; any one of them could be an enemy agents. This poster demonstrates how gender issues are embedded within these poster campaigns. Lacoste’s “Keep Mum” shows how men (not the women), are now the careless citizens, while the women (not the men), are now aligned with the enemy. What was previously perceived as innocuous chatter over drinks now had the potential to do harm to the nation.



Through this poster's emphasis on the sexual nature of the female spy, though, sex itself became part of the narrative of national security instead of a distraction from it. For example, the novels and films of the James Bond franchise portray a very different relationship between sex, spies, and the defense of the nation – one we could venture to say has become commonplace and conventional, and of a piece with the genre of the spy thriller. The English spy conquers not only the dangers posed by foreign intelligence, but also the women who cross his path and become enamored with his svelte tuxedo-wearing, martini-shaking, globe-trotting, Empire-touting antics. With the shift in emphasis and context with this poster, we are not presented with the dashing sex appeal of the exotic female foreign agent by way of the common associations with James Bond; instead, we are shown the threat posed *by* sex. The threat to national security is intimacy itself, the private spaces occupied by husbands and lovers speaking casually to (or even in the

proximity of) their romantic attachments.

These posters demonstrate how not just the occasional fling between soldiers and femme fatales, or gabbing women and government agents, could pose problems for England, but also how even the securest of intimate enclaves, the marriage, was vulnerable to security breaches. Another poster in the “Careless Talk Costs Lives” series suggests an attack on the space between husband and wife. This poster depicts a couple sitting together, a man dressed in his British navy uniform and the campaign’s trademark blonde woman wearing the usual red lipstick and a pink dress. The poster, however, implies a more “traditional” setting and relationship than what appears to be the notorious one-night-stand narrative portrayed by the more notorious “Keep Mum” illustration. They huddle together on what appears to be a couch, with a light shining against them and projecting their shadows on the wall behind where they sit. The woman in this poster gazes not at the viewer but at her male companion, on whose arm she leans amorously and open-mouthed, as if she were mid-speech. The man, in contrast, seems to be unfazed by her advances, his face tilted downward in a blank stare. His hand appears clutched to his chest, in a fist, noticeably distant from hers on his arm. Etched underneath is the slogan, “Tell NOBODY – Not Even HER.” While the setting and individuals in the poster suggest a far more domestic scenario, the universal “HER” implies the generic woman in a soldier's life, the wife or girlfriend he sees while on leave. In its capitalization, the “her” becomes a source of danger, one emphatically warned against. The soldier is implored to not open up, to withdraw into himself, in his own private life at home, to resist the advances of the woman who beseeches him to talk.



This particular slogan certainly raises many additional questions about war trauma – What is it, exactly, that he's not supposed to tell? Why can't he look her in the eye? However, I want to emphasize the importance of his not telling – the *form* of his silence – rather than the content of whatever information he withholds. Despite the soldiers and military officials being the ones harboring confidential information, the emphasis in all of these posters falls upon women, who emerge as the civilians most likely to break the seal of secrecy. These are secrets ultimately involving sex: private lives, sexual lives, are spaces where information can be revealed. England's poster campaign signals, in political terms, “the end of the affair.” There is no longer such a thing as an innocent fling: even a seemingly harmless flirtation can pose a potential security breach.

England Keeping Mum: Greene's Blitz Fiction and Wartime Culture

It is through this context of love and sex in wartime that I turn to the fiction of Graham Greene, in particular his World War II novels set in London during the Blitz and,

therefore, during the anxiety over intimacy, information exchange, and international threat. Greene himself was recruited to work for MI6 during the Second World War, and was even stationed in Sierra Leone. The life of a spy was part of his own daily existence by way of remaining hidden himself while monitoring others abroad.⁵² Greene's contact with this way of thinking, I want to suggest, would translate directly into a novel like *The Ministry of Fear*, which portrays a culture in which everyone is responsible for national security and romantic flings could possibly lead to the downfall of a nation.

It's not surprising, then, that Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) is one of the primary texts investigated by Deer: everything in the novel occurs because of an outside threat trying to work its way inward. The decline of England has its source in a clear villain, located by the novel in the mysterious entity that is Germany's "Ministry of Fear." The Blitz and international espionage of World War II are not simply the historical backdrops for the novel's political thrills as it is the enabling condition for the characters' (and the plot's) existence. Both are perpetually anxious, neurotic and unsettled because they could be overtaken by German influence at any given moment. *The Ministry of Fear* fluctuates between scenes of the protagonist's domestic strife and England's political turmoil. So exceeding, even absurd, is its domesticity that the novel's opening moments center on nothing more than a cake, the most ordinary of images that catapults the novel into its international espionage plot. Arthur Rowe wins a cake "made with real eggs" – ostensibly its only remarkable feature – during a London fete. Unbeknownst to our hero, his prize contains a reel of film with confidential political information coveted

⁵² Greene biographer Norman Sherry maintains the assertion that "Greene would have received training in security precautions, the avoidance and detection of surveillance, the use of specialized equipment, such as miniature cameras, and he would learn new terminology" (88).

by a Nazi spy ring. Séances, murders, bombings, memory losses, scientific experimentations, and, of course, a love affair with a suspected female Nazi agent ensue as Rowe gradually learns his cake is more than just a tasty carnival prize. While the espionage plot envelops Rowe, his thoughts fixate upon the contemporary state of London, which, for the novel, is the Blitz of 1940-1941.

Given its espionage-driven plot, *The Ministry of Fear* would seem the most likely and obvious site to examine the relationship between literature, secrets, and the state. Secrets are integral to the plot at several levels: 1) the classified information that belongs to German resides in the reel of film coveted by enemy agents; 2) Rowe's mysterious past and the murky details that surround his involvement in his wife's murder; and, 3) the true nature of the hospital in which Rowe receives his treatment after awakening from a bomb explosion (and how the novel hints at the doctors' sinister practices upon their patients). Furthermore, as an espionage novel, secrets not only constitute its plot but also shape the form the narrative takes. The novel delays its revelation of characters identities and plot details. The third-person omniscient narrator also directs readers' attention away from key plot elements in order to prolong mystery. Lastly, characters in the novel are flat – they are reducible to a single character trait or solitary function in the grand scheme of the plot.

For Greene, though, secrets are a means to re-examine how the state imagines itself, and, in the pages of *The Ministry of Fear*, how England understands itself in order to re-shape itself during a time of attack. Much of the novel is comprised of Rowe's wanderings through bombed-out buildings and landmarks of London while commenting on what English life “used to be” before World War II. Rowe's political opinions

repeatedly turn to the ways in which Germany has overtaken England as the island nation gasps for breath. As the novel turns the screw of its political thrills, it emphasizes an English culture currently in decline. The following passage opens *The Ministry of Fear* and introduces us to a longing for a state that used to be:

There was something about a fete which drew Arthur Rowe irresistibly, bound him a helpless victim to the distant blare of a band and the knock-knock of wooden balls against coconuts. Of course this year there were no concerns because there was a war on: you could tell that too from the untidy gaps between the Bloomsbury houses – a flat fireplace half-way up a wall, like the painted fireplace in a cheap doll's house, and lots of mirrors and green wall-papers, and from round a corner of the sunny afternoon the sound of glass being swept up, like the lazy noise of the sea on a shingled beach. Otherwise the square was doing its very best with the flags of the free nations and a mass of bunting which had obviously been preserved by somebody ever since the Jubilee. (3)⁵³

The novel begins not so much with the protagonist, but with what distracts him from his current position as an English subject. The curious appeal of the fete – there's “something about” it – precedes the actual naming of our leading man, Arthur Rowe. The passage draws attention to the event rather than to the man, emphasizing what it represents culturally. Rowe does not even enter the novel until after the fete has appeared. When he does, his character is filtered through being uncontrollably drawn to it, as if he has no agency of his own and is merely being controlled by this celebration of Englishness. He is just the “helpless victim” of the cultural context in which he is mired. The fete, though, is trivialized by way of the omniscient narrator's ironic remarks, as he categorizes it as a problematic distraction from larger issues that must be attended to by the public. His “of course” ironically casts Londoners as a group persisting with the normal conditions of their everyday existence, forgetting about the war, and continuing

⁵³ Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, New York: Penguin, 2005. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

their lives in spite of the ongoing war.

This opening then presents the layering of mirth with destruction, the carnival with the German aerial bombardment. Troupe music plays loudly and the noises of festival games swarm Rowe while the empty bombed-out spaces on the street where homes once stood draws his gaze. The sounds of the fete cannot drown out the sound of shattered glass – the remnants of a bombing – being pushed to the side. What's important in this scene is how the urban space of London is structured by the absent presence of the Blitz: we are introduced to the war not by a scene of violence, but by its remnants, the indexes of destruction rather than its direct representation. These gaps in the novel's introductory description are the signs of the war: how one “could tell that too” by scanning the streets of London and knowing the city is under siege without hearing sirens blaring and fighter jets cutting through the air above. Notice, though, that the fete is trying its hardest to persist in spite of the war. The city square doesn't just do “its very best,” it also attempts to preserve bits of clutter left over from the Jubilee – an annual English July event. In other words, the city space holds on to reminders of the summer shortly before the Blitz began in September 1940, a time that didn't know bombs.

I turn to the opening of *The Ministry of Fear* in order to show how Greene's novel is saturated by a complex cultural context: nervous city inhabitants, nostalgia for a traditional English life, and international threats. The novel's first passage suggests the conflicting perspectives about life during the Blitz. Early in the novel, Rowe refers to the state of emergency surrounding him and proclaims, “This isn't real life anymore [...] Tea on the lawn, evensong, croquet, the old ladies calling, the gentle unmalicious gossip, the gardener trundling the wheelbarrow full of leaves and grass. People write about it as if it

still went on; lady novelists describe it over and over again in books of the month, but it's not there anymore" (54). Rowe's comment here contains an explicit reference to a time before the propaganda campaigns when it was possible to engage in "gentle unmalicious gossip." He establishes the problem of women not just as the now insidious gossips but as the writers – "the lady novelists" – who would have us believe that such an innocent world still exists. He does not seem to parody these women in this passage, yet he oddly echoes the sexism of the propaganda posters. The thoughts in this passage present how the Blitz ushered in a way of life that was, inarguably, an epistemological rupture and subsequent shift for Londoners and England as a whole. Unlike World War I, whose trench warfare left Britain physically untouched, the Blitz of World War II brought the war *directly* home, and created states of emergency, paranoia, and injury that forced Londoners to relinquish their hold on the past because it was being destroyed all around them. The England of old was something physically dismantled into unrecognizable shards: "[...] the Germans are methodically smashing London to bits all round me. You remember St. Clement's – the bells of St. Clement's. They've smashed that – St. James's, Piccadilly, the Burlington Arcade, Garland's Hotel, where we stayed for the pantomime, Maples and John Lewis" (54). Through its eradication, Edwardian England became a fiction existing only in the past and, as Rowe suggests here, in the pages of fiction itself. Rowe's manner of distinguishing between fiction and reality is characterized by the obsessive fixation of novel readers: not only do novelists (and "lady novelists," for that matter) describe it "over and over again," but their description also surfaces in "books of the month" – those literary texts consumed rapidly by the mass public. England has come to understand itself through the literature it has produced because the current state

of the nation does not match the image established by its literary archive.

This relationship between literature and culture is not incidental for *The Ministry of Fear*. The imbrication of fiction with war-torn reality here is an important relationship for Greene's novel because Rowe (and other characters, for that matter) constantly place themselves in relation to the novels read by the public. While speaking with his mother, Rowe continues to describe the new England that has replaced the old – a new reality that also seems ripped from the pages of fiction. The spies, the bombs, the murders, and the international threats all lead him to exclaim, “It sounds like a thriller, doesn't it, but the thrillers are like life – more like life than you are, this lawn, your sandwiches, that pine. You used to laugh at the books [you] read – about spies, and murders, and violence, and wild motor-car chases, but dear, that's real life: it's what we've all made of the world [...] The world has been remade by William Le Queux” (54). Le Queux, we might recall from Chapter One, was the author of best-selling espionage novels at the time that Joseph Conrad composed and published *The Secret Agent*. Le Queux saw the popularity of his fiction skyrocket because of the tense international relations between England and rival European powers. The unlikely happenings in the life of a spy would seem to exist only in the realm of fiction, yet here they occur all around Rowe – and to him. Throughout the novel, Rowe constantly works against his placement in this espionage plot, struggling with the fact that this web of intrigue itself even exists – indeed, “laughing at” the preposterous transference of fiction into his sacred English culture. The anxieties previously contained and encountered only in literature become those same anxieties experienced everyday on the home front. The Blitz, in other words, created the conditions for a culture to adapt itself to wartime.

I want to emphasize here, then, how Rowe understands wartime culture *through* fiction. The influence of war and the changing nature of secrecy ran much deeper than the proliferation of spy novels would suggest. National secrecy during wartime compromises something believed to be inalienable: private life. It would follow, then, that the romance genre – the fiction most closely aligned with private life, the kind of life that England's poster campaign suggested was no longer possible – would become compromised as well. Affairs are a matter of state; dalliances are political: intimacy no longer becomes an escape from public life, but a dangerous point of contact with it.

In this context, Greene's *The End of the Affair* proves a more fitting work in which to consider the relationship between national and personal security, and to examine secrecy as a compromised and difficult literary form. While *The Ministry of Fear* illustrates in explicit terms the romance between spies and lovers, it ultimately presents too tidy a portrait of the dangers posed by Rowe's and Anna Hilfer's relationship. It is a thriller at heart, and as such, its intrigue – that of an English man unknowingly falling in love with a German spy – are explicit and, to some extent, predictable. Within the novel, the question of whether or not Rowe leaks information is less important (though of course he does) than the lengths he goes to in order to recover from his mistakes and save England, as well as battling (literally) his conflicted feelings toward Anna. Murders, train chases, and shoot-outs take precedence over domestic space, which fades into the background along with the cake and its real eggs.

The End of the Affair seems a far cry from this world of international espionage and national security. That non-relation, though, is precisely Greene's point. For Greene, the spy novel is something to emulate (à la *Ministry*) and then dismantle (à la *Affair*).

Through its lack of thrills, *The End of the Affair* directly addresses the security and insecurity of the domestic during wartime in a way that *The Ministry of Fear* does not. Bendrix and Sarah do not live solely in the shadow of total war; they also live in the shadow of this new relationship between intimacy and national security, in a world where intimacy, a casualty of national security, can no longer be sustained, even if it can be kept from view for a long time.

