

Spectrum of Voices: Polyvocalism in the Novel
and Its Consequences for Narration

by

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For all the strivings which were borne by she
who wished to make my dreams reality

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to demonstrate the narrative principle of the spectrum of voices, beginning with Mikhail Bakhtin's description of dialogism in the polyphonic novel and building upon Julia Kristeva's terminology of *intertextualité*, especially as it finds application in the novel's place within the social text. Central to this discussion is the plurality of voices in novelistic narrative, particularly those of the narrator, the reader, and the protagonist, as well as the novel's function as a catalyst for the encounter and acknowledgment of individual subjectivity between these disparate and often conflicting identities. Using the notions of the affirmation of subjectivity, the social text, and the spectrum of voices, this study concludes with a close reading of China Miéville's *Embassytown* and a discussion of the concerns of language, culture, and politics which are central to the development of this novel's plot, especially as they pertain to intersubjectivity and the mutual recognition between *one* and *other*.

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Introduction: The Significance of the Novel

In the early half of the twentieth century, there was an ever-increasing movement among literary scholars to try and understand the features of both language and literature in a systematic and logical way. Ferdinand de Saussure was among the first thinkers to challenge the earlier grammarian schools of linguistics in favor of a less prescriptive, more descriptive model of language and linguistic understanding. His work on the semiotic model of language, the sign system, and the synchronic and diachronic axes of linguistic history has fundamentally changed the discussion of how humans make meaning and how that meaning is communicated. Most important in his understanding is the realization that the relationship between words (or sound-images) and their meanings (connotations, denotations, etc.) are on the one hand arbitrary and unchangeable on the individual level, and on the other hand in constant flux and naturally responsive to social pressures.

Saussure's theories, especially those of synchronic and diachronic axes of linguistic history, were picked up by such scholars associated with the Russian Formalist school as Roman Jakobson, Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, and Mikhail Bakhtin. In particular, Jakobson worked together with Yuri Tynyanov to outline the problems that at the time they saw facing the practice of literary criticism, in which they outline the need for a sharp distinction between the synchronic and diachronic axes of literary history, which they relate to the study of the development and spread of literary genres. Much of the Formalists' work in addressing the concerns of literary history, especially in the analysis of literary genres and their development, continues to be relevant to this day. In his work on dialogism, Bakhtin expands the understanding of the social dynamism of

language, recognizing that each individual actor adds movement to the complex interplay of relational meaning in a vast social sea. He recognizes that, on the individual level, the meaning and use of each word is necessarily imbued with generations of social context, but that the individual also reshapes each word to serve his own purposes. When it comes to literature, it follows that any given poem or novel, any political treatise or technical manual, any written work at all serves to communicate within a specific linguistic context and is therefore never written in a vacuum but rather in response to all the other words that have come before it.

Following Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva continues to build upon this hypersocial linguistic framework in a term that she has coined, *intertextualité* (intertextuality). Kristeva works to expand this idea in several interesting directions. She is greatly influenced by psychoanalysis and sees the operations of the “speaking subject” as an important element of understanding linguistics and literature. In redefining literature under the term *intertextualité*, Kristeva points to the novel’s significance as an utterance within the larger context of what she calls the “social text” (“The Bounded Text” 37).

This study is focused on the relationship between the many voices at work in novelistic fiction, particularly those of writers, narrators, readers, and characters, and how the relationships between those voices affect language and meaning within the novel. Understood as an extended dialogue, the novel can provide great insight into the social processes of making meaning in both writing/creation and reading/interpretation. My thesis constructs a framework for the study of narrative voices in the novel, focusing on the works of Bakhtin and Kristeva, among a few other closely related lines of Russian Formalist thought developing through strains of structuralism, as well.

In seeking a deeper understanding of the relationship between intertextuality and novelistic form, this study applies a discussion of the novel as social text through a close look at one novel in particular, China Miéville's *Embassytown*. My thesis holds that an engaged appreciation for the interaction of different voices in the text better illuminates the social and psychological pressures at work throughout the process of meaning-making in the writing and reading of novelistic fiction by exposing the conversation at work between different worldviews and ideologies, a conversation that is necessarily distorted by the various interpretations reached by the author and the reader. By examining these pressures, a clearer light can be shone on the social aspects of the creative process itself. This discussion will be limited to the study of novelistic fiction, but if the principles of dialogism and intertextuality are applied carefully, it will not be difficult to demonstrate how this study could apply to artistic media beyond the page.

Novels serve as gateways. They allow a writer to explore the realms of mind and ideas, of desires and feelings, to chart the regions of human experience which are unpondered, uncomfortable, unutterable. The writer moves through the space of the text, at times chaotically to see what yet must be seen, at others methodically to categorize what has been newly discovered, and at others still purposefully to guide new explorers who might yet find new areas to venture. It is a writer's task to usher in readers and show them those previously untouched territories, make them accessible, and provide a reference for those things the reader may not understand. Novels also allow readers to access these regions, but where the task of the writer is to explore, the task of the reader is to observe; where the writer charts ahead, the reader follows behind; where the writer discovers, the reader witnesses. By no means, though, should this suggest the reader to be

passive in the process of making meaning. To be sure, the writer's process is dynamic (how can it not be?), but the text that is written can hold no meaning without the reader's intervention.

If the writer is an explorer, a guide, the reader is their journalist, watching and reporting, discussing the discoveries and granting them significance. The reader finds in the text what the author has left behind, wittingly or not, and makes the detritus into something that can be understood. The reader cannot possibly be passive in this process, any more than the writer can create meaning through the ranting shouts that echo back from the impassive faces of so many stone statues. No, the reader is very much alive in the writer's world; more than a mere denizen of a dictatorship at the hands of the author, the reader is a representative in the novel's republic, one of many at whose pleasure the author serves. In a Bakhtinian sense, the novel's author is, rather than the emperor, the orator, and it is up to the readers, the audience and senate, to decide how to respond to these words.

In this study, it is my intention to explore the novel as a space for the interaction of many different voices. When a writer pens a novel, she incorporates a multiplicity of many different voices. "The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 261). This multiplicity is most obviously apparent, for example, in the cast of characters in the works of Shakespeare or in the side characters of Dickens' novels. In the case of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, it was common to make use of "archetypes," characters who represented a personality type; in Dickens' case, the characters were inspired by real people whom the author had met. These cases show a couple of loose categorizations for

the voices of the text. The *personae dramatis* of an Elizabethan or Jacobean drama can generally be thought of as representations of different figures or stereotypes in the public consciousness, while Dickens' characters represent his perception of contemporary individuals. These figures would be decidedly external to the author, and they are anything but uniform in their relation to the writer. An example of a more "internal" figure would be the narrator of novels such as *Great Expectations*. The narrator represents the author, a figure very much like him, or a character with whom the author empathizes.

Less obviously, the variety of voices in an author's works can also be seen in the narrators of such works as *Don Juan* or *Tristram Shandy*. For Lord Byron, the narrator of *Don Juan* represents the figure of the would-be epicist, not Byron himself. He makes it clear in his attacks on such epicists as Robert Southey that he finds their aspirations to greatness absurd.¹ At the same time, this narrator shares certain qualities with Byron, and by all accounts the narrator is intended to be characterized in such a way that his audience would gladly return to him and follow his story. The storyteller in *Don Juan* represents a complicated figure in relation to Byron himself, on one hand a representative of the "epical pretensions" he wishes to exploit for his own amusement, and on the other hand an ambassador for the poem's actual success in poetic society.² Another important set of voices that should be considered (of course, there could be many others of a wide variety) is that of the audience, as they are conceptualized by the author (or the narrator) who presages the expectations of her readership and writes the novel according to this understanding—a phenomenon which leads to the emergence of genre.

The narrator of Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* has a similarly

complicated relationship with the reader. The narrative (so it can be called by the very loosest of definitions) is related in the first person by the titular character whose purpose, the reader is told early on, is to share every particular detail of his life: “As my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and, if I conjecture right, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever, . . . I find it necessary to consult every one a little in his turn; and therefore must beg pardon for going on a little further in the same way” (Sterne 7-8). Tristram’s intention, in his own neurotic way, is to relate his life’s story “*ab ovo*,” a term and usage he attributes to Horace, only to immediately acknowledge Horace’s recommendation against such narrative, concluding, “[I]n writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived.”³ This sets the tone for the narrator’s relationship with the reader for the remainder of his tale, begging a great deal of patience on the reader’s part and implying also a great deal of frustration.

The audience comprise figures as external to the author as one might expect to find. While they may not be given a direct voice in the novel, the author nevertheless writes in anticipation of how the audience will react to their work, following the conventions necessary to meet any perceived obligations. Roland Barthes notes that the voice of narration, the one which is heard when the text is read, is neither that of the perspective character nor even that of the narrator, but rather the voice of the reader. In his reading of *Sarrasine*, he remarks on the disparity between the knowledge held by the protagonist and that held by the narrator. The reader is in the unique position of holding both halves of this information, to the benefit of enjoying the building narrative tension: “it is the reader who is concerned that the truth be simultaneously named and evaded, an

ambiguity which the discourse nicely creates by *as though*, which indicates the truth and yet reduces it declaratively to a mere appearance” (151). That is, the reader finds enjoyment in the revelation of information that is hidden from the protagonist and, if possible, even the narrator, but such a revelation must be achieved in such a way as not to spoil the narrative suspense. More to our purpose, Barthes observes that the reader must interject their own voice “by proxy” in order to facilitate the narrator’s task. The reader literally has another voice in their heads interpreting the words on the page as they are reading.⁴

The author’s choices are necessarily influenced by a perception of the literary and social environment. Wayne Booth notes that “[t]he author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement” (138). While Booth’s assumption that the imagined author and the imagined reader must agree is eloquently argued, a few cases could at least challenge the validity of his assertion. One example for consideration is Montresor’s relationship with the reader in “The Cask of Amontillado,” which is predicated on the narrator’s slow revelation that he has buried alive his supposed good friend, Fortunato. One would be hard pressed to find any reader, even imagined, who agrees with Montresor’s actions or the reasoning that leads him to such a dark place. Indeed, the argument must be made that the rhetorical strategy in this case of horrifying the reader actually hinges on the incongruency between the narrator’s confession and the reader’s sensibilities—the reader actively recoils from not only Montresor’s behavior but his rationale as well. A fundamental disagreement is imperative for this narrative to be effective. To Booth’s

point, however, we must consider the imagined author and the imagined reader as occurring together in rhetorical space, negotiating the terms of their relationship through the words provided by the author and the meanings ascribed to those words by the reader. The relationship between writer, reader, and text is something Julia Kristeva notes in her use of the concept of the social text.

Taking as examples the characteristic range of voices in *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Juan*, it can be said that any given voice in the novel can be described spatially, either as being “internal” (that is close to the author) or as being “external” (distant from the author, closer to the audience). Of course, as the examples of *Don Juan* and *Tristram Shandy* demonstrate, this form of categorization is necessarily complicated, as the classification of “interior” and “exterior” overlaps in some places. To make matters worse, supposedly “external” voices, such as archetypes from the Italian *commedia dell’arte* or Dickens’ side characters, are not purely external at all. Rather, they are only the reflections of the author’s observations of such characters operating on some level in the world outside the work. They have been processed, filtered, and recreated according to the author’s vision, hardly a one-to-one representation of the figures which formed the basis for their creation.

Similarly, the supposedly “internal” voices of characters who represent the author are likewise processed and filtered versions of how the author perceives himself, a facsimile of how he would project himself to his audience, and thus external factors are present in his decision of how he is self-represented. All of this is to say that these two categorizations of “internal” and “external” cannot be seen as discrete and opposed boxes. Rather, these qualities are necessarily entangled, interpenetrating one another such

that they cannot be separated. It would, therefore, be better to understand the “internal” and “external” qualities of any given voice within the novel as the interdependent, correlated poles of the same continuum. Because these qualities are interdependent, it is impossible to discuss any given voice’s “interiority” without also discussing its “exteriority,” and *vice versa*.

The novel is necessarily an amalgamation of many different experiences on the part of the author, most of which are external and to one degree or another internalized and processed for representation in the text. “The novel in particular exteriorizes linguistic dialogue” (Kirsteva, “Word, Dialogue, Novel” 66). These “exterior” experiences of language in particular necessarily share a reference frame for their signifying practices at the time the novel is written down by the author: one might think of the moment of the novel’s authorship as a speech-act within a framework fixed in time, space, and culture. However, the author’s readership is anything but fixed. Rather, as time passes following the novel’s authorship and publication, the readership only expands and morphs the text. Laurence Sterne’s readership is not bound to the culture (the web of signification) of Enlightenment-era Britain, any more than Dostoevsky’s readership is bound to Imperial Russia. Both works have been extensively translated and read in many different languages and cultures at many important cultural moments.