The fact that bureaucracy and anxiety are such prominent surface features of this novel, however, can make it difficult to grasp just how deep modern war culture runs, how profoundly it penetrates the most ordinary – or the most melodramatic – events. The fact that it appears eight years after *The Ministry of Fear* (which was published in 1943, at the height of World War II) is crucial in this context. By 1951, the public had had time to reflect upon and live with the war's damage. While the earlier novel locates the threat to England from without, the latter detects a more toxic threat coming from within, cultivated through the mundane, as well as the melodramatic, relationships between individuals. Time had turned Greene inward, had brought him home and rendered his affair – in all its impossibility – domestic. As we can see from what the titles flag for us, Greene's emphasis no longer falls upon the insidiousness of government – the Ministry has receded from view – but on the emotional turbulence of one of literature's more shopworn stories, the affair.

Like *The Ministry of Fear*, *The End of the Affair* is a novel whose plot is driven by secrets, none of which poses a threat to national security. Maurice Bendrix, a highly unlikeable upper-class writer, forms a friendship of convenience with Henry Miles, a member of the Ministry of Pensions, in order to get material for his next novel. During

their social interactions, Bendrix eventually meets Henry's wife, Sarah, and the two begin the title's affair. When Henry eventually discovers the nature of their relationship, he keeps his realization hidden from them (although it is later revealed that Henry knew all along).

Aside from the very basic operation of secret-keeping at work in any extra-marital affair, the novel begins to harbor secrets in other more complex forms. After an amorous meeting during which Bendrix is nearly killed by a falling bomb, Sarah suddenly stops seeing him, and subsequently cuts off all communication. Some years pass, and Bendrix later learns that Henry is also growing distant from his wife. In order to uncover Sarah's reasons for spurning them both, Bendrix hires a private investigator to follow Sarah, chronicle her everyday interactions, and report back to him. Bendrix suspects she has taken another lover and wants proof that she has abandoned him for another man. In other words, the foundation of *The End of the Affair's* secrecy exists in a double-bind: the central secret upon which the novel is predicated creates another secret that then requires policing.

Secrecy, however, doesn't stop there. Before Bendrix is able to find his evidence, Sarah dies from pneumonia and leaves his questions unanswered. After her death, Bendrix procures her diary and discovers the hidden reason for all of her actions: she has turned to religion. At the instant when Bendrix is almost killed during an air raid, she had made a secret vow with God to never see Bendrix again in exchange for his life being spared. All of her strategic avoidance of Bendrix and surreptitious wanderings around London were because she turned to God. Instead of her usual trysts with Bendrix, she attended church services and met with Catholic priests. The novel's secret, its

unanticipated twist, is its turn from sex to faith, its replacement of one love for another.

At first glance, Greene's secrecy seems to be closer to the forms of secrecy in nineteenth-century British literature than the novels of either Conrad or Woolf: its plot feels closer to those personal intrigues and family secrets characteristic of Victorian fiction. To examine the novel under the domain of national security would seem strange, at least initially. This chapter, then, wants to examine this curious fit and suggest that even without a focus upon spies and soldiers, a novel can still traffic in matters of national security. I argue that *The End of the Affair* represents not a depiction of intimacy but an attack on it. This attack, moreover, is deeply connected to issues of national security in World War II-era England. Intimacy between individuals is something new for the state to now contend with as a threat.

The relation between intimacy and national security is much different than that between public and private. The private, domestic lives of individuals now merge with public, national issues in order to regulate threats. I want to track this distinction through the way *The End of the Affair* targets intimacy and unravels the relationships between husbands and wives, between lovers, and ultimately between characters who supposedly share bonds of trust. The novel views intimacy as the basis for relationships between characters even as it consciously violates this intimacy. I want to draw attention to *The End of the Affair* as a self-conscious meta-novel, a meditation on the death of romance and on the fate of an affair that comes to fruition during wartime. The title of the novel – “*the end of the affair*” – suggests a form of death. Not only does love have a shelf life, but “the love story” also meets its demise. The very act of narrating an affair brings about the affair’s death. The majority of the novel is Bendrix attempting to place in order

his memories of Sarah, suggesting that he experiences a plot unknowable to him, one that has no beginning nor end.

I want to look directly at the novel's first chapter to demonstrate how *The End of the Affair* front-loads a particular understanding of intimacy, one that sets its conditions for the remainder of the text. The end to intimacy is something explored by the novel in its very opening. This chapter, first and foremost, draws attention to the relationship between Henry and Bendrix, and characterizes it as one filled with jealousy, remorse, and violated trust. As they exchange awkward pleasantries – “What are you up to?” “Had a good Christmas?” – Bendrix barely listens to Henry describe his worries about the fragile state of his marriage to Sarah (8-9).⁵⁴ Instead, Bendrix contemplates his own tumultuous past with Sarah, the constant lies to Henry throughout the years, and his intense “hatred” for everything Henry does and says (7). This opening chapter ultimately demonstrates the false construction of trust as one man discloses his fears to another, whose main interest lies in how he can use this vulnerability to his advantage. From Henry’s perspective, the two share an intimacy, which makes their exchange possible. This exchange is ultimately what propels the entire plot of the novel forward, as it results in Henry enlisting Bendrix’s help to discover whether or not Sarah is having an affair. From Bendrix’s perspective, this intimacy is destroyed: he establishes Henry’s confidence in order to manipulate the trust between husband and wife. The function of novel's first chapter, I suggest, is to emphasize Bendrix's disingenuousness and how he aims to dismantle intimacy between individuals in post-war England. He is more than the unlikable and unreliable narrator; he is a character whose every word and deed is

⁵⁴ Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*, New York: Penguin, 1962. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

tainted by his destruction of intimate spaces, both his own and others' around him. His own emotional gains at the expense of Sarah and Henry take nefarious precedence, or more importantly as I will soon discuss, his own professional gains as a novelist.

“A story has no beginning or end,” Bendrix declares at the opening of his narrative, by way of explanation as to why he begins with his encounter with Henry on a rainy night in London (7). Before we even know a single characteristic regarding Mr. Miles, Bendrix states, “I hated Henry” (7). He then admits that he will do his best to write (and subsequently share with us) the following account against this bias, “because it is my professional pride to prefer the near-truth, even to the expression of my near-hate” (7). Bendrix asks out of obligation, “How's Sarah?,” which causes him to think back to the origins of his relationships with both Mileses (8). While Bendrix reflects upon his history with them, Henry expresses his worry that something seems amiss with Sarah. Henry hesitates to tell Bendrix what exactly it is with Sarah that makes him so anxious; Bendrix reassures him, “You know you can trust me, Henry” (14). Henry then reveals that he believes Sarah to be having an affair: “They always say, don't they, that a husband is the last person to really know the kind of woman...” (15). The chapter ends with Bendrix offering to pose as Sarah's lover and hire a detective's services for Henry because “Jealous lovers are more respectable, less ridiculous, than jealous husbands” (17). When Bendrix proposes this plan, Henry seems to view it as an act of kindness and generosity on Bendrix's part. He responds, “Would you really do that for me, Bendrix?,” while Bendrix notes in his narration, “there were tears in his eyes, as though he had never expected or deserved this supreme mark of friendship” (17).

I explain the plot in this way for several reasons. First, the novel considers the relationship between intimacy and information exchange in its opening pages. Henry clearly respects and admires Bendrix (though the feeling is far from mutual), in spite of the years that have passed since their last meeting. In fact, when Henry first sees him, Bendrix notes “his eyes light up as though we were old friends. 'Bendrix,' he said with affection” (8). Bendrix goes so far as to feign an intimate connection with a false declaration of trust and by appealing directly to Henry's hesitation, as he emphasizes, “*You know you can trust me.*” Second, the reference to Sarah elicits a break in narration that subsequently reveals a sinister foundation to the relationship between all three characters. Calling up Sarah's name causes Bendrix to acknowledge how their affair was founded upon an actual interest in *Henry* rather than Sarah. This break begins with him admitting, “I doubt whether I should have ever have troubled to know Henry or Sarah well if I had not begun to write a story with a senior civil servant as the main character [...] I didn't exactly go to bed with Henry, but I did the next best thing, and the first night I took Sarah out to dinner I had the cold-blooded intention of picking the brain of a civil servant's wife” (10). Even though the majority of *The End of the Affair* chronicles Bendrix's affair with Sarah, the origins of that seminal affair actually lie in an interest in this “civil servant.” In other words, Bendrix's motive for starting the affair – to write his own novel – corrupts the affair before it even begins. The affair, in effect, is already plotted – a plot that will ultimately take on a different quality because of the war. If Bendrix refers to his own actions as “cold-blooded,” as well as later naming Sarah “my victim” while he asks incessantly about her husband at dinner, there is clearly some form of covert operation at work in his pursuits.

At this stage in the novel, we are led to think that Bendrix is a threat because he feels duplicitous impulses towards their relationship. Bendrix interrogates Sarah in order to excavate the insignificant and confidential details of Henry's domestic life. These include the details known only by his wife: what time he ate breakfast, which route he prefers taking to his office, if he worked from home in the evenings, and something as arbitrary as "does Henry ever eat coffee beans to clear his breath before an important conference?" (11). What Bendrix wants to know, *needs* to know, is not the common everyday knowledge he could get from simply observing Henry in public spaces – it is information about his actions and qualities at the most intimate moments (even going so far as to know Henry has a birthmark in his pubic region). The conflation of his sexual relationship with Sarah with that of Henry is thus telling: Bendrix "didn't exactly go to bed" with Henry, suggesting that some part of Bendrix does believe his relationship with him to be somewhat sexual, or at least intimate, in nature. "The next best thing" to bedding Henry would be to seduce his wife in order to learn more about him – to learn that which can only be gleaned from having a sexual relationship with the person closest to his subject.

We should remember, though, that Bendrix's secret undertaking occurs during a time of war. Given that its setting is London during the Blitz, intimacy in *The End of the Affair* is under both literal and figurative attack. The private, emotional lives of characters and the public space of the nation are metaphorically linked. *The End of the Affair* targets intimacy at an overt level through Bendrix's strong distaste for love. Much of the text consists of his vitriolic philosophizing about the nature of love, its "end," his contempt for those who fall victim to it, and how romantic attachments slowly poison

themselves to the point of extinction. Early in the novel, before we know much of anything about his relationship with Sarah, Bendrix draws attention to its darker underside, signaled in the distinction between love and a love affair:

When I began to realize how often we quarreled, how often I picked at her with nervous irritation, I became aware that our love was doomed: love had turned into a love-affair with a beginning and an end. I could name the very moment when it had begun, and one day I knew I should be able to name the final hour [...] As long as I could make-believe that love lasted, I was happy [...] But if love had to die, I wanted it to die quickly. It was as though our love were a small creature caught in a trap and bleeding to death: I had to shut my eyes and wring its neck. (34-35)

Despite the alarming violence of his thoughts here, many similar passages litter the novel in which Bendrix describes their affair as something that must inevitably perish by way of violent force. It is significant that Bendrix describes the nature of their interactions before we know the details (albeit, even the basic history) of his relationship with Sarah. Furthermore, we must remember that this passage also characterizes Bendrix as a writer and novelist, ultimately affecting the way we view his narration. Not only is he prone to over-exaggeration, but also to viewing everything teleologically: life comes into view for him as a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. His affair with Sarah is something that must have an antagonist, a conflict, a culmination of that conflict, and some form of bleak resolution. As he allows his fiction to dictate his everyday actions, his narrations are prone to fiction as well. Intimacy comes under a double-attack here: first being the very description it is given, as something that must be destroyed, and second, being something forced (and fabricated) into the logic of a linear plot.

In *Amorous Acts*, Frances Restuccia notes how love is forced into a plot-oriented design within Greene's novel *because* of its emphasis on writing. She claims, "It is the failure of love that produces subjectivity" in *The End of the Affair* (65). Restuccia offers

a Lacanian reading of the text by aligning Bendrix's dilemma of novel-production with "the impossibility of love" (61).⁵⁵ She contends that writing – signification – is inextricable from the novel's understanding of an affair, that is, "love." *The End of the Affair* "intertwines creative writing with the 'affair' from the novel's beginning to its end, being very much about beginnings and endings – predominantly through the idea that an 'affair' may be defined as having a beginning and an end" (Restuccia 61-62). I would add that *The End of the Affair* wants us to consider how this shift is not only about the effects of writing on love, but about the fate of love in war. From the novel's opening, the narrative is self-conscious of itself *as* a narrative – that is, as a plot. The alignment of the life of an affair with the life of a story is incongruous, to say the least; however, I want to suggest that this is tantamount to the wartime culture articulated by both Patrick Deer and Greene. The collision between the state and the citizen, between politics and emotional life, renders affective experience *into* plot. The problematic intersection of war, secrecy, and romance pushes life into narrative, clamping down on emotions and pushing them into a pre-conceived design.

Hannah Arendt and the Insecurity of the Private Domain

The figure of the state, though, is not exactly crystal-clear in *The End of the Affair*. We have the numerous references to Henry's occupation as an employee of the various Ministries, and the projects and officials he must contend with. In order to help

⁵⁵ Restuccia continues, "While the affair progresses, Bendrix has no trouble writing; writing and the affair continue to be intermeshed. He also writes retrospectively the very novel we are reading, compensating with *The End of the Affair* itself for the loss of a sexual relation with the now dead and cremated Sarah Miles. Hinting at his awareness that to write is to avoid fulfillment but maintain desire, Bendrix makes a parallel between spending the entire night with Sarah and writing the last word of a book, implying in a Lacanian veins that to consummate love/desire is to complete or stop writing. A sexual relation – what never stops *not* being written – being impossible, it is only what leads up to, and fails to be, a sexual relation – that is, an affair, time-bound, with a beginning and end – that may be written" (62). See chapter two, "Modernism's Lacanian Ethics," in her *Amorous Acts* for further discussion.

make the state more apparent in the novel, I turn to Hannah Arendt, who creates a paradigm for what it could mean to be a citizen of a wartime state, and to live in a time of disaster and trauma. Arendt ultimately forces a rethinking of how the private and public are severed from each other in wartime. If Greene's novel highlights how Britain's attack upon intimacy fundamentally alters how one can write about romance during war, Arendt helps us to view how the operations of the state can still infect the private lives of citizens, thereby resulting in this dissolution of love.

In her essay, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," Arendt considers how individuals who shore up their own domestic domains in wartime ultimately blur the lines between public and private, particularly during times of state crisis. Considering the role of the average citizen in Germany, Arendt speculates about the possibility of unifying the German people in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust. She takes as her starting point the common game of finger-pointing at Germany and the assumptions that all German citizens are guilty of war crimes. Perpetuated by the Allied powers, the standard view towards the German state eradicated all difference between German citizens and viewed them all as one homogenous, guilty population. In other words, if you were a German citizen, you were deemed a member of the Nazi war machine. The motivation behind this view was to quash the German nation as a Western power and prevent it from rebuilding itself in the wake of the Second World War. The "charge of the collective guilt of the German people" aimed to destroy any "neutral zone" in which ordinary citizens lived, instead "making the existence of each individual in Germany depend either upon committing crimes or on complicity in crimes" (148-49). As a result, the boundary between criminals and normal citizens is effaced, as well as the distinction

between those Germans working against the Nazi party and those who are guilty of being “former mass murderers” (149).

Arendt further explores this problem by interrogating the notion of the “bourgeois” citizen in Germany during the World War II era, specifically his participation in crimes against humanity. Because of the economic conditions of the time, men were forced to fill the role of “*paterfamilias*” – that modern individual who seeks to provide for his wife and children through any and all means. Those means, however, undoubtedly caused him to become part of the Nazi war machine – he would involuntarily collaborate with its beliefs and practices in order to secure employment, thereby ensuring the security of his family. These men, Arendt contends, are much different from the fanatics and mass murderers commonly associated with the Nazi party; she reminds us, in fact, that its organization “relied entirely upon the normalcy of jobholders and family men” (152). They felt no ideological obligation or political responsibility towards National Socialism, only responsibility toward their families. Yet in a state of emergency, this redoubled commitment to private life transforms these “*paterfamilias*” into agents of the state, who reinforce and collaborate with their country’s policies of death and destruction.

Arendt ultimately aims to re-conceptualize how we understand the “bourgeois individual” during wartime by suggesting that we think of him not as one enlightened within the masses, but rather as one who pursues the “security (today one should say insecurity) of his own private domain” (154). The border between public life (his occupation, his actions toward other individuals in order to maintain that occupation, and his means of accruing financial stability) and his private life (his ethics & family-oriented

value system) became starkly defined. He would perform his job, then return home, unflinchingly, and live out his private, inner life. As a result, he ultimately does not discern the horror of his actions because he performs them simply out of professional obligation instead of murderous impulses. This argument, which is also the basis of Arendt's assessment of the Eichmann trial and the emergence of a new kind of war criminal, offers a way to understand the private realm's susceptibility to, rather than insulation from, the brutal realities of wartime.

I emphasize the importance of Arendt's comment in the passage above – the “insecurity of one's private domain” – as a crucial framework for Greene's *The End of the Affair*. Arendt observes how in wartime and postwar Germany, there is a sharp divide between intimacy in one's public and political life, and the forms of intimacy one encounters in their private, domestic, emotional, and even romantic life. There is a strict separation within the “bourgeois” individual between his professional actions and his private actions at home. In Arendt's framework, one can be a murderer, a war criminal, and a political puppet, and also be a lover, a husband, and a family man at the same time. Arendt writes, “He has driven the dichotomy of private and public functions, of family and occupation, so far that he can no longer find in his own person any connection between the two. When his occupation forces him to murder people he does not regard himself as a murderer because he has not done it out of inclination but in his professional capacity” (154). The bourgeois individual has no problem with this dissociative divide, since brutality is not an emotion or a state of mind, but merely a feature of doing one's job.

I want to turn to a passage from *The End of the Affair* to illustrate Arendt's claim. By portraying a romance under attack during wartime, the novel is precisely about how the private domain of citizens begins to unravel during times of state crisis. A private life becomes insecure because the very public space of emergency intrudes upon it, making the two indistinguishable. While references to World War II are scattered throughout the novel, they are typically brief and simply provide some kind of chronological orientation to help readers follow when particular events between Sarah and Bendrix take place. On one level, therefore, this regulation of the war to the text's background demonstrates how love is affected by modern war culture. On another level, though, the following passage provides us with a more direct claim about how war has shaped Bendrix's "affair."

Recalling a tension-filled discussion with Sarah about her marriage, Bendrix narrates,

It must have been some time in May 1940 when this argument broke out. War had helped us in a good many ways, and that was how I had almost come to regard war as a rather disreputable and unreliable accomplice in my affair. (Deliberately I would put the caustic soda of that word 'affair', with its suggestion of a beginning and an end, upon my tongue.) I supposed Germany by this time had invaded the Low Countries: the spring like a corpse was sweet with the smell of doom. (57)

The language here is shot through with speculation: Bendrix begins with the paradoxical formulation of vague certainty – this realization of the war's effect on his love life "*must* have been *some time* in May 1940." He "suppose[s]" it was around the time Germany invaded the Western European countries on the continent: he is not entirely sure, but has a fuzzy recollection and association of Sarah with those historical events. This lack of precision is significant because Bendrix does not need to remember the specific historical moment; rather, he focuses upon the affective resonance and personal mindset produced

by being part of a state in crisis.⁵⁶ It is also significant that “May 1940” is several months before the London Blitz began – this moment of reflection, then, precedes the violent cultural upheaval at the novel’s core. Bendrix’s realization arises during the moment of *impending* threat rather than during actual wartime, when bombs destroy buildings and citizens become targets.

This public threat, though, is one that Bendrix views as an aid to his romantic life, not just providing a small amount of “help” but a good deal of it. The content of this passage is important because Bendrix categorizes war as directly taking part in his relationship with Sarah. In other moments throughout the novel, he would simply mention it while detailing their feelings towards each other. Here, however, his word choice is rather curious. War is an “accomplice,” as if it were something that has aided Bendrix in committing a crime; it helps Bendrix to tell his story by providing signposts so that he can find the affair’s beginning, middle, and end. Bendrix implies that since war is a narrative – with this beginning, middle, and end – it helps to chart the narrative of his love affair. The affair and the war then become, narratively speaking, synonymous: from the standpoint of storytelling, the war stands in for the affair and allows it to be told as an affair rather than a love story.

Through this statement, we could even categorize their relationship more as an affair *because of* wartime rather than an affair during wartime. But it’s significant that Bendrix still characterizes their affair as something he is unsure about: the war “had

⁵⁶ Craig Mattson and Virginia LaGrand explore how Greene subordinates the Blitz to the unraveling of human relationships in *The End of the Affair*. They argue “the apocalypse is rendered mundane [...] in order to disregard it” (275). More specifically, they highlight the strange narration provided by Bendrix and suggest, “disasters are curiously unimportant to the narrator” (275). The “apocalypse” – that is, wartime culture – is made banal for the sake of attending to “the end of love” (278).

helped [them] in a good many ways,” yet he *almost* – not fully – considers it a collaborator. Yes, the war is his “accomplice” and he speaks of it productively at one moment; yet, oddly, the adjectives he then uses discredit it at the same time. It is not only dishonorable, but also, and more importantly, “*unreliable*.” If Bendrix views it as undependable, then that implies he depends on it to some extent – that he expects it to intrude upon his romantic life on a regular basis. An exterior threat associated with public experience shapes the intimacy between individuals.

I also want to emphasize the parenthetical remark in this passage: “(Deliberately I would put the caustic soda of that word ‘affair,’ with its suggestion of a beginning and an end, upon my tongue).” This thought indicates how Bendrix views the affair with Sarah in narrative terms. This quick aside interrupts his discussion of the relationship between love and war. The comment follows how he pinpoints the date of an argument with Sarah (as well as how the war influenced his life), and precedes his reference to a German invasion and international tension hanging in the air. This is significant for two reasons. First, the fact that Bendrix writes this thought within parentheses ultimately suggests how it is an afterthought, not wholly related yet still vaguely connected to his immediate thoughts. His memory of the repeated intrusion of war upon love is associated with how his affair follows the logic of a plot with a beginning and end. Second, Bendrix’s description continues to demonstrate the destruction – “the end” – of an affair. He “deliberately” uses “affair” as a descriptive word because of its “caustic” and corrosive effect upon his thinking. For Bendrix, an “affair” is ultimately a signifier that gradually destroys what it denotes. If we also look at the last line of this passage we see the vexed layering of life and death, the ripe smells of spring laden with a foreboding

sense of death. Moreover, Bendrix uses the figure of a “corpse” to designate his historical reference-point: a macabre reminder of a life that once was, a once-living body that lingers and decays slowly, drawing attention to our mortality. This simile constructed by Bendrix – designated by his use of “like” – ultimately casts death over his alignment of history, romance, and the narratological understanding of his “affair.” He suggests that residing at the intersection of these three categories produces a subjectivity slowly rotting away.

War acting as an accomplice in Bendrix’s affair demonstrates how Arendt’s claim is at play in Greene’s novel. Despite her focus upon the German population in the wake of the Holocaust, Arendt provides a productive contrast for the purposes of this chapter. Although the national context is different (unlike Great Britain, Germany had to deal with criminality after the war), her account helps to bring into focus the insecurity of the private domain. The English model provided by Greene's novel shows us how this separation – this dichotomy – does not exist. In England, Arendt's German paradigm is turned around: one's intimate life and one's public life are, in fact, deeply connected. Private, intimate lives become “insecure” because they cease to be something wholly distinct from the public realm. The ways in which Bendrix presents his thoughts in the passage above demonstrate how private life becomes intertwined with and obfuscated by the life of the state. He is not only couching his affair in the context of a history of destruction, but also narrating it in a manner that questions the security of romance in the first place. This moment in *The End of the Affair* is about how one understands the information necessary to process an “affair” during war. Notice how his voice is speculative and resigned. As he tries to decipher the date of an argument with Sarah, his

narration elides the details of the affair and cedes its specificity to the more general moments and dates of the war. His comment, paradoxically, both makes use of and ignores how the public experience of war influences one's view of romance.

As it comes to operate within Arendt and Greene, "insecurity," then, represents the blurring of the line between the emotional domain where one's inner self would be secure, and the public domain where one's life is in view of others. As we have seen with the political climate during Blitz-era England, evidenced by the Ministry of Information's World War II propaganda campaign, those private, intimate lives are precisely what pose a potential threat to national security. Those lives are the kind that can inadvertently involve enemies of the state because trusting someone with information can cause a breach in defenses.

"Insecurity," in fact, is frequently invoked by *The End of the Affair* to designate the condition experienced by Sarah's tortured lovers. However, it means something quite different for the novel. "Insecurity" alludes to the sense of inadequacy felt by Henry and Bendrix because they aren't able to fully know Sarah, as they often find it impossible to decode her actions and thoughts. This inadequacy results in their impulse to police Sarah's actions, which they feel would alleviate their paranoia toward her involvement with another man. In reference to Henry's anxieties towards her in 1946, Bendrix narrates "he felt for the first time excluded from Sarah's confidence: he was worried and despairing – he didn't know what was going on or what was going to happen. He was living in a terrible insecurity. To that extent his plight was worse than mine" (42).

Bendrix also describes similar feelings of his own years prior, during their Blitz-time affair when his own sense of insecurity causes him to lose trust in the most

insignificant things. He begins to feel that the everyday conditions of Sarah's life could potentially violate their relationship:

Insecurity is the worse sense that lovers feel [...] Insecurity twists meanings and poisons trust. In a closely beleaguered city every sentry is a potential traitor. Even before the days of Mr. Parkis I was trying to check on her [...] even in the most open statement I would read hidden meanings. Because I couldn't bear the thought of her so much as touching another man, I feared it all the time, and I saw intimacy in the most casual movement of the hand. (55)

“Insecurity” here becomes a condition in which interiority – anxieties, paranoid spells, and the lack of intimacy – leaks over into public actions – the desire to have Sarah monitored and the subsequent hiring of Parkis to spy on her throughout the public spaces of London. The latter of these passages, though, equates intimacy with something to be feared. Sarah's actions could suggest intimacy with another, thereby violating the intimacy shared by her and Bendrix. Intimacy doubly exists as being both something coveted and protected, as well as a threat from the outside that could permeate the inside. The very existence of intimacy, in other words, threatens its own erasure.

A Good Man is Hard to Find (When He Works for the State)

I will now return to the novel's opening scene in which Bendrix and Henry reunite after several years. Aside from his actual motivation to “bed” Sarah, I want to emphasize that Bendrix's interest in Henry arises because of both of their professional endeavors: Henry as a high-ranking employee of the British government, and Bendrix as a novelist writing about a similar figure. I want to emphasize the importance of their professional interests in order to suggest that the work of the state, as a result, is the enabling condition for not only Bendrix's work in progress, but also *Greene's* text. We are immediately placed in the double-bind of a novel about novel-writing and narrative

production at the same time we begin the novel itself and our attention is drawn to the downtrodden emotional plight of Henry Miles, the state employee. Bendrix's need for subject matter for his own story – to be in closer proximity to a state official – is what mobilizes the central plot of *The End of the Affair* because it results in his deception and manipulation of Sarah.

When Bendrix meets Henry on the street in 1946, he senses his turmoil and asks, “What's troubling you, Henry?” (13). Because of the narration that precedes this question, we would think Bendrix is subtly prying into his private, subjective life again. He follows his question, however, with the following statement to readers: “I had long abandoned that novel about the senior civil servant: I wasn't looking for copy any longer” (13). His remark might reassure us of his current motivation to help Sarah (and by association, Henry), but also reminds us of the stain on his character in its reference to a time when his motive was anything but genuine. Whatever this exchange may mean in the present of 1946, it cannot be wholly uncoupled from its connection to a more pernicious, disingenuous past. Whether or not Henry knows Bendrix's secret (which he largely does), their present bond is grafted with the secret of a friendship shot through with sedition.

This sedition, moreover, has as much to do with the individual as it does with the state. Bendrix's contortions – the lengths he goes in order to know his subject – bring us back, time and gain, to the question of what it mean to be a figure for the state. Henry interests Bendrix only insofar as he stands in for something: for a particular kind of job, and for what that job represents. Rarely is Henry described without reference to his work. He was “an important assistant secretary in the Ministry of Pensions – later it was

to be the Ministry of Home Security” (10). His professional status isn't incidental for the text, which returns to it repeatedly to explain his emotional angst and the lack of intimacy between husband and wife. The novel does not so much circle back to Henry himself, as it does to what he signifies professionally and politically. Sarah's trysts with Bendrix can only take place because Henry is preoccupied with his work at the state office. And Bendrix goes to great lengths to specify the precise nature of Henry's absence: initially, he is at work on widow's pensions. While meeting in a hotel Sarah quips her husband, “some wretched Liberal is asking a question next week in the House about widows”, to which Bendrix replies during his first-person narration, “So you might say that the Liberal [...] made our bed for us that night” (43). Later, they meet at his home while he is away “work[ing] on the widows' pensions or – for he was soon shifted from that job – on the distribution of gas-masks and the design of approved cardboard cases” (48). Even during Sarah's narration, she is able to locate the beginning of her affair with Bendrix in relation to Henry's work with the state: “Henry of course has nothing to do with pensions any longer, but he keeps an interest in the subject and likes to recall those days. Wasn't it widows' pensions he was working on when Maurice and I had dinner for the first time and everything started? (98). And later in the novel, when Sarah declares to herself, “I wanted Maurice beside me. I wanted to begin again,” it's during the celebration of V.E. Day as she stands by Henry, “trying to be interested” while he thinks aloud to her, “I'm wondering where I shall be drafted from the Ministry of Home Security” (105).