The relationship between the text and any given audience is necessarily dependent on an extensive (possibly infinite) array of variables; the shape of the relationship between the text and reader to the specific historico-cultural moment of authorship is necessarily complex.⁵ If the moment of authorship is a fixed point, the position of all possible readers must be represented by an ever-extending field, into which the spectrum

of the different voices of the novel extends, like a the beam of a lighthouse refracting into the fog of night. At any given time, the audience might resonate with this voice or that; culture is ever-changing, after all, and those characters with whom readers might sympathize will necessarily shift with their cultural values. How closely to the author one intersects with the spectrum of voices represented in the novel depends on how sympathetic they might or might not be with the author's perspective in his cultural moment, although we can say to an extent that the reader is drawn into the reality of the narrative's position in space and time, real or imagined, at least to the extent that the reader's experience or imagination will allow.⁶

This study, then, seeks to understand the importance of this continuum for the purposes of better understanding narration in novelistic fiction. I begin with an exploration of the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism as it pertains to narration in the novel, moving into the concept of the polyphonic novel and how the qualities of dialogue inform its narrative style. For Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogue is the key to understanding literature, and a novel's "monologic" or "dialogic" qualities describe how masterful the author is in utilizing the external voices she envisions within the body of the text. For Bakhtin, the dialogic quality of narration is exemplified in the polyphonic novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky: "Dostoevsky . . . creates not voiceless slaves . . . but *free* people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 6).

Importantly, Bakhtin's conception of the voices in the polyphonic novel depends on their agency in interacting with the narrative, the reader, and even the author. The voices do not simply represent characters, but perspectives, worldviews, and personal

ideologies. The variety of voices in the text, crucially, are conceptualized by Bakhtin as individual subjective identities, striving for their own existential meaning, just as any living human character might. Bakhtin brings this point to the matter of dialogue, saying:

In Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel we are dealing not with ordinary dialogic form, that is with an unfolding of material within the framework of its own monologic understanding and against the firm background of a unified world of objects. No, here we are dealing with an ultimate dialogicality, that is, a dialogicality of the ultimate whole. (18)

This is to say that the novel is a vehicle for dialogue between essentially valid viewpoints. The plurality of voices in the novel, and the understandings of the world which they represent, are set in conversation with one another, pursuing answers to questions about life and society. This can only be achieved when the individual subjectivity of each voice is acknowledged and affirmed.

From Bakhtin's main concepts, I work with Julia Kristeva's derivative notions of intertextuality. Kristeva sees the novel not merely as a response to the social environment of its creation, but as an action of social dialogue, actively shaping the cultural conversation as much as it is shaped by those social pressures. The word of the novel is seen as a vector exerting force within its contextual framework. For Kristeva, the "three dimensions or coordinates of dialogue are writing subject, addressee, and exterior texts" ("Word, Dialogue, Novel" 66). If Bakhtin's dialogism is an "internal dialogue," then Kristeva's concept of intertextuality can be discussed as an "external dialogue" of sorts. These two principles—"internal" and "external" dialogue—form the foundation for my discussion of the "spectrum of voices" within the novel, a spectrum of the representations of voice and language in narrative structure. My study concludes with a practical application, discussing the importance of the many different voices and representations of

“Language” within the narrative of China Miéville’s *Embassytown*. This novel is especially important for my study because of Miéville’s academic and creative experimentations with language and dialogue. The different voices of the text are represented quite literally in the radically different understandings of language and society portrayed in this concept-driven science fiction narrative.

Bakhtin and Dialogue: The Novel as Subversive

A novel itself cannot create meaning; it is impassive, unresponsive, utterly inanimate. Rather, any given novel is a cultural artifact which potentially serves as a focus for cultural interaction. Internally, an author's language finds itself divided among different voices. Bakhtin credits Dostoevsky with the creation of the "polyphonic novel," with "polyphonic" (a term borrowed from music) referring to the many distinct voices of the author, the narrator, the protagonist, and the other individual characters of the narrative. For Bakhtin, there are two fora in which any narrative might operate insofar as how it treats these internal voices: monologic and dialogic. In the monologic forum, the narrative is a monolithic presentation, each individual within the text representing something important to the overarching message. No voice has agency of its own freed from the rhetoric of the narrative but rather serves a role within the story as part of an internally and logically consistent whole. In the dialogic forum, separate voices are treated as unique, independently subjective persons, each individual a world within the world of the novel. Each voice holds the capacity to compete with any other, to riot and revolt against even the author's own voice. In the polyphonic novel, Bakhtin finds among the competing voices the carnivalesque, a feverish whirlwind of dream logic, id, anarchy. The cacophonous interplay of the different voices, pushing and shoving, pressing against one another, makes tangible the dialogic. The interiority of the polyphonic novel's dialogism, however, does not stop within the text; it invites the reader to engage in the discussion, to participate in the display of anarchy. The subjectivity of the reader is of vital importance to the truly polyphonic experience of the novel, as the reader shapes the dialogue of the novel internally.

Michael Holquist has pointed out that for Bakhtin “literary texts are utterances, words that cannot be divorced from particular subjects in specific situations” (68). That is to say that any literary text generally—and the novel specifically—is part of a conversation, a cultural dialogue, informed by the context of the utterance. Bakhtin insists that the novel is unique among the various literary forms in that it comprises many different styles and voices of speech; it is wholly and inseparably dependent upon the relationship between style and language (“Discourse in the Novel” 263-65). To elucidate the “dialogic,” Bakhtin introduces the notion of “heteroglossia,” a compound “language-within-language” in which vocabulary, speech patterns, and generic conventions are all custom-tailored to specific social and rhetorical situations as the need arises, explaining:

[A]t any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These “languages” of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying “languages.” (291)

Holquist identifies “heteroglossia” (a linguistic term he attributes to Bakhtin) as being the “locus where the great centripetal and centrifugal forces that shape discourse can meaningfully come together” (70). That is to say that the “many tongues” of discourse, the languages (or discourses) within language, are found at the point at which the plurality of possible meanings behind any given utterance might diverge, highly dependent on context. Bakhtin also calls this the “double-voiced” quality of literary discourse “which inevitably arises under conditions of dialogic interaction” (*Problems* 185). This multiplicity of meaning (polysemy), these sets of different systems of language (discourses) within language, allow for surprising versatility but also

necessarily complicate the study of language:

Linguistics recognizes, of course, the compositional form of “dialogic speech” and studies its syntactic and lexical-semantic characteristics. But it studies these as purely linguistic phenomena, that is, on the level of language, and is utterly incapable of treating the specific nature of dialogic relationships between rejoinders in a dialogue. (*Problems* 182-183)

This is to say that “linguistics” is the science of understanding language as a mechanism for communication (grammar, syntax, morphology, spelling, etc.) while “dialogue” is the framework for understanding the process of meaning-making and the exchange of ideas. The immense complexity of language, its infinite versatility, requires an understanding of the immediate context for its study to make much sense. Put simply, linguistics cannot offer a path for understanding literature; only dialogue can.

In his essay “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin holds the novel in especially high regard, as its prominence presages a new epoch of literary history: “the novel has anticipated, and continues to anticipate, the future of literature as a whole” (7). His examination of the novel as a “genre,” that is as a formal category of narrative representation, falls within the context of a sort of Darwinian competition between “species” for generic dominance. Bakhtin examines the succession of formal dominance between the two eponymous genres, the epic and its traditions being subsumed into that of the novel; indeed, it is appropriate in this framework to consider the epic as “subsumed,” for Bakhtin points to the novel’s capacity to literally devour other literary traditions (19). “Among genres long since completed and in part already dead, the novel is the only developing genre. . . . Compared with them, the novel appears to be a creature from an alien species. It gets on poorly with other genres. It fights for its own hegemony in literature; wherever it triumphs, the other older genres go into decline” (4). This is to say that Bakhtin sees in

the novel—not merely the potential—the active, ongoing process of revolution in literature and literary tradition through the development of and changes in genres: the novel is the future of literature, or at least the beginning of that future. The era dominated by the epic has come to an end, and the era of the novel’s prominence has already begun.

Bakhtin finds an incompatibility between the novel and other, more stagnant literary traditions. Viktor Shklovsky makes a similar argument about the emergence of genre in *Theory of Prose*: “a work of art is perceived against a background of and by association with other works of art. . . . *The new form makes its appearance not in order to express a new content, but rather, to replace an old form that has already outlived its artistic usefulness*” (20). Bakhtin has taken this a step further by demonstrating a *coup d’état* in which the novel emerges triumphant from the ruins of the epic.

Roman Jakobson describes what he calls “the dominant” in a lecture titled the same, which deals with the prevailing aesthetic and artistic concerns in literature at any given cultural moment. He claims that “we must constantly bear in mind that the element which specifies a given variety of language dominates the entire structure and thus acts as its mandatory and inalienable constituent dominating all the remaining elements and exerting direct influence upon them” (Matejka and Pomorska 82). Jakobson’s primary concern in this discussion is on the traits of poetic language and their centrality in the Formalist conception of art and literature. However, he goes beyond the realm of poetry by acknowledging “transitional genres” as being especially interesting to the literary scholar: “In certain periods such genres are evaluated as extraliterary and extrapoetical, while in other periods they may fulfill an important literary function because they comprise those elements which are about to be emphasized by belles lettres, whereas the

canonical literary forms are deprived of these elements” (86).

The novel, as a vehicle of generic literary change, is certainly among those transitional (or “hybrid”) literary genres, and under Bakhtin’s framework, perhaps the most important in the current age, precisely because of its transformative and generative qualities. It is not simply that the novel is dominant, but that it actively subverts and overturns linguistic and discursive hierarchy. Indeed, Bakhtin ascribes to the novelistic genre a completely different paradigm of cognizance: “*Prophecy* is characteristic for the epic, *prediction* for the novel” (“Epic and Novel” 31; emphasis mine). The choice of terms here is deliberate. *Prophecy* carries religious, even supernatural, connotations. The epic is the dominant literary mode in an age of mythology and magic. It is the genre of the established order of the old world, an order that has been carefully cultivated and maintained for centuries and which is strict in its hierarchical stratification. The epic is the genre of the storied past: “the world of high literature in the classical era was a world projected into the past, on to the distanced plane of memory, but not into a real, relative past tied to the present by uninterrupted temporal transitions; it was projected rather into a valorized past of beginnings and peak times” (19). By contrast, *prediction* is more methodical; it is less certain but more systematic. It is the language of meteorology and experimentation. The novel is the genre of the modern, the dominant form in the age of science and rationality. Where the epic portrays a valorized past, “only in the novel have we the possibility of an authentically objective portrayal of the past as the past” (29).

However, I would be careful not to misunderstand Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the novel as an “empirical” genre. Rather, like science, the novel is centered around the idea of finding truth and critiquing deeply held beliefs: “characteristic for [the novel] is

an eternal re-thinking and re-evaluating. That center of activity that ponders and justifies the past is transferred to the future” (31). This is to say that the novel’s dominance is derived not from a new paradigm for conceptualizing hard reality, but from the dissolution of the old paradigms under a new skepticism.

Bakhtin is far from the only person—or even the first—to place significance on the shift from epic to novel. Ian Watt finds key to the shift a reversal of the meaning of the term *realism* from the “universals” of a medieval hegemony dominated by the church and Aristotelianism to the ambiguity introduced in modern existential philosophy. Watt connects the shifting significance of the “real” in philosophy to the development of novelistic narrative: “the novel arose in the modern period, a period whose general intellectual orientation was most decisively separated from its classical and mediaeval heritage by its rejection—or at least attempted rejection—of universals” (12). In this view, the novel’s rise to prominence corresponds to an increasing skepticism through the Renaissance and into the early modern period, a skepticism that gradually permeated everything from math and science to philosophy. This increasing skepticism finds expression in the early novel’s style of narration, especially its rejection of the established narrative conventions in the epic and in poetry, “and the reason for this seems to be that since the novel’s primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience, attention to any pre-established formal conventions can only endanger [the author’s] success” (13).

For Watt, the key feature of (early) novelistic fiction is its attempt to convince the readership of its verisimilitude. Interestingly, he finds Henry Fielding instrumental in demonstrating the development of the novel against the background of the epic tradition.