It is not enough to claim that the repeated details of Henry work on widows' pensions amounts to Greene's realism, his effort to lend his characters texture and local color. For the inclusion of this detail, so very specific and bureaucratic, underscores the

prevalence of widowhood in the wake of the First World War. If the widow's reality gives subtle shape to Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, it casts its shadow here, too, in the form of the civil servant who makes that reality his business. As such, this bureaucratic signpost acts as a reminder of the relationship between the state and trauma, injecting it into the spaces of Greene's novel. The deaths of the previous war thus make themselves felt in the context of the current war, foreshadowing Henry's eventual widowhood (and Bendrix's status as a bereaved lover). By drawing attention to this historical and political role filled by Henry Miles, I do not mean to suggest that Bendrix's interrogation of the Mileses is therefore an interrogation of the state, or that *The End of the Affair* is a subsequent indictment of the British state during World War II. One would even be hard-pressed to locate a specific politics within the text. What I do want to suggest, though, is that the constant association of Henry with the Ministries of Information and Security gives Bendrix's cross-examination of Sarah a much more suspicious underside. The fact that he pries for information about someone who works for the state lends his actions a political quality. We do not know why exactly Bendrix chooses to write his own novel with a civil servant at its center. All we can glean is that he is less than enamored with the life of a civil servant, whom he sees as banal and vapid – but charged, paradoxically, with important matters of the state – and that he will connive and manipulate others in order to collect information to further his own professional aims. Bendrix's target is still nonetheless the state, which ultimately begs the question of how much the specter of the nation haunts Greene's novel.

If Hannah Arendt suggested that “the insecurity of the private domain” grew out of a sharp divide between one's (government) work and one's private life, Greene's novel

offers a very different portrait of this insecurity. In his account, the private and public lives of the modern bourgeois subject have merged to the point of indistinguishability. If the private domain has become vulnerable – if its sanctity and security can now be punctured – it is because the professional and the intimate no longer exist in discrete realms.⁵⁷ Recently, Lisa Fluet has examined Greene through the lens of the “New Modernist Studies” and argued that his fiction “designates narrative reflections on social services and the welfare state” (270). Although her focal points are Greene’s *Brighton Rock* (1938) and *A Gun for Sale* (1936), Fluet offers a useful parallel to my argument with *The End of the Affair* for several reasons. First, the protagonists of these novels embody “nationalized and classed characteristics” indicative of a certain type of English male (271). The ideologies of the nation, in other words, ultimately shape these characters whether or not they actively acknowledge themselves as part of it. Second, Fluet draws attention to the connection between these characters’ professions and the operations of the state. She categorizes these novels as “pulp modernism” because of their representations of hit-men and contract-killers. This turn to “pulp” and the “neo-noir” within Greene’s work is a “symptom of the welfare state” (270). For Fluet, These professionally oriented characters act in ways that compensate for the failures of the state to adequately provide for its citizens. An unfortunate side effect of their profession, then, is that these characters “don’t possess the right kind of affect; they don’t ‘feel’ correctly in situations involving death” (294). The public operations of the state, in other words, affect the security of one’s private domain because his professional life intrudes upon the

⁵⁷ Greene biographer Sherry makes provides a compelling parallel with Greene’s life as a spy. Regarding the training Greene received at the hands of MI-6, Sherry notes, “the intelligence officer needs to gain some influence over the agent by finding out something private about him that would disturb him if it got into the hands of the police or his party. It may prove useful later if he tries, or threatens, to go over to the other side” (87).

very ways he in which he apprehends basic affective experience.

The End of the Affair makes the insecurity of the private world apparent through Parkis, the novel's private investigator and spy-for-hire. Parkis, like Arendt's bourgeois, is both the dedicated family man *and* merciless professional. However, the fact that he performs these roles in the same space ultimately subverts Arendt's dichotomy and shows us the connections between one's intimate and public lives. He ultimately gives us different sense of what Arendt's model explores, as well as a different understanding of Greene's vulnerable bureaucrat. One could go as far as to say, in fact, that Parkis is the very reason that *The End of the Affair* is a novel about the "insecurity of the private domain." As he lives out in his own private life while hunting and exposing Sarah's secrets, Parkis is the character that allows us to view how an affair falls under the domain of security. Not only does he police Sarah's (possible) affairs in order to salvage Bendrix's own, but Parkis also merges his personal, private, and domestic life with the bureaucratic work of spying. Intimate space is both monitored *and* inhabited by Parkis. As a result, he seems taken from a different genre entirely, as if he belongs in one of Greene's "entertainments" rather than his "serious" novels. In a comic turn, the spy that was made the focal point of a novel like *The Ministry of Fear* is instead demoted to the category of private investigator. In *The End of the Affair*, Greene gives us a man who takes his profession very seriously, recording detailed notes about Sarah's whereabouts and his own daily expenses. But the novel also emphasizes Parkis's role as a dutiful father, constantly worried about his son, who accompanies him on his daily excursions. The fact that Greene allows for a window into this man's private life as a father creates a slippage with his character: it sullies the ability for characters (and readers) to see him as

a strict professional. In other words, he seems to be more father than investigator throughout the text, despite how hard he works to sustain the latter. The spy, then, has transformed into the family man.

Parkis blurs the professional and private on two levels. First, his job is to monitor the private lives of his targets. Secondly, he incorporates his own family life into his professional endeavors. I suggest that through Parkis, then, these two categories become indistinct. His basic plot function is to follow Sarah and report her actions to Bendrix – those actions that she performs when she believes no one watches (let alone someone recording her daily routines and expenses). Bendrix hires Parkis through a “watching” service, which is in itself indicative of the dual role played by the bourgeois individual, demonstrating how the professionally-employed “peeping tom” is put into place by the amorous (yet unhealthily-obsessed) lover. When he first hires Parkis through Savage’s Detective Agency, Bendrix does not want to be pitied and is concerned he will be viewed by Parkis’s employer as a cuckolded lover. He describes, “I felt embarrassed and bitter: I had not come here for sympathy, but to pay, if I could afford it, for some practical assistance” (20). Yet, an odd question arises during his interview before hiring Parkis. When Parkis’s boss, the aptly-named Mr. Savage, inquires about the “intimate” nature of Bendrix and Sarah’s relationship, “Perhaps you and the lady are – intimate?” Bendrix, sticking to the facts, replies, “No. I’ve only seen her once since 1944.” Savage, needing more than the bald facts of the case, presses him further: “I’m afraid I don’t quite understand. This is a watching case, you said” (21).

What becomes apparent in this exchange is that the clinical, no-questions-asked service that Bendrix seeks is not available to him; there is no such thing as invading

another's privacy unilaterally. As he compromises Sarah's privacy, he will in turn be compromised. Savage, in other words, is better at his job than Bendrix had hoped: intimacy for him comes with the territory of surveillance; there is no separating the two. His brief question ultimately sets the stage for Parkis, as it demonstrates the merging of the professional with the private and is treated as a common and expected association. It serves an important contrast to Bendrix's views, which express a desire to keep surveillance removed from his own domestic space, or more specifically, those who represent it. When referencing the encounter with Parkis in his home, Bendrix couches his description in terms of invasion and decay – a slow violence that will creep over his personal life. Savage asks him if he can send Parkis to Bendrix's home and he immediately regrets saying yes: “it felt as though I were admitting some infection to my own room [...] I could have told him that his man's presence would be like dust over the furniture and stain my books like soot” (22-23).

Bendrix's remarks to Parkis's employer are important because they establish a separation of intimacy and surveillance that the novel (through Parkis) actively works against. Arendt's framework allows us to see how not just the professional and the private are merged, but also how intimacy becomes a method of security. For Arendt, private concerns pave the way for citizens to willfully ignore a terrible public and political reality. For Greene, the private is precisely the terrible reality – in a time of war, love offers no more shelter than a home or a city street. Love no longer falls into a tidy narrative – Sarah and Bendrix demonstrate this, as well as the relationships targeted by Britain's propaganda campaign. Even though Arendt is concerned with individuals in the service of the state, at stake in Greene's novel is something different yet related: a world

that is no longer private because of the extensive need for security which dictates citizens' everyday existence.

Parkis, who represents "everyday insecurity" both in his occupation as private investigator (a homely version of Greene's international spy) and his preoccupation with his son, thus enters the novel as a culmination of its ideas and as a curious foil to the realms that Bendrix is so determined to keep apart. Nearly every appearance of and reference to Parkis in the novel while he "works" also involves his son. When Bendrix first sees him, he does not realize it is Parkis who sits across from him and Sarah at a restaurant monitoring their behavior. His existence seems insignificant, as Bendrix casually mentions "I noticed we had attracted the attention of a little man who sat on a sofa not far off [...] He had a long moustache and fawn-like eyes and he looked hurriedly away [...] He had a small boy sitting with him" (30-31). When they formally meet for the first time shortly after this encounter, Parkis introduces Bendrix to how his son is part of his professional enterprise. This scene portrays a strange transaction between the two men as Parkis presents a receipt of the daily expenses (beverages, newspapers, transportation, etc.) incurred while spying on Sarah. On one level, this list causes Parkis to look somewhat pathetic and frivolous, reducing the work of spying to a matter of bookkeeping. In other words, the novel severely trivializes the work of the spy, rendered here as cups of coffee and tube tickets instead of infiltrating enemy nations and international globetrotting. This list is important on another level because it introduces us to how Parkis's son plays a role in his professional life, essentially acting as an apprentice to his father. Bendrix notes the list was "written in a very neat script as though by a schoolboy" (37). Parkis admits that it is his son's handwriting because he is "training him

in the business [...] a youngster can be useful and costs nothing except a comic now and then. And nobody notices him. Boys are born lingerers” (37). He also allows Bendrix to bring his son with him to visit and spy upon Richard Smythe (the man whom Sarah has been seeing mysteriously) to pose as Bendrix's own child. During his stop at the Smythe household, Bendrix acts the part of arbitrary London citizen stopping through for help with his “son” who suddenly feels ill from eating too many strawberry ices. Parkis's son allows Bendrix to erect the façade of a family man in order to get closer to his unsuspecting target.

Even though Parkis uses his son to advance his position as a spy, he also attempts to play the role of the dutiful and protective father. This over-protectiveness, of course, is contradictory: his son constantly interacts with liars, manipulators, and adulterers while on the job, and he participates in the act of spying on another to expose them for a price. This paradox, though, is precisely the point of Arendt's “insecurity of the private domain” and the object lesson of Parkis: the impossibility of living one’s private life outside the public sphere, to be a father with a son who stays at home, or goes to school, or does not know (or care) how his father earns a living. From Parkis worrying his son will learn who Bendrix is by reading about his novels in school, to his concern for his diet while with Bendrix, to him taking time off from work because his son falls ill, it is clear that Parkis is concerned for the well-being of his son just as much as he is about discovering Sarah Miles's secret. For even as he blurs the boundaries by bringing his son to work, Parkis recognizes the need to set limits – and the limit, as it happens, is sex: “If it came to breaking into a bedroom,” he asserts, “I’d leave him behind” (37). And even though his list of daily expenses mentioned is composed by his son, Parkis makes sure that he

compiles the actual report detailing Sarah's actions, even interrupting his son's script to complete it himself: "You'll notice, sir, it's in a different hand. I never let my boy write the reports in case there's anything of an intimate character" (38).

It is no coincidence that "intimate matters" are what cause Parkis to step in and prevent his son from further working on Bendrix's case. Intimacy, yet again, constitutes a threat that must be restricted or regulated. This moment emphasizes a recurring merger within the novel: it connects Parkis to an attack on the intimacy valued by Bendrix. Parkis's work with exposing the inner life of Sarah (and subsequently her affair with Bendrix) leaves a permanent stain upon how Bendrix can view the mere existence of intimacy. While considering Parkis's rambling and inefficient reports, Bendrix thinks, "It was as if in my attempt to trap Sarah [...] I had let a clown come tumbling into our intimacy. Intimacy. Even that word smacks of Parkis's reports" (52). Intimacy, in other words, is altered for Bendrix by ceasing to be about romance, emotional exchanges, and sex, instead becoming associated with the work of a spy – close and covert examination, gathering intel, and compiling reports in order to decipher your target's intentions.⁵⁸ Even the kind of emotional closure one gains through experiencing death is tainted by the presence of Parkis. After Sarah dies, Bendrix still harbors feelings of resentment towards her, feelings so strong that "it was as if she were alive still, in the company of a lover she had preferred to me" (137). Because of this unwarranted "jealousy," he remarks that he could use Parkis as a weapon to continue leading an attack upon her intimate life: "How I wished I could send Parkis after her to interrupt their eternity" (137).

⁵⁸ "Intimacy" also seems to be the word Parkis uses to designate those places that are unacceptable – a stand-in for those moments when he asks his son to avert his eyes. Intimacy, then, is also a place where the novel suggests it's not always wise of acceptable to go.

Coda: Misreading Sarah

The End of the Affair's questions about religious faith has gone absent – perhaps glaringly – from this chapter's analysis. Michael Gorra's now canonical introduction to the centennial edition of the novel flags faith as its central concern and declares it to be “the religious novel of a fundamentally secular age,” as it explores the boundaries between faith and sex, adultery and social responsibility, and the consequences of individual betrayal (122). In reading the novel as a narrative about privacy's demise and secrecy's ascent, I have deliberately set aside the matter of faith, which is the more common subject in the criticisms of *The End of the Affair*.

I return us, then, to a component of the plot I mentioned previously: the affair central to all of the novel's happenings comes to its “end” because of Sarah's vow to God. This vow, though, is one made in secret, and ultimately kept secret until its revelation when Bendrix reads Sarah's diary. As I have discussed throughout this chapter, *The End of the Affair* is very conscious of the difficulties of writing a story in a time of war. In fact, narrating this kind of story proves so difficult that Bendrix himself fundamentally *misreads* Sarah and, therefore, the plot he aims to construct. Sarah did not cheat on Bendrix (and by association Henry) as he suspected. She had not found another lover; rather, she had found God. In the end, what we have is *not* a romance novel about jilted lovers, re-directed passions, and sexual trysts with mysterious unknown men. The text instead transforms into a novel about faith. One may suspect that this reading runs counter to my argument about the state and the novel's re-imagining of intimacy in wartime culture. I assert, though, that this contrast actually marks a shift in how we can

understand secrecy. Bendrix's misreading – which is, in the end, the novel's oversight – is *because of* secrecy.

My analysis suggests that faith cannot be taken on its own – it needs to be seen through the lens of secrecy. It is something so concealed that, even when it is in plain sight as a sentence on the page of a diary, it is illegible. The novel's secret is that, in the end, it is about faith and the ways in which that faith is less a subject for the private citizen than it is a secret to be locked away, carried to one's grave, and revealed only through the strange contortions of domestic intrigue. *The End of the Affair*, then, marks the rise of a new kind of secrecy: one scarred by international crisis and mired in personal tragedy, laced with government bureaucracy and bound by the terms of narrative form.

Chapter Four: Ian McEwan and the Undercover Work of Modernism

In a recent interview with *The Independent*, novelist Ian McEwan claims, “All novels are spy novels [...] The end of secrecy would be the end of the novel – especially the English novel. The English novel requires social secrecy, personal secrecy.”⁵⁹ McEwan made these statements in the context of his most recent work *Sweet Tooth* (2012), a novel about a young woman hired by Britain's MI-5 division to spy on an author who may or may not have leftist tendencies during the tense years of the Cold War. This final chapter will take McEwan's assertion as a starting point in order to ask why it is that the *English* novel, specifically, requires not only secrecy, but more importantly the “social” – the political and cultural – form emphasized by McEwan. Furthermore, I want to explore his suggestion that all novels revolve around some form of surveillance, looking specifically to *Sweet Tooth* in order to elucidate this claim. *Sweet Tooth*, I will soon discuss, is a novel curiously situated within the problematic relationship between secrecy and national security. Given its plot – the defense of England during the Cold War against leftist intellectualism that rivals the pro-capitalist aims of the state – the novel itself is overtly concerned with national security, particularly how literature and the arts maintain it.

The “official secrecy” of England, though, occupies a privileged but ultimately occluded position throughout the text – the form of state-mandated secrecy that ultimately defines the public life of individuals in the Twentieth Century. I want to first show how *Sweet Tooth* bookends itself with the Official Secrets Act. I submit that these references couch the novel in different terms, especially given McEwan's understanding

⁵⁹ See Boyd Tonkin's “Ian McEwan: Why I'm Revisiting the Seventies,” published in *The Independent* August 25, 2012, for further discussion.

of the social implications of the English novel. Early in the novel, our heroine Serena Frome goes for a job interview at the arbiter of English secrecy, Britain's MI-5. She believes she will be considered for a secretarial position, one that simply pushes papers and documents meetings, yet still has to maintain a high degree of confidentiality given its subject matter. She knows that she will come to have not just a professional life predicated upon secrecy, but that her personal life, too, will be infected by secrecy's reach. Serena narrates, "If I was accepted, I would be working over in Curzon Street. I would be obliged to sign the Official Secrets Act and be bound by its strict provisions. Of course, I kept saying. Marvelous. Thank you" (35).⁶⁰ By invoking the Official Secrets Act, the novel calls to mind the political imagination it seeks to legislate, and the perceived international threat to which it responds. Serena's thinly veiled sarcasm ("marvelous, thank you"), the cavalier, ironic manner with which she masks the gravity of her new position, only amplifies its existence as a complicated political backdrop.

Despite the numerous lies, deceptions, and breaches of confidence throughout the novel, the Official Secrets Act continues to go without mention throughout the entire novel, only to be invoked a second and final time on its last page. Because Serena has been particularly deceitful to Haley, he writes a letter to her exposing her duplicity. This character understands that the OSA prohibits her from discussing the basic everydayness of her life while employed by MI-5, and that her speaking openly could pose trouble for her colleagues: "We wouldn't want you or Shirley or even Mr. Greatorex to languish behind bars at Her Majesty's leisure, so we'll have to wait until well into the twenty-first century to be clear of the Official Secrets Act. A few decades is time enough for you to

⁶⁰ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, New York: Anchor, 2012. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

correct my presumptions on your solitude, to tell me about the rest of your secret work and what really happened [...]” (300-1). Here, the OSA does not just end McEwan's novel, it also concludes with its function as a disciplinary mechanism – that its violation can result in incarceration, and that it ultimately prevents the revelation of the truth until decades later.

In grounding its depiction of secrecy in the OSA, *Sweet Tooth* grounds its treatment of secrecy in historically-specific terms. This chapter will examine this triangular structure between secrecy, history, and literature. If “all novels are spy novels,” and “the English novel requires secrecy,” then I argue that this three-way intersection also tells the story of the relationship between fiction, individuals and the state. *Sweet Tooth* contends that the very reading practices of the English public always already serve state interests. McEwan's novel is the endpoint of my project's argument because it suggests that political secrecy and national security govern literary production.

So far, my dissertation has relied largely upon this affiliation between historical circumstance and literature. My first chapter explored Conrad's *The Secret Agent* in the wake of rampant cultural xenophobia in pre-World War I London. My second chapter examined how Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* exposes the plight of war widows in post-World War I England in order to redefine what it means for a culture to be compassionate in times of national injury. The previous chapter explored Greene's *The End of the Affair* in relation to World War II propaganda campaigns and the public paranoia over state-sanctioned information. Ian McEwan, the focus of this final chapter, is no stranger to the symbiosis between history and fiction. I will discuss how *Sweet Tooth* inhabits a particular cultural moment in England's history (the late 1960s / early 70s), but, more

importantly, how it explores the relationship between ideology and the artistic imagination. The novel is fundamentally about the production of literature as an extension (and a puppet) of politics. I place *Sweet Tooth* in relation to these novels from earlier in the century in order to argue that McEwan's novel makes a claim *about* the modernist novel itself. *Sweet Tooth* is a strange hybrid-form of a novel that merges both realism and modernism, ultimately re-writing the stark divide that seems to exist between them. Through entrenching itself within the discourse of twentieth-century British secrecy, the novel makes history central to the production of literature and the ways in which aesthetics get politicized. *Sweet Tooth* re-writes the relationship between aesthetics and politics because it shows us how the modernist novel is political in a way that is covert. Modernism, in other words, has a way of keeping its politics a secret. McEwan's novel ultimately provides a strategy for reading through modernism's elaborate aesthetic ruminations, extraneous plot elements, and vertiginous psychologizing of characters and returns us to the inevitable politics of fiction.

Why the State Likes Historical Fiction

Over the years, McEwan's body of work has often aligned itself with cultural events or particular political ideologies. *The Cement Garden* (1978) was an affront to early Thatcherism and its problematic concern for children living in the welfare state. *The Innocent* (1990), set in 1950s Berlin, depicts Communist surveillance procedures during the Cold War. *Black Dogs* (1992) further investigates the place of Germany in the political imagination of the twentieth century following the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as how the ghost of Nazism still haunts contemporary Europe. McEwan's more recent fiction continues this trend: *Saturday* (2005) covers a day of protest in London

against the United States' war in Iraq; *Solar* (2010) concerns the life of a scientist who travels to Antarctica to study the effects of global warming. From my description of these novels, as well as their publication dates in relation to their subject matter, it is clear that McEwan's fiction not only inhabits a cultural moment, but also a conventional liberal mindset towards its topic. McEwan does not simply write historical fiction: he uses the genre to critique and refashion normative political opinions of the left-leaning liberal.

Sweet Tooth is no exception to his trend of writing fiction with an historical center. However, the novel takes a backward glance to the 1970s and tells the story of a tumultuous love affair set against the threat of IRA terrorist acts, impending economic crisis, and the tensions between Russia and England, which reached their boiling point during the Cold War. Serena Frome, the novel's narrator, is an undergraduate at Cambridge University in 1969 studying math, but with a voracious appetite for literature. She devours novels, constantly relating their plots and characters to herself and others in her life. She begins an affair with Tony Canning, a history professor secretly working for Britain's MI-5, who takes an interest in Serena's passion for literature. He begins grooming her for a simple desk-job in MI-5 upon her graduation, encouraging her interest in English history and in England's current position in global politics. Serena gradually works her way up in MI-5, and is recruited to work on operation Sweet Tooth. Sweet Tooth is a program that secretly funds English fiction writers who seem sympathetic to right-wing beliefs, based upon either their public persona or the politics suggested in their work. Writers are then able to produce without distraction so that their works will be delivered without delay to the English public, which will then absorb the ideologies the state wants to perpetuate (George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is frequently cited by McEwan's

novel as the most successful Sweet Tooth project). Serena's target is the young, upstart fiction-writer Tom Haley, to whom she poses as the benefactor of a nationally funded arts foundation. They also begin a romantic relationship soon after meeting, and her superiors order her to influence his writing according to the state's desires. While he produces drafts of his novel, she reports her findings back to her superiors at MI-5. Much to the state operatives' dismay, Haley publishes a bleak post-apocalyptic novella completely devoid of the pro-capitalist, pro-West, and pro-English ideals they had expected it to contain. Haley wins a major literary prize (beating out Iris Murdoch and Martin Amis), and immediately gains celebrity status in England. The tabloid press, though, soon discovers operation Sweet Tooth and reveals that MI-5 secretly funded Haley and that his benefactor girlfriend is actually an operative for the state. Haley is professionally shamed and breaks off his relationship with Serena in the wake of the scandal. In a sudden twist, he sends her a letter revealing that he knew of her true identity all along, wondering how and why she could wrong him in such a way. McEwan's novel then concludes with the revelation that *Sweet Tooth* is actually composed by Haley, who writes from Serena's point of view about her formative years in order to better understand her actions and rationales for her present betrayal.

Similar to *The End of the Affair*, secrets operate on two levels here. The first is the domestic: a woman begins an affair with a man, while harboring a secret of great magnitude. The majority of the conflict in *Sweet Tooth* stems from Serena's inner turmoil over whether or not to tell Haley the truth. Much of the suspense, in fact, comes during intimate scenes between them wherein she toys with the possibility of revealing herself. The second level is the fact that Serena's domestically oriented secret has its origin in the

state. Whereas *The End of the Affair* hinted at the state through a character like Henry, as well as the wartime cultural discourse that permeated it, *Sweet Tooth* is not the least bit subtle about the state's intrusion upon the intimate lives of citizens: it openly links intimacy and personal relationships with government operations. However, I want to be careful not to just characterize Serena as the type of "femme fatale" conjured by the World War II-era propaganda posters mentioned in the previous chapter. For Serena does not just coax information out of Haley and pass it along to other government agents; she is actively engaged in the production of literature and in the public's collective unconscious.

As *Sweet Tooth* views it, something as personal as literary taste, reading practices, or the response one has to a novel has public consequence. McEwan's novel provides an appropriate endpoint for this dissertation because it is precisely about how this shift affects individuals and what happens when the state shunts them into the domain of "official secrecy." *Sweet Tooth* demonstrates this not just through not just how they interact and forge relationships, but also at the very level of narrative production. The revelation that Haley is the author of the text we have been reading speaks to how the discourse of secrecy governs literature: it is central to its plot and necessary for its suspense, but it is also crucial to its form as a duplicitous text, one that practically demands a re-reading to spot those clues of its secret authorship.

Even though the "Sweet Tooth" project is entirely fictional, it suggests the idea that even literature, generally speaking, exists in a tightly bound relationship with the state, as any instance of government censorship (or, more pointedly, government-sanctioned book burnings) surely makes clear. The novel implies that the state goes so far as to have its

hands in the kind of stories we recommend our friends pick up at the bookstore and read quickly for pleasure. Literature is always secretly ideological, even in its most popular forms, and doing work that the state wants it to do by hailing readers. The vexed relationship between the state and the literature is not something entirely new for *Sweet Tooth* to interrogate. One could trace its antagonism as far back as Plato, when he casts poets out of his republic because of the danger they pose to civil order. A more modern understanding of the state, though, has led to it having a much more domineering presence in the realm of the arts. The state's role in aesthetic production has been a current topic amongst literary scholars extrapolating the representational parallels between political and literary language. In a recent issue of *Contemporary Literature*, Matthew Hart and Jim Hansen explore the ramifications of thinking about writers as citizens who reflect upon the conditions of their political subjectivity. Drawing from politically-vocal authors like Harold Pinter and George Orwell, they suggest that while both art and politics search for some form of attainable "truth," they ultimately cannot engage the same line of questioning because literature relies upon stylizations and "linguistic and aesthetic ambiguity" (492).⁶¹ Politics, on the other hand, is strictly about power and how one wields it as an instrument of control (492). The two problematically collide, however, in the figure of the writer. Because language is always already ideological, the question becomes whether politics and literature can ever be wholly separate – they share the same end, yet work towards it by completely oppositional means.

⁶¹ See Matthew Hart & Jim Hansen's "Introduction: Contemporary Literature and the State," in *Contemporary Literature*, 49.4, for further discussion.

Hart and Hansen, though, want to rethink this antagonistic stance: to question the pre-supposed dichotomy between the state and the writer. The state is far more complex than how authors conventionally portray it as the villainous “big bad” clamping down upon any resistance to its totality. The typical way of considering the state is that it “exists as a category of analysis in a largely negative sense. The state is overpowering, it demands conformity and its power marks the failure of liberal principles of autonomy and free association” (492). This strand of thought runs from Hobbes’ concept of “the Leviathan” – an all-consuming totalizing and synthetic representation of mankind that comes to stand in for man – through Hegel’s understanding of the state as the originary site for forming political relations, and to Nietzsche’s view of the state as “the coldest of cold monsters” (qtd. in Hart, 493). The problem within these views, it seems, lies in how the state claims to understand its masses and speak for its people. Ultimately, a fundamental gap in representation exists.