Fielding's early work in *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews* points to his conviction that the (what is now called) novel form should take the mantle of the novel as a successor, but his attempt at a "comic epic in prose" was largely unsuccessful due to the constant interruption of the reader's narrative experience for the sake of observing the epic conventions: "were it not for the Preface we would surely be justified in taking *Joseph Andrews* as a parody of epic procedures rather than as the work of a writer who planned to use them as a basis for the new genre" (254). As Fielding develops his narrative style going into *Amelia*, he largely abandons the attempt at the "comic epic in prose," favoring a more serious approach to narrative, "and both mock-heroic incidents and epic diction have been abandoned; . . . *Amelia* may be regarded as the work in which the influence of the epic on Fielding [through the *Aeneid*] was most fruitful" (255). In this interpretation, Fielding's deployment of the epic formulation is most successful—ironically—when he lets go of the strict formal elements dictated by the "rules" of epic literature, an important and necessary development in novelistic fiction.⁷

Georg Lukács contrasts the epic and the novel on the basis of their historical and philosophical exigencies: "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). Like Fielding and Watt, Lukács sees the novel as a successor to the epic. In a train of thought in line with Marxist sentiments, Lukács contextualizes the novel's importance against humanity's shifting relationship with nature: "Estrangement from nature (the first nature), the modern sentimental attitude to nature, is only a projection of man's experience of his self-made environment [i.e., the second nature] as a prison instead of as a parental home" (64). In

this context, the “totality of life” provided by the novel is substantively different from the totality provided by the epic: “The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life” (60). This is to say that the world of the epic is a polished, unified, and universal whole, where the reality of the novel is one of granular individuation that gestures beyond itself. Toward this difference, Lukács locates the point of transition from epic to novel much earlier than Watt, going as far back as the *Divine Comedy*. Lukács claims, “In Dante there is still the perfect immanent distancelessness and completeness of the true epic, but his figures are already individuals, consciously and energetically placing themselves in opposition to a reality that is becoming closed to them, individuals who, through this opposition, become real personalities” (68).⁸ The epic cedes to the novel in the modern era of estrangement from nature and the individuation of the self, and this is reflected in the transformation of the narrative structure.

J. M. Bernstein notes that for Lukács “pre-capitalist epic narratives were structured by value-systems and beliefs whose validity was authenticated by the practices and institutions of society at large. . . . Because our social world is no longer value-oriented and structured in this way, then the novel cannot rely on antecedently validated value assumptions” (xviii). Essentially, the “universalist” point of view operating in the world of the epic is one that is rooted in the values and institutional practices of a bygone era, one in which the old forms have been found insufficient to accommodating humanity’s new reality. What separates Bakhtin from many other theorists is that, for him, the novel is not simply a new genre in the history of literary development, but that it is a force which confronts and alters the other genres in its ecosphere; its ability to

“novelize,” to devour other genres and make them anew, is what sets the novel apart from other literary forms (“Epic and Novel” 11).

Tzvetan Todorov manages to locate a number of complicating factors in Bakhtin’s conceptualization of dialogism. In structuralist fashion, Todorov lays out very clearly the argument for the dialogic, before locating inconsistencies in the historical development of Bakhtin’s idea. Examining this argument adds to a discussion of the dialogic both a new depth and a new set of challenges that must be addressed. Todorov insists that Bakhtin fails to establish the novel as a *genre*: “The not very coherent, and ultimately irrational, character of Bakhtin’s description of the genre of the novel is a strong indication that this category does not occupy its own place in the system” (90). Todorov’s argument finds that Bakhtin, under his own definition of “genre,” has not provided sufficient literary evidence to support its categorization as such.

Indeed, there are so many “genres” of novelistic fiction, covering such a wide range of literary devices and conventions, that to refer to the novel itself as a “genre” seems somehow inappropriate (91-93). Of course, when Bakhtin uses the term *genre*, he is referring to a broader literary tradition, one which emerges in the mixture of literary conventions, dialects and dialectics, fiction and philosophy, that is thought of in *novelistic fiction*. I do not believe that Bakhtin should be defended against this criticism—Todorov is absolutely right—but perhaps the question of the novel’s status as a “genre” misses the point of the novel’s truly astonishing capacity for linguistic and literary reconstitution, its ability to draw in fragments of outside texts and reform them into something new and unique. The broader, more important question for this discussion is not the novel’s characteristics as a “genre,” but rather its transformative quality, those

very mixings, the experimental mingling of textual and linguistic modes and mannerisms, both old and new, which are meant when the novel is described as dialogic. Where mythology and epic possess and preserve the premodern monolithic worldview described by Lukács, Watt, and Bakhtin, the novel is, quite literally, a new (even “alien”) thing. The old, dead literary traditions are given new life as they are reinvigorated by the novel.

There are three Bakhtinian features of the novel which Todorov examines as points of contrast with the epic: stylistic three-dimensionality and its connection to heteroglossia in the novel, a shift in narrative time, and an emphasis in the narrative on maximal contact with the present. Additionally, there are three corresponding features of the epic: an absolute past (to use Goethe’s and Schiller’s terminology) as the narrative subject, national tradition as the source, and an absolute epic distance separating the epic from contemporary reality (see Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” 11 & 13). Todorov remarks that these features “can be reduced to a single great opposition: possible or impossible continuity between the time of the (represented) utterance and the time of the (representing) uttering” (89). The dichotomy of the past and the present serves as the point of departure between the epic and the novel. Where the epic focuses on the stories of heroes long since passed, the novel emphasizes the lived, contemporary experiences of protagonists in a present shared with the reader, as even stories from the past are expressed in a way where the reader is brought into the time of the novel.⁹

However, if the sticking point for Todorov is the basis on which the novel is referred to as a “genre,” it begs the question of what else it ought to be called instead. The lengths to which Byron goes in order to ridicule “epicists” like Robert Southey in *Don Juan* demonstrate that even as early as the Romantic period the epic as a literary format

was dead, if not dying.¹⁰ In fact, Bakhtin points to *Don Juan* as an example of epic poetry which shows the genre to have been “novelized” (“Epic and Novel” 5-6). Under such a framework, it would seem more appropriate for “novel” to be thought, instead of as a literary genre, more as an artistic movement or, better still, a cultural-literary process:

Those genres that stubbornly preserve their old canonic nature begin to appear stylized. In general any strict adherence to a genre begins to feel like a stylization, a stylization taken to the point of parody, despite the artistic intent of the author. In an environment where the novel is the dominant genre, the conventional languages of strictly canonical genres begin to sound in new ways, which are quite different from the ways they sounded in those eras when the novel was *not* included in “high” literature. (6)

In other words, the novel desecrates the epic and its formal characteristics, ridiculing and repurposing them to incorporate the voices and linguistic devices from all corners of society, the high and the low. The confluence of so many unique perspectives and mannerisms permits the novel to undo the epic’s inherent literary (and by implication its social) stratification, to make equal all voices in the text. This is related to a critically important stage in the development of the novel identified by Bakhtin in what he calls the “carnivalization” of literature (*Problems* 122).

Carnival, for Bakhtin, has its roots in the late medieval popular practice of romp and riot. The phenomenon of carnival is social rather than literary, characterized by a general upending of the typical social order and a disdain for the hegemonic strictures of governance. Bakhtin describes carnival as “a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators” (122). The carnival is a display of jovial anarchy, a suspension of the usual rules governing society. During the carnival, there are no spectators or performers, only participants, and the symbolism of the normal social order are mocked and ridiculed. When Bakhtin talks of the “carnivalization” of literature,

he specifically conjures this notion of social upheaval, of anarchy and mockery, the abolition of rigid divisions in social hierarchy: “a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people*” (123).

This impulse toward anarchy is found by Bakhtin in the genre of Menippean satire and its development upon the genre of Socratic dialogue: “The menippea is fully liberated from those limitations of history and memoir that were so characteristic of the Socratic dialogue . . . ; it is free of legend and not fettered by any demands for an external verisimilitude to life” (114). This characteristic, among several others, sets Menippean satire off for Bakhtin as a necessary transitional phase between the epic and the novel, for the menippea, as described by Bakhtin, incorporate the carnivalesque social phenomenon into literature in such a way that makes the pluralism of the polyphonic novel possible. The connection between carnival and polyvocalism is found in Menippean satire, which “was formed in an epoch when national legend was already in decay, . . . when disputes over ‘ultimate questions’ of worldview had become an everyday mass phenomenon among all strata of the population” (119). This is to say that the dialogic quality endemic to the polyphonic novel—that is, the internal disunity of the text and the validity of its disparate internal subjectivities—saw its development in the genre of Menippean satire, which was in turn a carnivalization of Socratic dialogue.

Kristeva and the Social Text

The novel, as comprising many voices and perspectives of equal validity, is best understood as a social action performed in concert by many different people at different points in time, by the writer in its authorship, by the reader in its reception, and by the various internal voices of the text at any given time. In this social conception of the novel, Julia Kristeva's notion of the social text extends beyond the words on the page into the social environment, where the novel is seen as an interaction between the text and its social environment, incorporating many other texts into something new. In "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," Kristeva follows Bakhtin's logic of the carnivalization of literature, guiding us along the thread from the epic to the novel, following Bakhtin from the monologic to the dialogic, through Menippean satire and carnivalesque language. Kristeva draws a direct connection between the polyphonic novel's incorporation of many different voices and the carnivalesque tendency to reject rigid social hierarchies: "Menippean discourse develops in times of opposition against Aristotelianism, and writers of polyphonic novels seem to disapprove of the very structures of official thought founded on formal logic" ("Word, Dialogue, Novel" 85). For Kristeva, the dialogic qualities of the novel are rooted in the spirit of the carnival, a force of popular opposition against the oppression of the Aristotelian logical framework.

As with Bakhtin, Lukács, and Watt, Kristeva views the history of the novel as that of its development in the shadow of—indeed, even in opposition to—the epic, the polyphonic narrative in particular being an act of rebellion against the monolithic metanarrative of mythology and its hegemonic traditions. The epic itself is a representative of a monolithic, even deterministic worldview. Kristeva writes, "The

organizational principle of epic structure thus remains monological. . . . Within epic monologism, we detect the presence of the ‘transcendental signified’ and ‘self presence’ as highlighted by Jacques Derrida” (Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, Novel” 77). Everything in the epic has a specific place, every character performs a particular and necessary function, every voice contributes to the overall tone of the tale, every word serves to demonstrate the moral. Like the relief carvings that adorn the Parthenon, the individuals who act within the drama of the story cannot be extricated from the carving of the overarching narrative. All, by virtue of their participation in the epic narrative structure, are part and parcel with the story, driving the action toward its predetermined end, compulsory actors who cannot help but behave in concert one with another.

Kristeva’s framework for what she calls “epic monologism” is characterized by monological discourse, which includes not only the narrative and descriptive modes of the epic, but also historical discourse and, perhaps more to the point, scientific discourse (“Word, Dialogue, Novel” 76-77). The inclusion of historical discourse makes perfect sense in context of discussions of the epic genre, as the epic mentality is first and foremost preoccupied with the state of the world as it was in ages past; it might be said that the inclusion of historical discourse was not only logical but even necessary for Kristeva to make her case effectively. However, the inclusion of scientific discourse draws attention at first counterintuitively, until it is considered that the guiding framework of the scientific method is one rooted in empirical fact and universal reason, a perfectly monolithic worldview dictated by what can be observed, repeated, tested, and proven. By a frankly bizarre stroke of genius, Kristeva here has demonstrated the paradoxically unifying thread between the age of myth and the age of reason: “In all

three, the subject assumes and submits to the rule of 1 (God)” (“Word, Dialogue, Novel” 77). Even should the scientific community reject the existence of God as provable, they nevertheless hold to the same self-assured faith in empirically demonstrable fact as the faithful have in that of an almighty, all-knowing God. The epic monologism of the mythic age persists in the church, among historians, and among scientists, all of whom are focused on the question of the world as it is, and all who are within it subject to the laws that govern that world.

By way of contrast to monological discourse, Kristeva outlines dialogical discourse to include Menippean satire, the carnivalesque, and the polyphonic novel (“Word, Dialogue, Novel” 77). Kristeva’s discussion of the dialogical begins with Bakhtin but immediately launches forward into new territory, suffused as it is with psychoanalytic theory and semiotics. If monological discourse is by its very nature monolithic and reserved, the dialogical is subversive, flamboyant, and riotous. For Kristeva, this is most clearly embodied in the carnival, “an antitheological (but not antimystical) and deeply popular movement. . . . A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game” (78). Kristeva describes the carnival as a performance without a stage, with participants taking roles as the moment, the mood, and the circumstances permit: the carnival space is “the only space in which language escapes linearity (law) to live as drama in three dimensions” (79).