Hart and Hansen are also quick to point out that Foucault’s theories of the state can only take us so far. Through a Foucauldian view, the state is comprised of systems of surveillance and it can only exist through a network of other power relations organizing sexuality, the body, the family, technology, and so forth. As a result, the state’s politics still reach the discourse of the linguistic arts. Gramsci’s model of the relationship between individuals and the state, instead, offers a more productive contrast. Since this representational conundrum shapes individuals into versions of the state, Gramsci counters by focusing upon the forms of representation that “produce assent in those governed by the state” (Hart 498). Instead of exploring mere resistance to the state, Gramsci asks “how hegemony is produced” in the first place and wants to theorize a

more labor-oriented understanding of the people, one grounded in the more concrete experience of citizens rather than ambiguous relations between art and politics. For Gramsci, the material conditions produced by the state produce a critical lens through which we can “imagine alternative arrangements of power” (499). This model of the state ultimately proves a more useful tool for literary analysis because it creates a critical space that becomes “a way of thinking about the spaces inhabited by those who are governed” – leading us, in other words, to the space of literature (499). The open-endedness of the literary helps to articulate notions of culture that are potentially (and dynamically) problematic. Literature is a way of mediating the conflicting forces found within state power: it offers the assent, the dissent, the successes, and the failures of living in its shadow.

These theorizations prove useful when examining how the state in *Sweet Tooth* has its hand in the kind of fiction it wants to see circulated among its citizens. Rather than seeing the state on one end of the binary and the individual subject on another, the novel is about the process of their collusion – quite literally, they work hand-in-hand. A predictable way of reading the plot would be that the state plays the role of the villain because, in the end, it is responsible for the destruction of the romance between Serena and Haley. But instead of merely demonizing the state in accordance with this reading, I suggest a more productive understanding of the novel occurs when we take on how literature mediates citizens being interpellated by discourses of the state – how both writers *and* readers in the novel navigate a critical space towards the political bodies that govern them. In the novel the state has a forthright investment in literary production – specifically, the kind of literature that espouses the nationalist tendencies it wants

propagated throughout the English population. In other words, the state of *Sweet Tooth* has an affinity towards how fiction represents and constructs its own history. The state likes historical fiction because the genre, in itself, organizes readers into having a more engaged relationship to politics. *Sweet Tooth*, then, points out the way in which we read for politics, even when it's not there, and how the stylizations of literature can potentially obfuscate that reading. Even more so, the novel is about the way in which the state *reads for itself*.

The MI-5 of McEwan's novel believes that the politics publicly displayed by a writer will manifest in his fiction; therefore, they target would-be novelists who *seem* as if they could voice opinions that serve the political right, in other words, the more conservative ideals of Great Britain. Peter Nutting, one of Serena's superiors at MI-5, describes the aim of operation Sweet Tooth as "to try to lure left-of-center European intellectuals away from the Marxist perspective and make it intellectually respectable to speak up for the Free World" (85-86). I emphasize the potentiality of these writers instead of their already-demonstrated value within the literary realm: MI-5 targets them precisely because they are yet unproven. The government wants writers whose voices are unheard and un-established so that the intrusion and influence of state power goes unrecognized.

In McEwan's novel, the search for an author's politics begins with an examination of the positions they *seem* to advocate. In other words, MI-5 searches for an undercover politics, one merely hinted rather than openly declared. But instead of having a governmental agent, or another writer, or even some form of personal investigator to look into their backgrounds, they hire Serena – a compulsive *reader* of novels; someone who

enjoys inhabiting the perspectives of fictitious characters, understanding their motives, considering what she would do differently were she part of their plot, and even paralleling events in their lives with those occurring in her own. Nutting acknowledges, “You know as well as I do, it's not straightforward to deduce an author's views from his novels” (87). He remarks here that Serena is already versed (“you know as well as I do”) in the act of deciphering politics in fiction, of reading against the grain and deeper into a text in order to understand its take on British culture – that decoding how literature interpellates readers, so to speak, is already a common tactic of hers. The Sweet Tooth operation ultimately *needs* a reader like Serena to decipher the content of Haley's stories, someone to understand how they operate and to predict how his work will unfold, the kind of political beliefs it will ultimately advocate.

Nutting continues, “We're looking out for the sort who might spare a moment for his hard-pressed fellows in the Eastern bloc, travels out there perhaps to lend support or sends books, signs petitions for persecuted writers, engages his mendacious Marxist colleagues here, isn't afraid to talk publicly about writers in prison in Castro's Cuba. Generally swims against the orthodox flow” (87). Not a single act on this list is overtly political – there is no unabashed protest or explicit support of the crown. These are ultimately intellectual methods of expressing politics via art or collegial engagement; they are not the actions of those who would form an interest group or organize a protest. Sweet Tooth's target is one who expresses politics via subtle acts of feeling. MI-5 looks for writers who engage pro-capitalist, anti-Marxist beliefs through their *non-fiction* writing in hopes that their soon-to-be-written *fiction* will demonstrate the same. They want a body of literature – or at the very least, a best-selling novel – that will espouse an

anti-leftist critique. Nutting describes to Serena why they chose Haley for their next project, and what she should read in order to foresee the direction his fiction might take:

I should direct your attention toward an article he wrote for the *Listener*, deploring the way newspapers romanticize villains. It's mostly about the Great Train Robbery – he objects to the word “great” [...] You'll see he's a member of the Readers and Writers Educational Trust, an organization that supports dissidents in Eastern Europe. He wrote a piece for the Trust's journal last year. You might look at the longish article he wrote for *History Today* about the East German uprising of 'fifty-three. There's a goodish piece about the Berlin Wall in *Encounter*. (90)

Here, we have a list of actions MI-5 deems appropriate for Sweet Tooth, meaning appropriately right-of-center or just slightly leftist: denouncing how the media celebrates corrupt individuals for illegal actions; membership in a group that advocates for those who protest the communist politics of the Eastern Bloc; and a closer examination of a revolution that occurred in Eastern Germany. The problem one may notice with this list, though, is that MI-5 neglects to see how these could be anything other than opinions in sync with the conservative right. We do not know the specifics of Haley's articles here, why it is exactly that he supports dissidence in Eastern Europe, or why he scolds the media for elevating train robbers. Just because Haley writes against certain leftist practices does not necessarily mean that he himself is a fully developed Tory wholly against the left as well. The Sweet Tooth operatives, it seems, read for content rather than form, or for signposts rather than context. As readers later discover with Haley's published novel (which I will engage shortly), as well as his description of his own politics when he discovers Serena's identity, MI-5 ultimately exhibits a *failure* of reading Haley. Their targeting and profiling procedures are acts of willful misreading – a twisted instance of “reading for the plot” that proves utterly false by the novel's conclusion: their

reading, ultimately, constitutes a misrecognition—or a fictionalization—of the ideology they wish to see in print.⁶²

Haley, Over-Specification, and the Politics of the Apocalypse

One of the disorienting features of reading *Sweet Tooth* is its inclusion of Haley's work within the text. Haley's fiction actually interrupts the trajectory of McEwan's novel. While we read the story of Serena researching Haley and her progressive investment in him and his fiction, the narrative of *Sweet Tooth* suddenly detours in order to accommodate space for this new writer. Chapters about Serena conclude, only to resume on the ensuing page with references to new settings, new characters, and new plots and conflicts. Or, in the midst of chapters we are presented with a new section that does not follow logically from what precedes it: we are suddenly introduced to a name we do not recognize, in a place different from where the action just concluded a mere few lines ago. These sections compete for space with expository chapters about Serena; they spend narrative time summarizing a story that initially bears no direct relevance to the novel's main plot. In other words, we do not encounter a quick overview of what Serena reads. The descriptions are lengthy, overly detailed, one could even say tedious; in effect, they force us to read in real-time with McEwan's heroine.

The disorientation caused by these interludes, though, does not stop at their derailment of *Sweet Tooth*'s story, as it continues in the very way the novel describes and narrates Haley's stories. There is a considerable vagueness surrounding the replication of Haley's fiction within the text itself. The sections covering his works do not indicate whether we are just reading their summaries by an omniscient third-person narrator, or if

⁶² This is a reference to Peter Brooks's critical study of the same name, which I will discuss in the context of *Sweet Tooth* in the upcoming pages.

they are a brief overview provided by Serena or a combination of different narrators, or if the sections are a plot summary interspersed with what seem to be actual quotes from the story. McEwan's text gives superficial treatment to the plots and characters of Haley's stories: no dialogue appears and we merely read the synopses of what happens and what characters might be thinking at a given moment. For example, the following passage appears at the beginning of one of these sections, and describes one of Haley's protagonists: "He's well to the left of his party and *something of a troublemaker, an intellectual dandy, a serial adulterer and a brilliant public speaker* with good connections to powerful members of the Tube train drivers' union" (94). On the ensuing page, we have an even stranger formulation: "Prayers and hymns follow in the usual order. Everything proceeds smoothly. An ancient canon, *his gaze wrenched downward by osteoporosis*, assists efficiently in the service" (95). The use of italics here is a common occurrence when Haley's stories interrupt the narrative of *Sweet Tooth*. The confusion surrounding the italics raises the question of whether they are details emphasized by the narrator (presumably Serena), passages quoted directly from the story, or both. Understanding the form of these interludes is important because if Serena is describing their plots, then we as readers are getting Haley's work filtered through her narrative voice. In other words, if Serena narrates the descriptions of Haley's stories, then we are viewing them in a way that makes him a valid target for MI-5's project. She would attribute a politics to his fiction that might not otherwise be there. She might emphasize one character over another, or direct attention to a particular plot point while neglecting others, in order to see how his work is applicable to project Sweet Tooth's standards. She would describe the stories in such a way as to identify them as containing right-leaning

ideologies beneath their surface, or exhibiting traits that are suggestively pro-England, even in stories that seem to express nothing about the political state of Great Britain.

For instance, *Sweet Tooth* gives us five examples of Haley's work. Several are short stories – the genre through which Serena first encounters Haley and first begins to analyze his writing – and one is the novel he publishes while under the tutelage of MI-5. *Sweet Tooth* does not merely mention these stories in passing, but attends meticulously to their many twists and turns. The abundance of superfluous information, in fact, seems to exhaust the stories themselves and raises questions about the selectiveness of McEwan's narrator in these sections. Why spend so much narrative space developing Haley's fiction? Why provide unimportant details at times that seem to ultimately counteract the narrator's emphasis at other moments? Why is the tiny movement of someone's hand, or how exactly someone dresses a mannequin, or the fact that the police found blood on a window during a home robbery, deemed important by the narrator summarizing Haley's fiction?

The odd, unnecessarily generous coverage of these stories not only directs our attention away from Haley and Serena to something that seems trivial and unrelated, it also frustrates our ability to read for plot. In his groundbreaking narratological study *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Peter Brooks dissects the impulse we bring to fiction when we read for action, for the progression of relationships between characters, or even for the description of intriguing and exotic settings. Brooks terms this motive “plotting,” characterizing it as “the activity of shaping, with the dynamic aspect of narrative – that which makes a plot ‘move forward,’ and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of

design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning” (xii). For Brooks, the desire for meaning – for details to make sense – is inherent in the act of reading. These moments of digression in *Sweet Tooth*, then, stand out precisely because they make it difficult to read for plot. The sections detailing Haley’s stories and all of their superfluous information disturb the search caused by plotting. In *Sweet Tooth*, however, reading is not just narratological (as often noted by Serena, who devours romances because they help her better understand her life), but also *political*. The frustration of the act of reading is bound to the seek-and-destroy-while-gathering-intel mission that Serena does for MI-5. She reads these stories in order to discover how Haley is, in fact, a radical. Plot becomes something covert and threatening instead of something for readerly pleasure.

Scholars and contemporary writers have often discussed this element of exhaustive detail in McEwan's work. Some see what Peggy Knapp has called his “over-specification” to be a hindrance to his fiction, while others view it as his means of critiquing the parameters of fiction itself, or developing close-reading strategies in his readers. The former of these two approaches was made notorious by Booker Prize-winning author John Banville's essay, “A Day in the Life.” Banville lambasts McEwan's 2006 novel *Saturday* for overburdening readers with superfluous (and in Banville's opinion, poorly written) information that ultimately renders inert any political and cultural message contained within the novel. Similarly, literary scholar Elaine Hadley finds that the overuse of details in *Saturday* contributes to a problematic form of liberalism that tries to absorb and comprehend everything that the rapidly changing post-9/11 world offers to the narrator, Henry Perowne. Other scholars such as Knapp, Frances

Ferguson, and Thom Dancer, on the other hand, claim that *Saturday* actually challenges the observational methods that we regularly utilize: the novel's overabundance of detail marks the failure of a narrator-protagonist to comprehend and adequately participate in them. Because of such failure, these critics contend McEwan uses *Saturday* to make a claim about the long-held belief that literature can and should change us, its readers, into more ethically- and culturally-conscious individuals. In *Saturday*, after all, Perowne's daughter recites Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" as a way of preventing a rape (the poem calls up childhood memories within her attacker that literally stops him in his tracks). Ferguson and Dancer claim that McEwan is openly critiquing this conventional, and ultimately clichéd, approach towards literature: the overuse of informative detail exhibits the presence of epistemological flaws in both the narrator and the narrative itself. McEwan's narrators often privilege their abilities to collect and participate in information gathering, yet they typically produce disastrous results.⁶³ Knapp pushes this idea further, suggesting that "over-specified" scenes – those paragraphs that detail, in over twenty pages, a brain surgery, a squash match, a hot-air balloon floating through the sky, or a woman summarizing a short story – "introduce a hermeneutic of suspicion" while we read them (126). She argues that the plethora of details, some of which are completely arbitrary, "makes us wait to see how the over-specified details of the early scenes will figure in the various crises to come," and that through "the art of emplotment, an intelligible shape will emerge" (131).

I argue the same in the case of how *Sweet Tooth's* Serena "over-specifies" (oftentimes unnecessarily) during her coverage of Haley's stories. These stories may

⁶³ *Atonement's* Briony Tallis is another clear example of the perils of information-gathering, ultimately resulting in a novel whose plot is precisely about the destructive material repercussions of narratives gone horrifically awry.

seem initially like cumbersome, unnecessary digressions from the primary narrative, but they ultimately serve that narrative by developing our sense of Serena as a reader. And as she reads, she falls in love with the writer (after all, McEwan *is* writing a romance). Serena's ability to identify with characters, to feel anger, repulsion, or sympathy for them, or how she feels both hurt and enthralled by the things they say and do, are all part and parcel to the minutiae she encounters in his fiction. Even the elements she might regard as a failure in Haley's work still, nonetheless, pique her personal interest and draw her in. As a result, she becomes invested in his capabilities as an author. Aside from their connection to the novels' romance plot, though, I want to suggest that these over-specifications function along similar lines to how Knapp claims they do. Rather than just introducing a hermeneutic of suspicion (as we are meant to suspect the connections between his fiction and his life, as Serena and her superiors often do), the overly-detailed stories also cause us to contemplate how exactly they are political in the ways MI-5 suspects. As we can see, the overview I provide above does not regard any overtly political context. The stories of Haley are *not* those of the British writers with familiar political orientation: Charles Dickens, George Orwell, or even my prior examples of Joseph Conrad's focus on foreign agents and Virginia Woolf's on marginalized soldiers. For the most part, Haley's work limits itself to the intimate and domestic: to siblings, husbands, and wives, in all their ordinary, even mundane, fantasies.