Language is freed in the carnival to transcend strict adherence to the hegemonic order and to embody whatever might be each actor’s unique desires. The prevailing

atmosphere is one of levity and chaos, and none are governed by another. All of the participants comport themselves precisely as they themselves see fit, and this changes language from the framework for a grand, unifying plot into a decentralized space of endless possibility. In the context of literary history, Kristeva tells us that the polyphonic novel inherits this open stage and carries on the work of the carnivalesque. The history of the carnival is “the history of the struggle against Christianity and its representation; this means an exploration of language (of sexuality and death), a consecration of ambivalence and of ‘vice’” (80). The polyphonic novel of Dostoevsky takes on a renewed significance in this context, of championing the disparate *wills*—rather than the unified *will*—of the people.

The problem of the “affirming subject,” the voice articulating “thou art,” is similarly a difficulty in Kristeva’s “gadflies” in her discussion of Philippe Sollers’ experimental novel, *H* (“The Novel as Polylogue” 162).¹¹ These “gadflies” are the political dissidents and dissatisfieds that the political schema must take pains to appease, if only to silence their complaints. They are not members of the governing class, but rather are opposed to its interests, opposed to the self-serving bourgeoisie, their members posing such a nuisance that the ruling class cannot ignore them. It is the polyphonic novel’s capacity to give voice to the swarms of gadflies; but its “Menippean” narrative style, its carnivalesque nature, relegates the novel to the edges of narrative space. It is “tolerated” because there can be no other recourse; the mandate of the people insists on the novel’s continued popularity.

The transformative, even transgressive nature of the polyphonic novel emboldens the actors’ rebellious natures. John Lechte has pointed to “carnivalization” as the point of

departure for the novel from the epic: “Kristeva—again following Bakhtin—means by carnivalization something more subtle than a make-believe reversal of existing social relations[;] . . . the carnival is a genuine transgression, not simply a mirror reversal of things as they are which cannot be predicted by the existing law” (105). The doubling of language under carnivalization is something Kristeva points to as a direct result of carnival revelry in the middle ages, and consequently transitions directly from a medieval psycho- and socio-linguistic framework dominated by the epic and the symbol to a modern framework dominated by the novel and the Saussurean sign (“The Bounded Text” 49). The transformation of language takes place not merely in the page-based text of epic and novelistic literary modes, but in the realms of social/linguistic space and in the realm of human relations.

For Kristeva, the word is characterized not simply as a point in the “space” of linguistic schema, but as a force, a vector. “The word as minimal textual unit thus turns out to occupy the status of *mediator*, linking structural models to cultural (historical) environment, as well as that of *regulator*, controlling mutations from diachrony to synchrony, i.e., to literary structure” (“Word, Dialogue, Novel” 66). The word as vector moves along the lines of intersection between what Kristeva describes as “textual surfaces” (65). These surfaces can be envisioned as the linguistic mesh of colliding *parôles*, the clash of meaning at the intersection of two minds or more. These vectors are also imagined by Bakhtin, who envisions a complex interplay of push and pull in the field of linguistic meaning (“Discourse and the Novel” 262). Kristeva deals with Bakhtin’s two fields of dialogue and ambivalence. Discussing the dialogical and ambivalent elements of dialogue along the three axes of subject, addressee, and context, each one

having a profound ability to alter the specific meaning of any given word at any given time, Kristeva remarks the “exteriorizing” process that marks the emergence of genre: “*any evolution of literary genres is an unconscious exteriorization of linguistic structures at their different levels. The novel in particular exteriorizes linguistic dialogue*” (“Word, Dialogue, Novel” 66). The “doubling” of language thus opens the infinite possibility for complexity (polysemy) in meaning, as individual *parôles* shape the contours of discourse and meaning-making.

It is important to note that for Kristeva “the word as minimal textual unit” refers to its status as a fundamental unit, not of language, but of dialogue. The distinction between the realms of language (linguistics) and dialogue (dialogics) suggests an interesting discussion of the difference between the *mechanism* of communication and its *function*.¹² Kristeva’s metaphor of the word in language as a textual surface suggests a boundary or transition, one that is constantly renegotiated as the meanings within *parôle* are shifted and sifted. If the individual word is thought of as a force, pushing and being pushed through linguistic space, the novel (ultimately a collection of “words”) must be seen as a complex system of forces, not unlike a turbulent fluid system that is infinitely, fractally twisting and swirling in on itself; similarly, the various connotations within the novel are constantly interplaying and reshaping and recontextualizing as the narrative progresses.¹³ This is to say that the novel is *internally dialogic*, that the different voices of the narrative are in tension with one another, calling and responding to one another, and establishing context for further development, understanding, and conflict. The novel’s internal dialogism can be distinguished from its *externally dialogic* qualities, in which the text itself is in the process of responding and calling out, shaping the context of

the novelistic genre. Graham Allen has pointed out that Kristeva's conceptualization of intertextuality "seems to evade human subjects in favour of the more abstract terms, text and textuality" (36). Generally speaking, Kristeva's focus on the text and its generic interactions, likely influenced by the Formalist insistence on dealing with the text as a cultural artifact, plays down the human element of the speech-act in favor of placing prominence on the discourse of textual material, the interchange, the practice of borrowing and referencing other texts to cast the matter into a new light or forge it into a new medium. However, rather than minimize the importance of the speaking subject, Kristeva's focus is on maximizing the emphasis on social and cultural interaction, what she calls the "historical and social text" (37).

In Kristeva, "I" (that is, the "speaking subject") becomes a powerful social and political tool, the experience of subjectivity being the driving force for change, especially as she reads *H*. Experience and subjectivity elevate the "I" of individual subjects to a par with the author, a par with the bourgeoisie. This, it should be noted, places a great deal of importance on the individualism of the subject: when the "I" becomes a part of the "we," individual subjectivity becomes untenable. The "I" ceases to exist in the collective. The power of the individual, amplified a thousand-fold, is sufficient to oppose and demolish the bourgeoisie, but the power of the collective is sufficient only to replace one bourgeoisie with another—the "untouchables" of yesteryear take their place as the ruling force and in turn declare a new class of "untouchables." This can only be achieved when the individualism of the myriad subjective "I's" is permitted to dissolve the collective of the bourgeoisie.

Kristeva's insistence on the power of "I" in the text of the novel is in this way

reflective of the multiplicity of valid subjectivities imagined in Bakhtin's conception of the polyphonic novel, in which "such an asserted 'I,' hypostasized and unshakeable in its twisted multiplications, conscious of the truth of its *practice*, does not insist on truth for its *speech*. This is not mysticism saying, 'I am truth.' The polylogue says, 'i truth i have a right to lie in the manner that suits me'" (Kristeva, "The Novel as Polylogue" 188; sic). This perhaps most (un)clearly demonstrates the purpose of the speaking subject's unique voice: to attempt meaning-making in the manner that most suits the speaker's intentions. The point of the voice is not to assert truth or falsehood, but to assert one's reality (against pressure to distort it), that is to say their perceived experience of the world, and this is the case for all voices in the narrative, whether they are the narrator, the protagonist, a side character, the writer, or even the reader. Crucially, Kristeva does not merely demonstrate this notion of the voice in the narration of *H* (a novel with no apparent plot), but in the discussion of her own cultural context in reading the novel:

I speak in French and about literature because of Yalta. I mean that because of Yalta, I was obliged to marry in order to have a French passport and to work in France; moreover, because of Yalta I wanted to 'marry' the violence that has tormented me ever since, has dissolved identity and cells, coveted recognition and haunted my nights and my tranquility, caused hatred to well within what is usually called love, in short, has raked me to death. Consequently, as you may have noticed, I have no 'I' any more, no imaginary, if you wish; everything escapes or comes together in theory, or politics, or activism. . . . (161; ellipsis in source)

This section is hardly a *non sequitur*. Kristeva has very purposefully placed the spotlight on her own personal relationship with the text of *H*—and on the emotions evoked in reading it—to point to the fact of the individual subject's capacity to render meaning in the text. The subjective "I" in Kristeva's ideation of intertextuality does not stop in the text. It extends to the reader. In a truly carnivalesque sense of the intersubjectivity of the

acts of reading and writing, Kristeva uses her own subjectivity in reading *H* (her husband's novel) to demonstrate the reader's capacity—as both observer and participant—to shape the meaning of the text, to take the role of performer in the novel's stageless drama, and to reimagine meaning in one's own individual *parôle*.

If Bakhtin sees the word as “heteroglot,” comprising and complicated by all the various meanings imbued from the various languages within language, Kristeva envisions the word as an arena for ideological conflict, an aspect of the word's meaning which she calls the *ideologeme*. Allen explains *ideologeme*: “If we accept that words such as ‘natural’ or ‘justice’ are the subject of immense social conflicts and tensions, then their existence in a text will represent an *ideologeme*” (37). The word is not simply complicated by the internal tension between varying social and ideological connotative attachments; the word *is* the internal tension between the inherited conflicting ideologies of its socio-historical moment. “God bless America” is not simply a patriotic devotion or even a genuine prayer. It is rife with political and ideological irony. All of the religious connotations for the figure of God alone are complicated by thousands of years of philosophical and theological debate. What it means to “bless” can take meanings from the mundane to the cosmic and bring to mind variously images of divine intervention, prosperity, or even the persecution of one's enemies. Even the question of whether America deserves to be blessed or to be punished is a matter of significant debate, given the complicated matter of the nation's history and the perspective of any given individual who utters or hears uttered the phrase “God bless America.” This simple phrase, ideologically loaded as it is, demonstrates the sort of internal tensions that the word embodies as a complex of internal social tension.

Drawing a wider scope, the novel, as a dense and internally dialogic collection of utterances, is necessarily complicated by its own social and political tensions: it is inherently rife with juxtapositions and conflicts. Kristeva's use of the term "intertextuality" does not simply refer to the novel's composition as a multiplicity of regurgitated texts, but to its position as an utterance within the "social text" itself, its function as a vector, a word, within the system of language itself. The novel is an interjection in the public discourse. Like any other speech-act, the novel's internal conflict is reflective of the broader cultural conflict, the *ideologeme*, at work at the time of its utterance. It is an extended dialogue on those matters foremost in the author's cultural (or at least cognitive) moment, and this plays out in the juxtaposition of disparate usages of language found in the voices of the narrative.

In discussing the dialogic, Todorov borrows Kristeva's term "intertextuality" for a more general case of what Bakhtin deals with in the dialogic. He uses the term "dialogism" to more precisely talk about specific dialogical situations (60). It is clear that Todorov is aware of Kristeva's conception of the intertextual as an extension of the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism, and he has no designs on overwriting that framework. However, in framing the "dialogic" within the "intertextual" in this manner, Todorov has blurred Kristeva's distinction between the subject and the text, a separation which he also does not seem interested in preserving.

Todorov is more interested in his introduction of "dialogism" as a representation of worldviews. Discussing the first of Bakhtin's three points of contrast between epic and novel, he remarks, "[D]iscourse here is not only representing but also represented, object of representation; it is the question of the novel's tendency to reproduce a plurality of

languages, discourses, and voices” (88). What is useful for the purposes of this discussion is the distinction between represented subjects and the text, which calls into question where the boundaries lie specifically. Kristeva’s reading of *H* draws pointedly on her experience, not only as a reader but as an *émigrée*, as a woman and a wife, as an intellectual and scholar, as a member of society directly impacted by policy and cultural (and countercultural) tendencies of her time, so it is easy to see through Todorov’s blurring of the lines between author, text, and reader: the voices of the novel are not bound to the words on the page, nor even to the text’s position in culture as a social text, but rather the voices of the narrative extend out into the world beyond the page, calling out even from the minds and experiences of the readers and writers who engage with the text. Indeed, all of these voices exist on a spectrum from the moment of authorship, the “speech-act,” to the time(s) of its reception, even beyond into the social sphere of contemplation and discussion.