Rarely does Haley's fiction broadcast politics in the ways we – and Serena – would expect. Why, then, is this man a target for operation Sweet Tooth? The over-specification of Serena re-narrating the stories challenges us to read into their details to glean some form of political interpretation, one that MI-5 would deem appropriate. We

are ultimately invited to understand how these works can be ideological – how they can be indicative and supportive of a particular English mentality that the state would want citizens to encounter in literature. Haley’s story “Pawnography,” for example, details the life of a married couple who both feel stifled by their domestic life. Their marriage starts to decline because of financial difficulties, and they regard their family as victims of “the sixties.” The wife then dupes her husband by staging a fake burglary at their home, only to later secretly sell their “stolen” belongings to a pawn shop for desperately-needed money. The husband is sexually aroused by her duplicity and their marriage quickly goes on the upswing. The story concludes with them having ravenous sex and experiencing a strange-yet-renewed sense of intimacy. To highlight the ideological work of this story, we could look to how it subtly emphasizes “the sixties” as a vital entity within its plot: the decade’s characteristic under-employment, mass immigration, and sexual revolution gradually whittle away at the couple’s psyches, as well as the institution of marriage that they represent.

Haley’s subtle politics, though, become much more pronounced once we encounter his work *From the Somerset Levels* – the piece funded by Sweet Tooth which will catapult him into celebrity status. Haley’s novel, which we again get filtered through Serena’s excessively specific, detail-saturated description, takes place in a post-apocalyptic England with ruined landscapes, burned-out villages, and disease-ridden populations. The story concerns a father and daughter (both nameless) traveling on foot to London to find the young girl’s mother. Once in London, they both “succumb to the bubonic plague” and they “die in one another’s arms in the rank cellar of the ruined headquarters of a once-famous bank” (185). Even though the government “barely

functions” in this environment, Serena notes, “industrial civilization and all its systems and culture are fading from recall” (184-85). Haley ultimately produces a work in which nothing survives. As if taking cues from T.S. Eliot, the existence of a bleak, post-modern wasteland decimates any hope for the future of the West. England as a nation, a simple geographic location, and above all as an ideology, ceases to exist in the world of *From the Somerset Levels*.

Clearly, this kind of literature is precisely the opposite of what the state wants coming from its Sweet Tooth project. Early in the novel, before Haley is revealed as a target (and in a sly form of prolepsis), Peter Nutting at MI-5 states, “We’re not interested in the decline of the West, or down with progress or any other modish pessimism. Do you see what I mean?” (87). Nutting’s question here – “do you see what I mean?” – is intended rhetorically; however, it also implies that Serena is already familiar with the kind of literature that the state does not want its citizens to be reading. Nutting’s brief descriptive statement allows him to quickly mention what Sweet Tooth wants to avoid; his question then does the remainder of the work for him. His interrogative tone in fact declares a common knowledge shared by Serena – and indeed any well-read and politically-informed citizen of England – who would know exactly what he means by a pessimistic view towards the West. Nutting’s tone thus raises yet another question of what forms of literature the state deems appropriate because literary production is always already an act with ideological consequence. With *Sweet Tooth*, it’s as if we are given a behind-the-curtain view of how the state would react to the novels I have already explored in the previous chapters: to Conrad lending a voice to immigrants working against England from within; to Woolf’s criticism of the state’s handling of soldiers and war widows; and

to Greene's portrayal of a nation where bureaucracy erodes the possibility of intimacy. It is not so much that these novels, along with Haley's, are direct indictments of the state, as they are concerned with portraying life in the shadow of state power. With his directions to Serena, Nutting attempts to ensure that the literary life portrayed is one that makes the state appear favorable to readers and ultimately bolsters citizens' faith in the systems it provides.

Serena's reaction when she first reads *From the Somerset Levels* registers why MI-5 does not want to celebrate this kind of "literature." She describes her initial response to Haley: "I spoke of the novel's indifference to the fate of the father and little girl, of the assured depravity of its minor characters, the desolation of the crushed urban masses, the raw squalor of rural poverty, the air of general hopelessness, the cruel and joyless narrative, its absence of hope, the depressing effect on the reader" (210). In secret, the novel exists in the service of the state, but in the end, it empties the state of any content. Characters do not transform, grow, or realize their potential. The novel ultimately does not believe in the progress of the English citizen, having them literally and figuratively perish beneath a "once-famous" – meaning a recognizably English – landmark within its pages. Serena narrates and summarizes a portion of the novel:

The old days will not be back. *Everything has changed so much that I can hardly believe it was us who were there*, the woman tells him of the past they once shared. *This was where we were always heading*, one shoeless philosophical character says to the father. It's made clear elsewhere that civilization's collapse began with the injustices, conflicts and contradictions of the twentieth century. (185)

Gone is the nostalgia experienced within Greene's *Ministry of Fear*, the longing for an England before war and violence. Those feelings are seen as a distraction from the inevitable trajectory the nation takes. *From the Somerset Levels* transforms England into

something unrecognizable, a stranger to itself, one haunted by the remnants of its crumbling civilization. Industry, technology, and capitalism – all championed by Great Britain – are not simply the villains in Haley's novel; they are the conditions that have eradicated existence and created the depraved individuals that ultimately perish because these systems have failed them. England has become a failed state and comparable to the third world. As Serena describes, “*From the Somerset Levels* was the incarnation of a the ghost that was haunting every headline, a peep over the edge of the abyss, the dramatized worst case – London become Herat, Delhi, Sao Paulo” (186).

The Ethics of Twist Endings and Modernist Re-Writings

The plot-twist at *Sweet Tooth*'s end might seem overly familiar to McEwan readers, reminiscent of his popular 2001 novel, *Atonement*. In the final pages of *Atonement*, readers discover that the entire second half of the novel is a fictional fabrication. The story readers have been following about the reunion of two star-crossed lovers, Robbie and Cecelia, is actually a fabrication. *Atonement*'s protagonist, Briony Tallis, reveals that she re-wrote their story because of her guilt at having separated them years ago, after which Robbie was killed in action during World War II, and Cecilia died during a bombing of London. Her effort to re-create reality in the pages of fiction – McEwan's novel itself – becomes her own act of atonement for her past sins. *Atonement* thus ends with the revelation that there is a text-within-a-text at work: Briony has been using the act of literary production to dupe us with a tidy story of rekindled love and hope, and then explodes that story with the jolting revelation of its bleak reality.

At the center of *Atonement*, then, is an ethical project, one that engages the relationship between literature and history in order to suggest that fiction should, and can,

do historical duty. Fiction, in other words, can persuade us to think one way about history, and then have us re-examine that perspective. Right up until the very end of her story, Briony is ultimately unwilling to tell the truth of her tale and repeatedly evades the ethics of storytelling. Because the novel depicts this lack of moral responsibility through the stylistic influences of Henry James, E.M. Forster, to Virginia Woolf, critics have viewed *Atonement* as an indictment of modernism. On the one hand, Peter Childs argues that the novel establishes a clear parallel with modernism through a “modernist concern with consciousness and perspective,” as those perspectives become manipulated, multiplied, and questionable (qtd. in Robinson, 491). On the other hand, Richard Robinson reads *Atonement* as a reproach of modernist aims, specifically the idea of “unhistoricized modernism” (474). The novel addresses the historical oversights critics often charge modernism with, a charge made famous by a line of critique going back to Georg Lukács. In essays such as “The Ideology of Modernism” and “Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?,” Lukács takes issue with modernism because it does not orient itself properly towards representing social totality. He contends that realism is the basis for all literature and should aim to be critical of reality; however, he faults modernism for being an uncritical and naïve distortion of reality that is incapable of viewing the world truthfully. Critics and readers commonly view modernist works as avoiding history. Critics frequently cite *Atonement* as an attempt to rectify the disengagement from history: it has the events of World War II as its centerpiece, yet at the same time denies characters full embodiment within Briony's narrative. The ethical project, then, is how *Atonement* serves as a corrective to modernism's perceived ahistorical stance.

Like much of McEwan's fiction – not only *Atonement*, but also *Saturday* and *Enduring Love*, among others – *Sweet Tooth* engages the relation between realism and modernism. First, I suggest this dichotomy plays out at the level of character development. Serena represents a form of realism that repeatedly conflicts with the modernist tendencies of not just Haley and his writing, but her own manner of navigating the political landscape of contemporary England. Rather than present us with details about her youth or growing up in the idyllic countryside of England – “Nothing strange or terrible happened to me during my first eighteen years and that is why I'll skip them” (2) – the narrator instead develops Serena's love of literature. In fact, the novel introduces her first and foremost as someone who is not just an avid reader, but voraciously consumes novels and maps them onto her reality: “At seventeen my friends and I were timidly and delightedly rebellious, but we did our schoolwork, we memorized and disgorged the irregular verbs, the equations, the motives of fictional characters [...] I enjoyed reading novels. I went fast – I could get through two or three a week” (2). More importantly, though, Serena's specific taste in novels aligns her with certain conventions of the genre. She is a fan of the romances of Jane Austen, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* – nineteenth-century novels with a fine-tuned, at times exhaustive attention to social detail. Yet, even though these are the novels she consumes, she admits to skipping through their thick descriptions that are characteristic of both realism and their author's styles. She acknowledges, “My needs were simple. I didn't bother much with themes or felicitous phrases and skipped fine descriptions of weather, landscapes, and interiors. I wanted characters I could believe in, and I wanted to be made curious about what was to happen to them” (6). Serena, in other words, is

ultimately a selective and irresponsible realist. She desires believable, relatable, and detailed characters, but she ignores the settings, cultural forces, or other exterior surroundings that help to further characterize them. She has an investment in the fine-tuned development of individuals, but could care less about the minutiae of their environments that aid in the representation of their social reality.

That is, at first. While reading realist novels for romance, Serena was clueless to the very notion that political action occurs throughout the plots in which she is so absorbed. Her reading practices undergo a complete revival as she awakens to the political imperatives within fiction:

My decline was initiated by the fifty minutes I spent with [...] *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* [...] I picked it up straight after finishing Ian Fleming's *Octopussy*. The transition was harsh. I knew nothing of the Soviet labor camps and had never heard the word "gulag" [...] Who was speaking out for all this lost humanity? I had never troubled myself with politics before. I knew nothing [...] I was an innocent and my outrage was moral [...] I believed I was seeing through a veil, that I was breaking new ground [...]. (7-8)

This encounter causes her to read everything by Solzhenitsyn within the course of a week, then to move on to Koestler, Nabokov, Milosz, and Orwell. Serena's description in this passage, though, still demonstrates her resistance to the historical forces at work in realism, as she couches it in dubious terms: her "decline" into something other than so-called pleasure-reading; the "harsh" conversion into a different, more socially-conscious reader; or that she did not bring herself to be "troubled" or distracted by the suffering found in fiction not attributed to romantic relationships. She was accustomed to her novels being tidy and having closure, not portraying an oppressed humanity whose understanding subverts and transforms her worldview. Her recognition of and reaction to

the political underside of literature, then, is the work of realism and precisely the aim of these novelists: to interpellate readers and demystify ideologies.

Haley, on the other hand, is representative of the modernism at odds with Serena's realism. He applauds the brilliance of J.G. Ballard's apocalyptic fiction, marvels at the foreboding pre-war poetry of Edward Thomas, and admires the meta-textual tricks of John Fowles. While discussing Fowles's work with Haley, she narrates, "I said I didn't like tricks, I liked life as I knew it re-created on the page. He said it wasn't possible to recreate life on the page without tricks" (175). This passage is important because it demonstrates the two characters' alignment with differing genres of fiction and opposing schools of thought: Serena prefers mimetic representation, to see life in its most direct form; Haley prefers an anti-mimetic approach commonly associated with modernism, the broken-mirror that exposes the contradictions and impossibilities inherent in representation. In fact, we can even see that his retort to Serena is a repetition with a difference: he uses her own words but distorts them by adding his own trick. In his stories, we can see that Haley has a concern for affect and the isolation experienced by individuals in the modern world. It is much different from Serena's desire to see "what would happen" to characters as she reads, which is by and large an investment in action and a plot's momentum.

At the same time, however, this interpretation of the characters is almost too neat and tidy. There's a way in which McEwan's fiction superficially tackles its subject matter and skims the surface of the debate between modernism and postmodernism, even going so far as to invoke the terms associated with them. Like his other novels – *Solar*, *Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam*, *Saturday* – Haley demonstrates how McEwan writes his

male protagonists in the same fashion: they seem to know a good deal of encyclopedic (yet trivial) knowledge about their given area of professional expertise and use it in their processes of self-aggrandizement. *Sweet Tooth* uses Haley to grandstand about mimesis. Serena, in fact, remarks how Haley sounds like he gives a lecture at times and he often loses her attention while he speaks about literature (167). At one moment, he has her read Edward Thomas's poem "Adlestrop" and describe back to him everything she can remember; she then summarizes what happens in the poem, where the narrator walks, the details of what he sees in the landscape surrounding him, and what he remembers while wandering. Haley's response is "Now try to remember the feelings [...] The memory of a name and nothing else, the stillness, the beauty, the arbitrariness of the stop, birdsong spread out across two counties, the sense of pure existence, of being suspended in space and time, a time before a cataclysmic war" (169). Serena is dumbfounded – she cannot answer the question and responds, "The poem doesn't mention a war" (169). Here, we have two conflicting aesthetic ideologies. Haley practically parrots the harbingers of modernist thought – Bergson, James, Proust, Woolf – going so far as to draw from their vocabulary. Even more significant to this aesthetic conflict is Serena's failure to understand how the shadow of war can haunt literature not containing overt references to battle. Serena fundamentally misinterprets what characterizes Haley's modernism, the proverbial "calm before the storm" of World War I exemplified by Thomas's poem. The realism that she inhabits does not recognize the encroaching violence that one must feel within the lines rather than the actions recorded by the lines.

Within *Sweet Tooth*, then, I want to suggest that modernism acts as an ethical intervention on the behalf of realism. Even though the novel nowhere mentions

“modernism” per se, it is haunted by it – it is present in the novel as absence. Serena demonstrates how realism can only go so far because it limits her ability to read and interpret. She is made aware of political oppression through literature about the Stalinist regime, but she is still unable to see literary politics in more subtle forms. Haley's modernism is what clues her in to the ideological operation of literature, one that can be in sync with the ideological apparatuses of the state.⁶⁴

The most important feature of Haley's modernism is how it manifests in the formal strategy of *Sweet Tooth* itself. *Atonement* reveals at its end that the novel we have been reading is a draft of Briony's own attempts at a novel to re-write a sad reality. Similarly, *Sweet Tooth* reveals that it, too, is an attempt of Haley's to draft a novel that re-writes Serena's life and inhabits her perspective in order to better understand how she could deceive a man she claimed to love. McEwan presents us with a novel of formal literary development, the culmination of a conflict between a follower of realism and a modernist aesthete. The formal strategy of *Sweet Tooth* – how the novel reveals itself as a kind of confessional narrative through a letter at its conclusion – recodes its realism because modernism ultimately gives way in the form of the book we are reading. Haley confesses the following at his (which is also McEwan's) novel's end:

⁶⁴ My readings throughout this chapter are clearly indebted to Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In his essay, Althusser distinguishes between "repressive state apparatuses" – the government, the army, the courts, the prison system, all stemming from the dominant political body that is the State – and "ideological state apparatuses" – churches, schools, the family, communications, and the arts. Repressive state apparatuses "belong entirely to the public domain" (97). On the other hand, ideological state apparatuses belong exclusively to the private domain because they "are quite simply *private* institutions" (97). Althusser continues, "The distinction between the public and the private is a distinction internal to bourgeois law, and valid in the (subordinate) domains in which bourgeois law exercises its 'authority.' The domain of the State escapes it because the latter is 'above the law': the State, which is the State *of* the ruling class, is neither public nor private; on the contrary, it is the precondition for any distinction between public and private. The same thing can be said from the starting point of our State Ideological Apparatuses. It is unimportant whether the institutions in which they are realized are 'public' and 'private.' What matters is how they function. Private institutions can perfectly well 'function' as Ideological State Apparatuses" (97).

I told you that it wasn't anger that set me writing the pages in the parcel in front of you. But there was always an element of tit for tat. [...] I really believed that I could wrap the matter up between the covers of a book and write you out of my system and say good-bye. [...] Living inside you, I saw myself clearly: my material greed and status hunger, my single-mindedness bordering on autism. Then my ludicrous vanity, sexual, sartorial, above all aesthetic – why else make you linger over my stories, why else italicize my favorite phrases? (299-300)

His admission forces us to reconsider the relation between form and content in *Sweet Tooth*. Haley concedes that his motivation to write issues from an affective condition – to echo Maurice Bendrix, his is a diary of anger recorded as a means of writing himself out of an emotional state – his own “record of hate.” However, he also credits the process of novel writing with a new understanding of his own subjectivity. He realizes he is self-absorbed and narcissistic, obsessed with his own artistic upward mobility and vindictive enough to make his love-object “over-specify” his own stories in order to bolster his aesthetic prowess. In other words, *Sweet Tooth* is the counterpart to *Atonement* because it is about the failure of literature to atone and make amends. Haley's writing of *Sweet Tooth* causes him to realize that his perverse intentions are embedded in the very act of novel-production, and ultimately infect his (which is also Serena's) narration. The broken mirror reflecting Haley shows the contradictions inherent to his own representation. *Sweet Tooth* becomes a novel about the process of its own production, about its own possibility to tell a story.

The twist at the end, though, does not just serve as a coda for Haley's remorse, a chance for him to re-write himself as his own act of “atonement” (as it bears another superficial, yet striking, resemblance to McEwan's most famous work). Nor is the ending solely a modernist ploy that provides a meta-reflection on artistic production by having the minor character revealed as author and literary puppeteer all along. In the

closing pages and amidst all of his confessions and admissions of guilt in his relationship with Serena, Haley writes, “let me tell you my favorite spy story” (298). He then proceeds to describe the historical event of “Operation Mincemeat”: a disinformation plan of MI-5 and MI-6 during world War II in which they planted false confidential documents on the corpse of a British soldier to be found by the Germans and fool them into believing fabricated plans of the Allied military forces. He adds intriguingly, “The original idea came from a novel published in 1937 called *The Milliner’s Hat Mystery*. [The author] was Ian Fleming, and he included the idea along with other ruses in a memo which appeared before a secret committee chaired by an Oxford don who wrote detective novels” (299). Haley then snidely asks, “Who says poetry makes nothing happen?” This last remark, a reference to W.H. Auden’s “Elegy for W.B. Yeats,” in which Auden famously declared, “poetry makes nothing happen,” reframes Auden’s statement to question literature’s effect on the state. In the case of the “spy story” here, it goes so far as to provide the state military tactics during wartime and potentially win battles.

This is not just an incidental question asked by a character in passing. The novel concludes by invoking, quite literally, a philosophy central to modernism – that art produces some form of effect within those who experience it, one of great historical consequence. If we revisit the previously mentioned arguments made by McEwan’s critics, then we can reformulate the critical project of his body of work through *Sweet Tooth*. It’s not so much that McEwan aims for us to be critical of how literature can make us better individuals as it is to be aware and critical of how literature can be used as a political tool and can effect the unfolding of history. What appear to be arbitrary plot wanderings and unimportant tangential character references become ideologically

significant and figure into the grand cultural scheme of things. The novel forces its readers to read for political plot by muddying its literary plot with all manner of excessive details. Haley ends by re-introducing secrecy and surveillance into this relationship, much like McEwan does in his statements about secrecy and the British novel that begin this chapter. He writes to Serena, “You lied to me, I spied on you [...] You may think we’re too mired in deceit [...] that our deception and humiliation have doubled the reasons for going our separate ways. I prefer to think they’ve cancelled out and that we’re too entwined in mutual surveillance to let each other go. I’m in the business now of watching over you” (300). This novel produced by Haley – the one we currently read – becomes synonymous with the police apparatuses of the state it so frequently discusses. In order to understand Serena, Haley inhabits the position of literary surveillance, one he correlates with his “favorite spy story.” “All novels may be spy novels,” as McEwan claims, but it is more important that *Sweet Tooth* shows us how social secrecy and personal secrecy are continuously, irrevocably, intertwined.

Epilogue

I conclude “Security Breach: British Modernism and the Violence of Secrets” by discussing the contemporary resonance of my argument. As recent years have demonstrated, secrecy is still a problem being worked out in public discourse. My project is ultimately bookended by two now historical figures: Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. When the WikiLeaks phenomenon made headlines several years ago, it shunted Assange into the geo-political spotlight. In the fall of 2010, Assange made use of his website to expose confidential documents and nefarious cover-ups perpetrated by governments all over the world. WikiLeaks released information from more than 250,000 diplomatic sources from around the globe, 11,000 of which were documents officially marked “secret” by their governments.⁶⁵ While some of these leaks seemed the stuff of gossip columns rather than international incidents – the royal family’s back-handed comments about Prince Harry, sexual preferences of Muammar Gaddafi, and foreign officials’ thoughts regarding Nicolas Sarkozy’s wife, to name a few – world leaders viewed much of the work of WikiLeaks as a serious affront to both national and international security. From revealing tension between North Korea and China regarding the Chinese government’s support for South Korean unification, to private meetings between the United States and Arab countries about attacking Iran’s nuclear program, Assange and his team made it their mission to expose injustices committed by nations around the world.

WikiLeaks initially gained the attention of the American public through its release of documents regarding the United States’ cover-up of civilian deaths during the war in

⁶⁵ I take these facts from a December 2010 *TIME Magazine* article by Massimo Calabresi, “The War on Secrecy.”

Afghanistan, as well as information about inhumane incarceration practices within Guantanamo Bay. Hillary Clinton, speaking from her position as Secretary of State at that time, declared that these leaks “pu[t] people’s lives in danger, threaten national security and undermine our efforts to work with other countries to solve shared problems.”⁶⁶ Assange, though, has notoriously viewed himself as a rogue vigilante on a mission to expose the corrupt practices of secrecy that countries and corporations keep hidden – to expose and dissolve secrecy in places that he believes demand transparency. The idea guiding his WikiLeaks campaign is that “nearly all information should be free and that confidentiality in government affairs is an affront to the governed.”⁶⁷ Assange claims, “We are an organization that tries to make the world more civil and act against abusive organizations that are pushing it in the opposite direction.”⁶⁸ When asked specifically about Great Britain’s Official Secrets Act in relation to his crusade against all problematic forms of state secrecy, Assange himself replied, “The dead hand of feudalism still rests on every British shoulder; we plan to remove it.”⁶⁹

Three years after the initial attention to Assange, Edward Snowden, a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency and national Security Administration, leaked documents to British newspaper *The Guardian* in June 2013. Snowden detailed the workings of countless global surveillance programs, the majority of which are run by branches of the U.S. and European governments in cahoots with telecommunications corporations. Snowden essentially acted as a whistleblower on the U.S. government, exposing its surveillance of countless American, British, and French citizens’ phone and

⁶⁶ Quoted in Calabresi, page 37.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Calabresi, page 32.

⁶⁸ Interview with Assange, quoted in Calabresi, page 35.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Calabresi, page 36.

internet records. Snowden's revelations ultimately showed that at any moment anyone around the globe could be wiretapped by someone in power at the NSA. The United States' global fallout ensued, as Snowden revealed their involvement in spying on citizens and world leaders in numerous countries (among them France, England, Germany and China). Their surveillance procedures, though, were not just limited to issues of national security during the war on terror. The U.S. government, according to Snowden, had also conducted industrial espionage by spying upon global corporations whose actions could potentially benefit the national interests of the United States. For publicly disclosing these confidential procedures, Snowden was subsequently found guilty of violating the United States' Espionage Act. The global manhunt for Snowden still persists as he seeks political asylum in various countries around the world, all-the-while speaking out against the Obama administration for its "old bad tools of political aggression" and for "using citizenship as a weapon."⁷⁰ In both the United States and abroad, the international reaction to Snowden has been volatile and divisive: some proclaim him a traitor, and others laud him as a patriot and hero for protecting the lives of those not having the privilege of political power.⁷¹

Assange and Snowden spotlight, in a contemporary context, the ideas that this dissertation takes up, chief among them the complexities of living in an age of "transparent secrecy," in which citizens are well aware – and often agreeable to – the official secrets that run beneath, or against, the stuff of daily life. We live in an era of secrecy, which dictates our daily lives whether or not we fully realize it. Between the

⁷⁰ See "Alleged Snowden Statement: Obama Administration 'Using Citizenship as a Weapon,'" accessed at CBSlocal.com, for further discussion.

⁷¹ Snowden was named *The Guardian's* "Person of the Year" for 2013; he was also runner-up for the same award given by *TIME Magazine*, beaten only by the newly elected Pope.

U.S. government's current war on privacy, to the ways in which individual lives are on public display, secrecy is the buzzword of our era that individuals either champion or work to dissolve. From social media, to blog culture, to the prevalence of smart phones that document in text and image events as they are unfolding, secrecy might be something that hardly exists in the American public anymore.⁷² We seem to broadcast so much every detail of our lives, particularly our innermost thoughts and emotional undertakings, that anything resembling secrecy has instead become utterly transparent. The common obsession with Facebook pages and Twitter accounts lays any discourse of secrecy bare, placing something formerly contained in private domains into a communal space to be rapidly read, evaluated, and commented upon. Information shared between two people in confidence can go public in seconds – and before millions – with a click of a button. The media frenzy alone that resulted from Assange's and Snowden's actions demonstrates the volatile relationship between secrets and their public, political life. The conversation that emerges during the past few years is how much more prominent (and problematic) the link between secrets and democracy has become. Snowden and Assange have shown that the connection between the governing state and the governed is predicated upon secrecy acting as a repressive apparatus. For those in power to remain in power, they rely upon citizens living in ignorance.

Regarding the relationship between secrecy and selfhood, we can see how Conrad, Woolf, and Greene anticipate these contemporary issues. McEwan, writing

⁷²One recent example of how government secrets become public through these common, everyday means is Saddam Hussein's execution. The event was supposed to be secret, but a low-quality video recorded with a cell phone was released and immediately became ubiquitous. Moments of like these blur the line between privacy and secrecy: they remind us that the things we record privately on our personal devices could end up betraying and making public state secrets.

today, instead casts them into a novel that directly addresses the act of writing fiction in an age of secrecy. All of these writers, though, share the sensibility that the idea of secrecy is a threat to democracy, inhibiting the development of an alert and informed republic, as well as fostering a community wherein the best interests of citizens are mere fodder for national security issues. Secrets ultimately violate egalitarian systems because they create hierarchies through the methods of their information-flows. Democratic agency then becomes suspended when the democracy becomes vulnerable to attack. As Peter Galison has recently examined, the relationship between secrecy and patriotism culminates in strikes against the United States, such as the attacks on Pearl Harbor and the World Trade Center.⁷³ Instead of protecting national security, secrecy impeded its functioning and facilitated threat because knowledge was only known by a select few and necessary preparations were not made. The failure in intelligence resulted in attacks on the home front that changed the rules of domestic politics and policing activities.

The questions thus arising from secrecy tend towards the imperative and the urgent. Are there instances when secrecy *must* be breached? Can secrecy corrupt when it allows the unrestrained wielding of power? Does interrogating secrecy pose greater problems when groups, for example the state, exercise it? What is justifiable to leave concealed or make revealed? The novels I have explored throughout this project provide an answer to these questions, as they interrogate the vexed processes of subject formation in relation to the state during an age of political secrecy. Secrecy is about how we imagine the kind of world – political and personal – that we want, and how we conjure the kind of world that we believe to be safe, or that we believe to be vulnerable and unsafe.

⁷³ See Galison's "Removing Knowledge" (2004), as well as his documentary film *Secrecy* (2008), for further discussion.

Citizenship, as these novels imagine it, is something ultimately insecure. The writers I have examined are concerned with forms of vulnerability as it relates to what will and won't be disclosed – those open secrets and withheld experiences that are not about private life so much as invisible life.

As our daily lives suggest, the American public still debates how much secrecy is too much, as well as how much exposure counts as too much. The rhetoric surrounding it shows how little we've been able to sort it out. As we try to maintain an appropriate balance between secrecy and security, new technologies have changed what it means to have either. Through this project, then, I have attempted to use the British novel to show how citizens of western democracies have certain narratives about national security and invest themselves in the way it is represented. At times, as we have seen, individuals are forced to question whether the narrative itself is transparent. This inquiry, then, causes us to see how secrecy invokes the rhetorical strategies that have an increasingly pertinent relationship to the imaginative qualities of fiction.

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