The Spectrum of Voices

The novel comprises a polyphony of voices: author, narrator, characters, readers imagined and real. All of these voices come together in the author's orchestration and create an extended dialogue. These voices are in constant tension with one another, creating a struggle of meanings and nuances within the framework of the world reflected through the author's experience, vision, and imagination. This quality is what Bakhtin calls the "internally dialogic" (*Problems* 14). As a creature of language in a social world of connotation and inflection, an author's perspective in the speech-act is influenced by the historico-linguistic context at the moment of authorship. In contrast with Bakhtin's conception of the "internally dialogic" is Kristeva's notion of the "social text" in which all of the meanings associated with any given word at any given time influence the suggestion of the words that she works with, and her decisions on how to use those words in turn influence the language system in which she operates ("The Bounded Text" 37). In this way, the novel both responds to the external linguistic stimuli of the author and recontextualizes the linguistic field for its readers, and can be called "externally dialogic." But language itself cannot be divided into discrete *interior* and *exterior* modes. It is deeply personal and psychological, an individual's use of language shaped by all of their internalizations of personal experience—trauma, struggle, reward, pleasure, desire, longing, loss.

Language is the framework through which we process our subjectivity in the world we inhabit. At the same time, language is highly performative. We shape our actions and our interactions, as it were, as though we were performers in a grand drama. We project ourselves as we wish to be seen (whether that is how we are understood or

not), and we provide context and commentary using language. All of this is to say that *language* is the bridge between the interior realm of the mind and the external domain of society. And the novel, as an extended dialectical practice, provides us with a space to mediate and moderate these internal and external qualities.

The question of whether any given voice or quality of the novel counts as a purely “internal” or “external” one becomes complicated very quickly when the student of the novel begins to ask probing questions. It is easy to provide a classification of “internal” and “external” as simple principles for categorization. Human beings like simple, easy frameworks that allow for the categorization of different elements into this or that discrete slot. However, the “interior” and the “exterior” of the novel are not separated by a clear line, nor even by an observable threshold. One could say that “everything that is exterior in relation to the book, everything that is negative as concerns the book, is produced *within the book*. The other and the threshold can only be written, can only affirm themselves in writing. One emerges from the book only within the book” (Derrida 76).

With reading and writing constituting opposite sides of the same collective speech-act between reader and writer, meaning can only be generated where they find common ground in the text. If the text, as a social text, comprises all aspects of the cultural context that touch the author, it must also include all those which touch the reader. The question of what counts as “inside” and “outside” becomes muddled when the door is hanging open. The air inside the house and the air outside mix and mingle in the doorway, sunlight falls across the threshold, and the individual standing in the doorway can be told to “come inside,” even though he may benefit from the shelter

provided by the roof against the rain. How much more so the text, when both speaking and listening subjects are wholly immersed in its context? The social text extends beyond the limitations of the page through language, through society.

The concepts of “internal” and “external” dialogue can become muddled when the question is asked which voices in the novel are to be considered “internal” and which are to be considered “external.” How difficult does it become to distinguish the “inside” from the “outside” when there is no door? What if there is no “exit?” Or when the wall where the doorway should be is designed to be open? Or when the only barrier between the inside and outside is a series of columns? What if the roof is open? Or what if there is no roof? Those inventions of the author intended to maintain the internal tension of the novel mingle with those outside influences that shape the author’s understanding and influence the intention of his work. Imagined as a house, the narrative is an open structure without doors, walls, or a roof, a space without clear boundaries between the “interior” and the “exterior,” a space into which writer and reader can come and go as they please.

Narrator

As a case in point, it serves to consider a few voices distinguished in the author’s work. Let us first consider the voice of the narrator. To what extent is he truly “interior” to the novel? It is easy to think of the narrator as a purely interior voice. He is our Virgil, our guide into the journey on which the reader embarks. He is the author’s ambassador, the representative of her voice. By necessity, one might think, his voice must be very close to the author’s, indeed. However, the matter once again becomes complicated when a couple of examples are studied closely. What is to be done with narrators like those found in *Tristram Shandy* or *Don Juan*? Both narrators are examples of figures who are

somewhat off-center from the author: they are both played for a joke by the author. In the case of *Tristram Shandy*, that joke is partially rooted in the fact that the story can never seem to escape the narrator's incessant rambling over inconsequential details—in all nine of the volumes that were published, the eponymous character whom the narrator represents never progresses beyond the age of five—but more specifically in making a mockery of the narrative conventions observed by Sterne's contemporaries.¹⁴ In the case of *Don Juan*, Byron's joke is derived from the narrator's imperfect knowledge of his own rhetorical situation, that he represents a figure whom his author, Lord Byron, despised—the “epicist.” These examples demonstrate that the unity of the narrator's voice and the author's is not perfect, but there is more. Because these narrators represent characters, they are necessarily exterior to the author's own person and worldview, informed as they are by various voices and perspectives which have been encountered over the course of the author's life and in readers' encounter with the scripted text.

It should be pointed out that the deeply internalized and internally dialogic narrative style in *Tristram Shandy* does not merely serve as mockery for its own sake, but as Sterne's interrogation of—even his challenge against—the predominant theory of cognition provided by John Locke and generally accepted across Europe during that time.¹⁵ In writing his novel, Sterne drew from the cultural text of contemporary cognitive philosophy, found some questions of his own which demanded answers, and proceeded to demonstrate by example the relevance of his questions through an intensely, even comically, introspective take on the personal biographical novel. Sterne used his novel to engage in a critical dialogue with the philosophical theory of his day, drawing on the social text and, in his turn, contributing his own unique voice to its fabric.

Don Juan similarly tackles issues prevalent in the study of contemporary poetics, in Byron's characteristically bombastic polemics. The narrator in this example serves as a case study, a representative of the poetical ambitions Byron is seeking to interrogate. To say only that the narrator is the butt of a joke by the author—true though this may be—is to ignore the more necessary function that he performs: not simply someone to make fun of, the narrator is an ambassador for the “epicist” framework of literature. His poetical ambitions represent an effort to return to the *epic monologism* of a bygone era, an effort ultimately doomed to fail thanks to the new dominion of the novel. The narrator, the would-be epic voice of *Don Juan*, was always doomed to fail in these ambitions precisely because the dialectical age in which he sought to fix his *magnum opus* had already ended: he was trying to contribute to a conversation that was already over. Byron understood this well, and in choosing an “epic poet” for his narrator, and then mismatching him with perhaps the most inappropriate hero to chronicle (Don Juan could be considered a legendary figure in a certain sense of the term, true enough, but he is hardly an adequate representative of the *heroic*), he asks if it is now time in the new age dominated by the novel to pursue something new, something different.

The narrator, then, is not always a figure representative of the author. In fact, the alignment of his worldview with the author's agenda is hardly even necessary. First and foremost, the narrator is the reader's primary conversant. At times the two may agree or disagree, but the two are always engaging in dialogue. Even in *The Inferno*, Virgil serves to answer Dante's questions about the world around him. Of course, *The Inferno* is thoroughly representative of a worldview built on retribution and punishment. It is monolithic to its core, as the journey through Hell is entirely given to voice the author's

desires that wrongs (and even slights) be punished. However, the questions Dante poses to Virgil, and the questions posed to the narrator by the reader, necessarily invite responses that must be interrogated.

This is why the age of the novel has left the epic behind. The monolithic framework of the epic brooks no argument or discussion; all of the actors and participants must maintain their roles, their characters, lest the performance devolve into chaos. This applies as much to the readers as it does to the narrators, heroes, and characters. The reader's role in the epic is that of the audience, the observers gathered to stand witness to the tragedy, to reaffirm the framework of its worldview. In the novel, however, the reader is not merely an observer but an active participant in the process of communication. This distinction is subtle but important, since the reader-as-participant has the power (in fact the compulsion) to change the narrative and its meaning in a way that the audience-as-observer is not capable of doing. In receiving the narrator's utterance, the reader bears the responsibility of interpreting and responding to the text, thus reshaping, once again, the social text through that response.

Reader

If the novel is dialogic, then all participants in the act of reading must take part in the discussion. This includes the reader. As in the carnival, in which observers are also performers, so too in the novel are the readers actively engaged in the process of dialogue with the text. It cannot be overstated how important the reader is to the process of meaning-making in the novel. It is the reader that gives meaning to the text, the reader whose responsibility and privilege is its interpretation. The novel contributes to the wider social text, but the social text cannot be understood if it is not first read. The fabric of

language cannot communicate if there are no listeners to respond to the speaker. The reader is the most crucial element of the act of writing, without whom it can serve no purpose. Writers and narrators both are well aware of the importance of the reader. It is for the reader's benefit that the writer writes, that the narrator narrates. As such, both writer and narrator anticipate the presence of the reader, the purpose in the act of reading.

One of the more profound ways in which *Tristram Shandy* took the novel in a new direction was in the use of its narrative device. The novel takes the form of a personal memoir, though the specific addressee (if there is one) is not made clear. The epistolary novel was quite popular during this period, placing a special emphasis on the relationship between the writer and the reader. The readers of *Pamela* are not the narrator's intended audience (those would be her parents), but there is quite a lot that can be learned about the narrator and her addressees through what she feels they need to know and in those topics on which she chooses to place emphasis. In *Tristram Shandy*, the relationship with the reader, while much more ambiguous, is more interesting. It can be assumed that Tristram is writing his personal account for the benefit of certain of his contemporaries, and so these individuals could be thought to share similar cultural values with him. At the same time, however, Tristram himself is something of an odd duck, constantly distracted by the details of his circumstances, by his compulsion to fill the wax museum of his life (his story) with the furnishings, ornaments, clutter, and litter that would make for a perfect facsimile of his life circumstances, regardless of whether the reader needs to know any of the details which he is so desperate to supply. And yet, as the narrator, he has determined that these endlessly fiddly details are a necessary

component in the story that he is trying to tell, the “complete story.” What Tristram has failed to grasp (in Sterne’s satirization) is that the readership can only retain so much of the plot, that the narrator’s responsibility to communicate his story effectively means curating those details that are necessary and adequately discerning which details are not.

For the readership of *Don Juan*, Byron’s narrator is interested in courting those who are interested in the pursuit of the high literary tradition. His “epical pretensions” make this his key audience by necessity. If he desires to be remembered alongside Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, it is critical that he manages to persuade the readers of classical epics, especially the scholars of the epic, that his work deserves to be among their number. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that Byron has in mind an entirely different set of readers, namely the literary society of his day, some of whom were fellow Romantics and would have scoffed at the classicist notion that the old forms—including the epic—must be preserved for art or poetry to be considered “great.”

This is not to say that Byron was not interested in being considered a great poet, but rather that his own ambitions, and those of his peers, necessitated an interrogation of what “great poetry” must look like, and so his readership rather focused on those practicing poets of his time who were similarly interested in pursuing the question of great poetry and its various and variable forms. This complicated readership contributes to the irony of the text in such a way that it can sometimes be unclear what is being said for whose benefit. This, of course, is the source of the humor in *Don Juan*, the complicated interplay of puns and playful language, doubled and tripled meaning, and the unclear relationship between the author, the text, and the reader. This is why Bakhtin considers *Don Juan* to be an example of the “novelized” epic; indeed, critics consider the

poem to be a “mock epic,” a term which points to the poem’s carnivalesque nature, its distinctly Menippean mode of satire.

In both cases, the relationship between the narrator and the reader is complicated. The significance of different registers in *Tristram Shandy* is often difficult for the reader to discern, and so readers must supply their own reasoning for why the winding of the clock, for example, is a detail that was necessary to be shared with us. The narrator’s cluelessness as he recounts his version of the Don Juan story is simultaneously endearing and laughable for the reader, forcing a reevaluation of the text itself. The reader is not only crucial to these texts’ ability to be read and the satire understood, but central to the dialogue in which they participate: “What we hear, . . . is the *displaced* voice which the reader lends, by proxy, to the discourse: the discourse is speaking according to the reader’s interests” (Barthes 151). The reader’s voice must be considered in any discussion of the different voices of the text. It isn’t enough to say that the text speaks to the reader, or even that the text anticipates the reader. In a very real sense, the text *includes* the reader; as the reader’s cultural situation changes, so too will their contextual lens and thus the meaning of the text.

Heroes and Characters

The heroes of the epic and of tragedy serve as object lessons, the recipients of the consequences of their actions, and a warning to heed the tragic arc of the epic’s moralism. We watch Oedipus as he slowly learns the consequences of his rage and inhospitality, driving him into unwitting incest and madness, bringing devastation on his city of Thebes, and we have to wonder whether his fate could have been avoided and, if so, how. We witness the wrath of Achilles as well as his eagerness to win his destined

glory, even as his wrath and his pursuit of glory conspire together to bring him to his doom. We listen in horror as Medea's children shriek (conveniently off-stage) of their deaths at the hands of their own mother, and we wonder how the gods can justify her behavior when her spite for Jason takes her to such acts of cruelty. In each case, these ancient tragic arcs provide us with a different framework to learn something of the nature of the world, a framework that projects itself as solid as the bedrock on which the ancient temples were built.

When we consider the cosmic "truths" of the ancient tragedies, however, we find something lacking. The equivocation of Oedipus' fate with that of Thebes is tied to the ancient belief in the divine right to rule, the gods' blessings upon the wise and noble rulers (and their curses upon the wicked or tragically flawed) falling down onto their hapless subjects in kind. Achilles' fate was a product of the ancient trope of death in glory, but thousands of other Greek and Trojan heroes raged and died at Ilius with nary a mention of their names in the epic cycle. Medea's revenge upon Jason through the death of his children is connected to the ancient understanding that a man's legacy is held in the children of his house, a legacy from which Jason had already severed his own children with Medea in the act of abandoning them. Prodding at these inconsistencies in the ancient epics yields a shortfall in the supposed universal truths they convey.

However, in reading the novel, the large-scale universals fall away. The individual, competing voices of the novel's protagonists and the characters they encounter give us a variety of perspectives to consider. There may be some individuals with whom we sympathize, others whom we may demonize, but all represented voices in the text are uniquely individuated subjects. The power of the novel is not simply its

ability to bring us into the world of the narrative, but its ability to challenge notions of subjective experience, to locate in others points of commonality where one can understand another's motivations.

The hero of the novel is the focal character of the narrative. It is through the lens of the protagonist's experience that the rest of the narrative is filtered, so that the context of their journey colors their many experiences and ours. The story of *Great Expectations* would have played out differently if Pip were a bit more selfless. *Don Quixote* would never have taken place if the hero were aware of how ridiculous his quest had been. *Tristram Shandy* could not have been narrated by anyone but Tristram himself. In a certain sense, the novel begins within the monolithic framework of the protagonist's own worldview, the *epic monologism* of their own individuality. And yet, even from the start, the narrator's relationship with the protagonist has already complicated that empirical and monolithic framework.

The narrator of *Great Expectations* is significantly older and more experienced than his younger counterpart, lending interpretations of his story of which his younger self could not possibly have been aware. The narrator of *Don Quixote* is very much aware of how laughable the Don and Sancho Panza are. The narration of *Tristram Shandy* very much relies on conventions the narrator overuses or uses incoherently, drawing attention to those conventions in ways he did not intend (thus satirizing them). Even before the story has begun, the protagonist meets his first and most critical challenger in the person of the narrator, who serves as an important foil against his otherwise monological journey. However, the hero's story would be very short indeed if that were the only resistance he meets. No, the worldview of the protagonist is truly tested when he

encounters the other characters of the story, as this is where he begins to meet those who will respond or react to his behavior.

The Affirming Subject

When we read a novel, our narrator invites us along on a journey with their protagonist. These are not always sympathetic individuals, and as we experience more of their reality, we encounter other perspectives in the characters they describe, other identities and modes of being, other ways of thinking. Novelistic fiction is a space in which we might encounter all kinds of different understandings, and many of those ways of thinking will challenge our own internalized realities with new possibilities, some of which will be exciting, some of which will be confusing, and some which will even be alarming. When exposed to a radically different reality from our own, how do we respond? Do we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to be challenged by something foreign to our own understanding? Can we admit that our perspective is limited? At what point do we shut the door to new experiences? At what thresholds do we stop ourselves from exploring further? When we encounter another subject in the novel, do we as a participant in the narrative acknowledge their subjectivity? Do we say, “thou art?”

The novel is a continuum between the author and the audience, and its constituent voices represent a spectrum. All of the voices within the novel, the character, the narrator, the author’s own voice and those of the characters represented therein represent the chorus of thoughts and ideas, wills and desires, anguish, frustration, struggle, triumph. It need not be stated that the act of reading can be highly personal. We only need to read a handful of personal experiences of poetry to see that what we read when we read depends just as much on the reader as it depends on the words on the page—perhaps (*pace*

Barthes) even more so. When we read poetry, we are asked to focus on our interpretation, the connotations that are evoked, our internalized associations between words, images, ideas, experiences, emotions, our lived experiences as thinking, feeling beings. When we read an epic, we are presented with a framework for understanding the world we inhabit, a treatise for understanding humanity and nature. But with the novel, we are asked to empathize with a plurality of other worldviews, to consider an alternative to our own unique perspectives, and perhaps to consider an alternative socio-historical context from our own.

Subjective affirmation is a crucial element of the polyphonic novel. Because a true plurality of voices in the polyphonic novel requires those voices to be disunited from the “voice” of the metanarrative, because the disparate voices must be allowed to pursue their own ends, their own subjective rationalization for their actions, it is also necessary that within the context of that narrative those disparate voices find their own validity; they must be affirmed by another subject in the narrative. In discussing the “affirming subject” first introduced by Vyacheslav Ivanov, Bakhtin describes “the ethico-religious postulate determining the *content* of the novel. . . . The heroes suffer destruction because they cannot wholeheartedly affirm the other, ‘thou art.’ Affirmation (and nonaffirmation) of someone else’s ‘I’ by the hero—this is the theme of Dostoevsky’s work” (*Problems* 10). Of course, Bakhtin finds that Ivanov fatally monologizes this entire principle in his study. Nevertheless, this “affirming subject” is one of the crucial elements identified by Bakhtin in the development of the polyphonic novel, the ability of the hero (and by extension, the reader) to empathize—or the inability to do so—with another subjectivity’s experience of their own reality.

The reader is granted a (perhaps not always very) honest glimpse inside the head of the narrator and with it an opportunity (perhaps, or perhaps not) of better understanding him. The author invites the reader along to explore the narrator's worldview (among many others), guiding the reader along the hero's journey. And as the hero encounters one situation and another and then another, as the reader is exposed to the hero's choices and language, the author invites the audience to better see the hero for who he is, perhaps who he desires to be, who he might change into. The reader is exposed to new characters as the hero continues on their journey, characters who will react to the actions of the hero or to the goings-on of the world around them or to various unseen stimuli which lead to further development of the plot, and the author asks the reader to consider who is worthy of sympathy, who earns the reader's respect, whom the reader will despise. Each character represents a model, a worldview, for understanding their own reality.

The central point from which the spectrum of voices radiates outward is the text. Given the highly social nature of the act of reading, especially that of reading novels, it makes the most sense for us to think of the "text" in the Kristevan sense, that is the "social text," not simply the hard paper-and-ink copy of the novel before us, but the carefully stitched-together patchwork of fabrics drawn by the author into the novel's composite material, all of the varying influences they have encountered, internalized, and reproduced in some form or other, altered as it may be. This form of the text is expansive, of course, but rather than limit the scope of one's reading, it is crucial to develop a broad understanding of the author's experience in order to best understand all of the potential worldviews that can be represented within each unique voice.

Conclusion

The spectrum of voices encountered in the novel provides a plurality of perspectives for the reader to grapple with. We strive with them for meaning and we challenge them in order to make better sense of our own realities. No voice in the text is quite like another, no matter how similar any two might be. And yet, through the narrative of the novel, we can learn from the plurality of perspectives, in terms of both what we believe and what we reject. The narrative of the novel stands not as a sermon preaching the reality of its worldview, but rather as a debate interrogating our own perspectives. We can choose to accept what it teaches us or to deny it, but for better or worse, the novel causes us to grow and to consider the possibilities of perspectives beyond our own.

Coda: Dialogue and Affirmation in the Narrative of *Embassytown*

The narrative of China Miéville's novel, *Embassytown*, is one that is preoccupied first and foremost with language and intersubjectivity. The story follows Avice Benner Cho, an individual who is witness to the events leading up to a confrontation between the human settlement of Embassytown on the planet of Arieka, and the species of the Ariekei (or Hosts) who are native to the planet. On Arieka, the indigenous species and the human settlers are able to communicate with one another through special human agents called Ambassadors, natives of Embassytown who are the only individuals capable of speaking the Hosts' "Language" in such a way that they can understand. The conflict begins with the introduction of a new Ambassador named EzRa, who is not native to Arieka and is introduced to Embassytown by the human empire of Bremen as a test, "[a]n operation to strip our Ambassadors of power and hobble self-government" (234). Because the planet of Arieka is at the edge of explored space, "Embassytown was going to be a way station" (235). For this purpose, the empire had an interest in disrupting the Ambassador's effective monopoly on the practice of speaking the Ariekei Language so that they could assert dominance over the colony. EzRa's use of language had the unintentional effect of causing among the Hosts a mass-addiction of sorts to the sound of EzRa's voice, a consequence of the coincidental facts of the Hosts' sharply referential linguistic psychology and EzRa's fundamentally fractured Language.

The Hosts' dependence on EzRa's voice causes their society to descend almost into ruin, and a class of desperate and frustrated Hosts begin mutilating and depriving themselves of hearing to break free from the addiction. Their resentment pushes their relationship with humanity to the brink of a war that is only averted by the successful

development of a new mode of interpreting and employing language which fundamentally changes the Hosts' perception of reality and frees them of the addiction that had plagued them.

China Miéville is a British writer and critic who is best known for his speculative fiction, for which he has earned numerous awards. Miéville has also authored *Beyond Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* ("China Miéville," *Gale Literature*). He earned his PhD in International Law at the London School of Economics and his interest in international politics and cultural exchange shows in his work ("China Miéville," *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*). Like most hard science fiction, the narrative of *Embassytown* is heavily conceptual. The plot is driven in anticipation of the singular moment in which the evolution of a new consciousness is catalyzed, when conceptualizations of existence are fundamentally shifted to acknowledge and affirm the subjectivity of the other.

Miéville's *Embassytown* is first and foremost preoccupied with the principles of language as a process of meaning-making. Throughout the text, there are references to linguistic principles and the narrative experiments with communication and perception through introspective questions, probing the relationship between thought and language. There are many different voices in *Embassytown*, each one competing with the others to represent its unique perspective on existence and subjectivity. It is in these voices that Miéville's questions about the nature of consciousness and its connection to language are to be found. The novel uses semiotic principles and psychoanalysis to probe the connection between language and phenomenology, dramatizing the ideas behind referentiality and signification as different ways of interpreting reality.

In “Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory,” Miéville contends with different theories of science fiction, its traditional juxtaposition with fantasy, and its purpose in addressing scientific inquiry. Specifically, Miéville is interested in exploring the question of how dependent the genre of science fiction is upon the plausibility of scientific principles, or whether the emphasis on “hard science” in discussions of science fiction misses the point of the genre: “it is vital to insist, as [H. G.] Wells does, on the potentially absolute discontinuity between the two [i.e., between empirical reality and rigorous and rational science], on the fact that the effect is the result of a strategy, or a *game*, played by writer and, often, reader, based not on reality-claims but plausibility-claims that hold purely within the text” (Miéville, “Cognition as Ideology” 236). For Miéville, it is not the fact—or lack—of H. G. Wells’ adherence to provable scientific principle, for example, that makes his work science fiction; rather it is his rhetorical maneuver of utilizing textually plausible ideas—rather than facts—to ask questions about the nature of reality.

This attitude toward science fiction as a forum for such inquiry is evident in the methodology Miéville uses to probe ideas about language and consciousness in *Embassytown*. Avice, the narrator, introduces the reader to what Embassytowners call the “Tallying Mystery” when she is left to ponder in what specific way the Hosts perceive individual (non-Ambassador) humans: “did the Hosts consider each Ambassador [comprising a pair of tandem genetic clones] one mind, double-bodied people? And if so, did they think the rest of us half-things, irrelevances, machines?” (Miéville 96). Questions about the perception of self and other are central themes in Avice’s (the protagonist’s) narration of the events in the novel, and it is through her own revelations

that Miéville shows us his working theory of language, namely that the acknowledgment of the other is a necessary component to peaceful coexistence. The nature of language and consciousness is central to the development of the plot in *Embassytown*, both to the nature of the ensuing conflict and to its resolution. It is literally broken language that instigates the conflict, the breakdown of communication that causes the conflict's escalation into war, and finally the reconstruction of communication that allows the war to be brought to a peaceful stasis.

Voices and Barriers

As an example of a polyphonic novel, *Embassytown* gives the reader many voices to consider. The novel is set on the fictional planet of Arieka, a world at the farthest edge of human expansion into space, in the far distant future of humanity's next evolutionary phase: *homo diaspora*. In the imagined future of the novel's setting, humanity has already encountered and entered into various political relationships with many species from across known space, called *exots*, or "exo-terrestrials." For any of the exot species members of humanity come across, they are able to reach across the linguistic barrier and communicate with them, initially using the specialized practice of "Accelerated Contact Linguistics" to quickly facilitate interspecies communication in the early stages of contact (Miéville, *Embassytown* 51).

In most cases, the ability to use language to refer to something beyond itself, the process of signification, is a shared quality of communication between species. Signification operates on the tenuous relationship between signifier and signified allowing in these cases for complex meaning and nuance. For nearly all languages in the novel, the flexibility of the sign, of the relationship between signifier and signified,

permits different species to communicate with one another. The Saussurean principle of “arbitrariness,” shared across so many dramatically different language structures, actually allows meaning to be negotiated between the various linguistic frameworks as various interstellar species interact with one another. However, this is not the case with Language, the interestingly ambiguous name given to the double-voiced language of the Ariekei (also called Hosts).

The Hosts who make their home on Ariekei have two mouths, two voices, and so they speak a language that utilizes two separate utterances simultaneously to create meaning. Behind the doubled voices is a single unified mind which the Hosts sense as they are hearing Language being spoken, and without which they are unable to comprehend the meaning of the spoken words (Miéville, *Embassytown* 56). In the initial phase of humanity’s contact, attempts are made to recreate the language of the Hosts and initiate communication. The Hosts’ Language is not especially difficult to learn, and the first linguists to arrive on Ariekei are able to successfully reconstruct and reproduce the spoken component (51). However, the difficulty comes when they try to speak with the Hosts in their own language and are unable to be understood.

A long time prior to the novel’s setting, the first linguists to study the Hosts’ language, Urich and Becker, are quickly able to work out the specifics of how Language works for the Hosts they encounter but no matter how many times they imitate the exact sound of the words they’ve learned, it never seems to register with the Hosts that Urich and Becker are trying to speak with them. In a desperate attempt to get any result at all, they scream a greeting together at a Host, united by their frustration, and then “[i]t asked what we were, and what we had said” (54). Eventually, humanity develops a successful

practice of communicating with the Hosts through the Ambassadors, specially cloned pairs of human beings who are born, reared, and trained for the sole purpose of speaking Language. The cloned pairs are brought up in constant companionship, acting and speaking not as two individuals, but as one: “for lifetimes, the last two megahours, our representatives hadn’t been twins but doppels, cloned. It was the only viable way. They were bred in twos in the Ambassador-farm, tweaked to accentuate certain psychological qualities” (58). Each pair is effectively regarded by Embassytown society as a unit, and they share neural links to further synchronize their thoughts. It is the shared mind of the Ambassadors, carefully cultivated throughout their upbringing and technologically enhanced by an embedded neural link, to which the Hosts respond when they converse. When the attempt is first made to simulate the Host’s Language with technology, the Hosts fail to hear anything but noise because there is no mind behind the electronically echoed words; similarly, they are unable to understand that two separate humans speaking Language are trying to communicate with them. Only when the mind behind the words possesses a unified intent can the Hosts comprehend that an attempt at communication is being made.

This fact is both supported and complicated by the case of Ambassador EzRa, the first pair of separate individuals (Ez and Ra are not a cloned pair, nor even related) seemingly successful at speaking Language the Hosts are able to understand.

Ez was the Cut, Ra the Turn. They spoke well, beautifully. I had heard enough of it to tell that. Their accent was good, their timing good. Their voices were well suited. They said to the Hosts that it was an honour to meet them. $\frac{\textit{su hail}}{\textit{shura su hail}}$, they said. Good greetings. . . . We were busy listening to them speak, and gauging their abilities. We didn’t notice everything change. I don’t think any of us at that moment noticed the reactions of the Hosts. (89)

The Hosts' reception of EzRa's Language is revealed to have been the product of Ez's latent, though narratively unspecified "sensitivities," facilitated by empathic implants that allow him to synchronize his mind with Ra's while they are speaking together:

"Telepathy's impossible. But with the right drugs, and implants and receivers, you can get brains into a certain phase" (232). However, their success is complicated by the inherent double-mindedness of their speech, an implied domineering tendency in Ez's link with Ra, that breaks the true synchronicity of their language and causes the Hosts to become—very literally—intoxicated on exposure to their voices.

When Avice is discussing the recent development of the Hosts' dependence on EzRa's broken Language, she consults Bren, a former counterpart in the Ambassador pair BrenDan before his partner Dan had died. As one who was trained to be (part of) an Ambassador, Bren is knowledgeable about the particulars of Language and how it affects the Hosts' understanding of the world around them. Bren tries to explain to Avice the cognitive dislocation triggering the Hosts' addiction to EzRa's voice:

"[I]f they hear words they understand, they know are words, but it's fractured? Ambassadors speak with empathic unity. That's our job. What if that unity's there and not-there? . . . It's impossible, is what. Right there in its form. And that is intoxicating. And they *mainline* it. It's like a hallucination, a there-not-there. A contradiction that gets them high." (169)

The Hosts' Language is built on statements of truth. Words carry meaning in Language because of the fact of their reference to objects of fact. The Hosts lack the capacity to use Language to refer to things that are nonexistent: "they don't, you know, *signify*. And what they call our minds aren't minds at all" (Miéville, *Embassytown* 81). For the Hosts, Language is not the semiotic process of utilizing sound-images to indicate concepts, abstract or otherwise; rather, Language is the direct conveyance of ideas between minds.

When a Host hears the words of Language, they are sensing the mind of the speaker and receiving the intent of the words directly. Avice paraphrases for the reader her understanding of her academic husband's explication of the early linguists' (Urich and Becker's) manuscript account of the Hosts' language function: "Their language is organised noise, like all of ours are, but for them each word is a funnel. Where to us each word *means* something, to the Hosts, each is an opening. A door, through which the thought of that referent, the thought itself that reached for that word, can be seen" (55).

The "truth" of the spoken word is the foundation of the Hosts' consciousness. This is why the Hosts can only comprehend language when there is a mind behind the doubled words, and when the mind is unified in intent of meaning. Periodically, the Hosts engage in a Festival of Lies, a practice that was gifted to them by humanity in the early stages of contact (83). During these events, Ambassadors demonstrate their ability to state untruths, something that is incomprehensible to the Host mind (or "impossible" in Bren's words), and then different Ariekei "competitors" make similar, largely unsuccessful attempts to do the same. These carnival performances are hugely popular among the Ariekei. Hearing words and meanings that are incongruent with reality causes a sensation of euphoria in the Hosts' cognitive sensibilities, and they become "literally lie-drunk" (84). What makes the Language spoken by EzRa so intoxicating to the Ariekei is the fact of the dis-unity of the two minds (Ez's and Ra's) as an impossibility that they are nonetheless able to sense in the Ambassador's spoken words.¹⁶

The fact of the Hosts' inability to comprehend meaning outside of their deeply empirical linguistic framework is rooted in a wider inability to comprehend modes of consciousness beyond their own special and cultural ideation of existence. That is to say

that they are unable to understand Language as spoken by non-Ariekei, non-Ambassador voices because they are unable to comprehend the possibility of a mind outside of their own existential experience. Throughout the novel, the narrator, Avice, tells us of her anxieties over the incomprehensibility of the Hosts' minds and whether the Hosts recognize thinking consciousnesses among the individual humans they encounter (an incapacity to apprehend an "Affirming Subject"). "Hosts, the indigenes, in whose city we had been graciously allowed to build Embassytown, were cool, incomprehensible presences. Powers like subaltern gods, which sometimes watched us as if we were interesting, curious dust" (Miéville, *Embassytown* 14).

This anxiety of the divide between humanity and the Hosts is manifested in the interactions between the Hosts and the Ambassadors, the only humans who are capable of speaking with them. Because the Hosts do not interact with human beings, there is an invisible wall between the two populations. The Ambassadors are able to traverse this divide for a time, but even their existence in human society is a complicated one, their doubled persons united in a single identity. During the earlier chronology of the narrative, Avice is engaged in a sexual relationship with an Ambassador named CalVin, and when she discusses their relations with her husband, Scile, they have something of a disagreement about whether CalVin constitutes one person or two (80-81).¹⁷ It is Scile's assertion (Avice's husband's), that CalVin is not truly one mind, like the Hosts think they are hearing, but two. In an allegory of postmodern semiotics, Miéville writes, "It's like we can only talk to them [the Hosts] because of a mutual misunderstanding" (82). Here, the character Scile points to the fundamental problem of communicating with the Ariekei, specifically that they conceptualize the Ambassadors as a single person; the implication

which Avice must wrestle with is the notion that the Hosts see individual humans as broken, half-creatures, incapable of thought as they conceive it.

The narrative comes to its primary conflict when Ambassador EzRa are introduced to the Hosts and speak their broken words. As a result, the Hosts who are present immediately become addicted to the sound of their voice. Over the coming days, word spreads among the Hosts and more and more come to Embassytown to experience the effects of EzRa's voice. The Hosts develop a dependency, calling EzRa the "god-drug" and Ariekeine society begins to break down (Miéville, *Embassytown* 194). This is problematic for Embassytown since the residents of the settlement are dependent upon the Host society functioning to survive. Matters are made significantly more complicated after Ra is murdered by Ez, severing the supply of the god-drug's voice which cannot be replicated.

The Hosts go into a severe withdrawal from which they cannot recover: "there was no cold turkey for them; EzRa's speech had insinuated too deep into them for that" (207). Many of the Hosts become mindlessly violent in their desperate need for the sound of a voice that cannot be reproduced: "The most desperate oratees, incapable of planning, would come full tilt at the barricades, leap far and fast up them, grabbing with giftwings, shouting in Language" (219). Some of the Hosts find that they are able to free themselves of the dependence by removing their anatomical equivalent of ears, called "fanwings" (209-210). Resentful of what has been done to them, and now unable to communicate with humanity, the "Languageless" Hosts begin a speechless war against Embassytown in order to preserve the future of their species.¹⁸

The voice of the Ariekei is demonstrated on multiple occasions to be

fundamentally incompatible with that of human speech and thought. The incomprehensibility of Host psychology is an internalized assumption of Embassytown society, each and every one of the residents born and raised under the assumption that understanding the Hosts and their way of thinking is impossible for humans, and that Hosts are also incapable of understanding that humans can think or speak at all: “We can’t learn it [i.e., the Hosts’ Language], . . . All we can do’s teach ourselves something with the same noises, which works quite differently” (Miéville, *Embassytown* 56-57); “As if any of us could speak to Hosts” (117); “it’s some Ariekeine thing, we wouldn’t understand” (177). The inscrutability of the Hosts’ mentality is the fundamental root of the “jury-rigged” misunderstanding that passes for communication between humans and the Ariekei, via the Ambassadors, and the narrative’s outlook on the nature of this fundamental unintelligibility is bleak. A solution to this desperate situation is found, however, when Avice begins to question the supposed incomprehensibility of the Ariekeine worldview.

I’d always stressed, as I’d had it stressed to me, how incommensurable Terre [i.e., human] and Ariekeine thinking were. But I thought about who it was had told me that, those many times. Staff, and Ambassadors with a monopoly on comprehension. It was giddy to feel suddenly that I was allowed and able to make any sense of Ariekeine actions. What I saw there was dissent, and I understood it. (262)

This moment of realization punctuates Avice’s idea of helping the Ariekei to learn how to use Language to signify, rather than merely to reference.

This is the moment of the narrative when the reader begins to see some hope that the Ariekeine war will come to an end through mutual understanding. This moment culminates in the transformation of Ariekeine thought. The quantum leap is sparked by the

moment when the Ariekes named Spanish Dancer is finally able to recognize individual humans (rather than Ambassador pairs) as thinking, speaking creatures capable of thought and consciousness (not broken, non-conscious entities). “I don’t believe we could have overturned generations of Ariekene thinking, even with so avant-garde a group as this, had they not known somewhere to some degree, that each of us was a thinking thing” (307).

This realization, a moment toward which both species have been struggling throughout the narrative, allows the Ariekai to transform their perceptions of consciousness, to use their Language in signification rather than solely in reference, and to open the door to a new reality full of other thinking, rational beings. It allows them to use Language for untruths as well as truth-claims, and it provides them a door out of their ingrained perceptions and into the wider inter-linguistic forum. The reason why the Hosts continue to participate in the Festival of Lies (apart from the euphoria of being lie-drunk) is because they are grasping at a version of Language that goes beyond pure referentiality. The most effective participant in the Festival of Lies, in the days before the war erupts, is a Host by the name of $\frac{surl}{tesh-eche}$, who manages to push the limits of what the Host Language will allow in order to find and break those limitations, at first by constructing sentences in such a way that it can cut itself in the middle so that the final utterance which completes the truth-claim is left off. Scile finds out that $\frac{surl}{tesh-echer}$ has been “training itself into untruth. It’s using these weird constructions so it can say something true, then interrupt itself, to lie” (141).

These attempts by certain of the Hosts at lying are in and of themselves “their longtime striving for lies, to make Language mean how they wanted[,]” attempts to

master (and ultimately to relearn) Language. When that transformation of their Language is finally achieved, their entire conception of reality is transformed: “What they spoke now weren’t things or moments anymore but the thoughts of them, pointings-at; meaning no longer a flat facet of essence; signs ripped from what they signed. It took the lie to do that” (311). With their minds freed of the shackles to a referential, positivistic ontology, the transformed Ariekei are also freed of their dependence on the voice of the god-drug, since the impossibility of broken Language is no longer impossible in this new mentality. The development of the lie in *Embassytown* is demonstrative of the most important discovery in Host society, as it allows them to pass from a reliance on simile and reference into the realm of metaphor and signification.

Intersubjectivity

The plot of *Embassytown* serves as a sort of allegory for the importance of intersubjectivity not simply to communication but to a harmonious existence between two very different societies. The climax of *Embassytown* comes in the moment when the first members of the Ariekei species are finally able to affirm the subjectivity of their human counterparts, and their conception of language is transformed in one dramatic and irreversible instant. For the majority of the moment, the Ariekei are groping toward a language of signification, although they do not understand that this is what they are looking for and so are not able to locate it. They are locked in a psycholinguistic framework that is dependent on referentiality to the “real,” which is to say that their minds are incapable of utilizing language in any way that doesn’t point to something in physical reality. Words in Ariekei Language are effectively unidirectional, inflexible, unbreakable. The Ariekei who participate in the Festival of Lies, and those afterward

during the conflict with Embassytown who want to continue pursuing lies, do so in pursuit of a linguistic paradigm that they fundamentally are incapable of comprehending. They know they are searching for something new in Language, but they are not able to find it because, quite simply, the forms in which the Hosts cognate prevent them from knowing what they are looking for.

The catalyzing moment of *Embassytown*'s narrative action is the moment in which the Ariekei finally learn how to use signifying language instead of referential language. This moment manifests Bakhtin's concept of the "affirming I," the "thou art" referred to in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, and it starts when Avice starts trying to make herself knowable to the Ariekei. For the duration of the novel, the protagonist is unsure whether the Hosts are even capable of being understood. This uncertainty toward the compatibility of human and Ariekei thought stands as a barrier preventing humanity from successfully reaching across the linguistic void and being understood. The linguists who catalogued the Ariekei language early on were able to grasp what the Hosts were saying to each other through study and interpretation but lacked the necessary component to make meaning in ways the Hosts could understand. It is the principle of intersubjectivity that was lacking, the inability of the Ariekei to perceive the possibility of human thought, which locked them off, and the human linguists floundered as they tried different ways to communicate. What was required for this to happen was something that the humans themselves were incapable of doing on their own; humanity needed to make the Ariekei truly aware of their own consciousnesses, but this notion had to be generated spontaneously within the Ariekei mind.

This process is achieved toward the end of the narrative, when Avice finally

manages to convince Spanish Dancer to consider the possibility that individual humans (not their doubled Ambassador counterparts) are each uniquely capable of individual thought, that they are not broken half-creatures with only half a mind or machines that belong to the Ambassadors (as the Hosts had apparently previously misunderstood). It is only in the moment when Spanish Dancer considers this possibility that their entire worldview is radically transformed, and in that transformation they are finally able to achieve the new linguistic framework they had been groping toward. The Ariekei had previously relied on reference to the living, human similes in order to make language serve their own purposes. To create new meanings, the Ariekei would recruit human beings to enact certain scenarios which could then serve as a physical reference in the real, but this necessarily tethered their capacity for meaning-making to referentiality; without humans to enact any scenario which might serve as a referent, the Hosts lack the capacity to speak the thoughts which those events represent.¹⁹

When the war between humans and Hosts escalates, there is a small group associated with former lie-athletes who try to pick up where the Festival of Lies had left off, and they see the human similes as their key to finally achieving the lie, moving to the realm of “*thatness*,” as Avice puts it in discussing with Bren a way forward out of the war, and with it the transformation of the Hosts’ Language (295). Avice continues, “The Ariekei in this room want to lie. That means thinking of the world differently. Not referring: signifying. . . . Similes are a way out. A route from reference to signifying” (Miéville, *Embassytown* 296). There is evidence that the Ariekei had some oblique inkling that there was a possibility for subjectivity among the human population, though the trajectory of the plot bears out that this is something they could never truly realize

without humanity declaring itself to them. “It had seen us—us similes made of Terre, not merely us similes—as key to some more fundamental and enabling not-truth” (291). The Ariekei were aware that there was something to be learned from the human similes of the nature of subjectivity and cognition, something that they had not yet found for themselves. Without direct guidance this *something* (the dislocation of the signifier from the signified—the move into the arbitrary or the subjunctive) could only be guessed at, and there could be any one of infinite solutions to that problem.

It is worth mentioning that the central conflict of the plot comes as a direct result of the impossibility of effective communication, specifically of the kind that allows Embassytown society and the Host city to continue to function. The discordant euphoria generated in the Hosts’ minds by the sound of EzRa’s Language, the god-drug, creates such a need to keep hearing it that the Hosts stop speaking with other Ambassadors, except to ask whether they can hear EzRa speak. As a result, communication is bottlenecked so that it can only occur through a single Ambassador pair at once (first through EzRa, then through EzCal—Cal replaces Ra after he is murdered by Ez). Even then, the words spoken by EzRa (and then EzCal) only serve to satiate the Ariekei dependence on these Ambassadors’ broken Language. Trade, production, and diplomacy all effectively cease. The conflict between humanity and the Ariekei spirals out of control and devolves into war for the simple fact that the ability to truly communicate is effectively destroyed.

When Ra is murdered by Ez and then reconstituted with Cal (the bereft half of CalVin whose partner commits suicide) to form the Ambassador EzCal, Cal’s new domination of his linguistic partnership with Ez translates directly into a compulsion on

the part of the Ariekei to obey their commands, an unsettling new side effect of their dependence on the god-drug's broken language. As a direct consequence of this, a population among the Ariekei begin ripping out their fanwings (hearing organs) in order to undo their dependence on (and compulsory obedience to) the god-drug. Frustrated with the state in which their relationship with humanity has left their people and their society, these "Languageless" Hosts lash out in an effort to purge themselves of the addiction that threatens to destroy their society.

However, just as the impossibility of communication is the source of the conflict between humanity and the Ariekei, so too is possibility for intersubjectivity the solution. The new linguistic paradigm for the Ariekei which is discovered by Spanish Dancer does more than simply allow the Ariekei to lie, or even to use language to their own devices: it breaks the Ariekei free of the tethers which had bound their minds to the referentiality of the original Language, and in so doing cures them of their dependence on the god-drug. Since lies (significations dislocated from monologism) are possible in this new linguistic paradigm, the incongruities of lies and of broken Language are no longer a substance for their dependence. It takes time and effort, but the Ariekei are able to spread this linguistic paradigm amongst themselves, and Ariekei society is finally allowed to function once again. It is also implied that Ariekei society is given the freedom under this new linguistic model to pursue new modes of existence that were previously impossible in the old psychosocial framework of Language, modes that contain the possibility of lies.

It should be noted here that there is one important critical commentary on the linguistic developments of Ariekei language brought about through the possibility of lies and signification, namely that of Avice's husband, Scile, who is horrified at the

notion of fundamentally altering Language. Scile is a graduate student in linguistic studies and is absolutely fascinated by the Hosts' Language when he first encounters it, especially in how they make meaning: "There's nothing like this ["language" that is totally referent, non-signifying] anywhere[;] . . . It isn't about the sounds, you know. The sounds aren't where the meaning lives" (55). When Scile learns what the Ariekei are attempting to accomplish through the Festival of Lies, he becomes very fearful that this form of Language will be destroyed forever by the introduction of a new "evil" in the form of the lie (141). Scile starts a quasi-religious movement within Embassytown aimed at turning the non-Host public against the possibility of lies in Language. Scile becomes convinced, along with some members of the embassy and certain leaders among the Ariekei, that the change will destroy Host language as it exists, and he becomes involved in a plot between the two parties to have one of the most successful of the "liars" in the Festival killed in a very public display. Later, when the war between humanity and the "Languageless" Hosts begins, he leaves Embassytown to join the "Absurds" (as the "Languageless" Hosts) although he disappears early on and it is not learned until almost the very end of the narrative where he has gone.

Scile's last action in the novel is an attempt on the life of Spanish Dancer, one very last attempt to end a permanent alteration to the linguistic framework of Language before it spreads to the entire Ariekei population. The efforts Scile takes are all directed at preserving the old form of Language that had existed before the arrival of humanity. In a way, his concerns reflect those of the environmental and "First Peoples" movements, especially insofar as they are both intertwined and deeply troubled by the prospect of irreparable harm caused by human activity on the "natural" world (although

environmentalism is not the focus of my study). As far as the goal of “preservation” is concerned, while Scile’s decisions are extreme, in his positivistic understanding of language and society, they would appear—from his point of view—necessary to prevent the irreparable loss of something that does not exist anywhere else in the universe. The narrative acknowledges the deeply troubling implications of humanity’s contact with the Ariekei when the reader is told in the final pages that the Ariekei culture splits into two, one society operating under the new Language and one operating under the old.

In typical science fiction fashion, *Embassytown* operates as a hypothetical scenario in order to probe ideas, in this case about the nature of language and communication. Miéville draws on the theories of so many important linguistic specialists that it is practically impossible not to see this novel as a treatise on language and communication. But what is the wider question that Miéville asks us to consider? In modern phenomenology, we are told that it is impossible for the human mind to understand, to truly apprehend, the thoughts and feelings of another thinking entity, because those thoughts and feelings cannot be transmitted. We can only approximate and interpret what we observe in others based on our own experiences. Crossing the gap assumed between consciousnesses necessitates the signifying process in language. The individual, from this epistemological standpoint, is an island within the mind, a prisoner of a sort, trapped within the unique neurolinguistic framework that permits one to observe, understand, and respond to the wider world. We are not capable of “plugging into” another mind, of baring our thoughts to another, no matter how intimate the context might be.

Miéville asks us to consider an impossible alternative: the Ariekei do not signify

in any way understandable under human thought but rather express their ideas directly. They have no need to interpret, as the referent is an inherent aspect of their Language. On one level, this is more intimate an understanding than humans, with our sign-based language, are capable of. However, as mentioned earlier, this linguistic model does not allow the speaking subject the freedom choose how language might be employed. On the other hand, while signifying language does not bear the capacity to share thoughts directly, we are able to express ourselves more freely and with an infinitely greater range of creative license than the Ariekene mind could ever be capable of under the Old Language. This freedom is envisioned in *Embassytown* as something of a utopian goal for language-driven culture, as the conclusion of the narrative seems to imagine the possibility of an idyllic peace between Embassytown and the Hosts, a lasting peace accomplished through the mutual acknowledgment of individual subjective experience.

Besides the fictional/narrative voices of *Embassytown*, there are also a few textual voices that will need to be considered. It should be noted here that Miéville is not only an author of fiction, but of literary and political criticism as well. Miéville draws on a number of political and linguistic traditions to craft the narrative of *Embassytown*, even directly referencing theorists such as George Lakoff and others. The concept of the sign, taken directly from Saussurean linguistics, is fundamental to the novel's plot, but Miéville makes plain the importance of understanding the permutations of language through the dialogism of Bakhtin, the psychoanalysis of Lacan, and other thinkers. In these ways, *Embassytown* is not simply another science fiction novel with a fascinating linguistic gimmick. Rather, the novel is deeply, intimately conversant with theories of language and culture. It probes at the cultural framework of language, drawing in a very

Kristevan way on the social text of the academic world in order to ask questions about the nature of language and psychology. Miéville asks us to consider something impossible in language, a model of direct-referential thought-sharing, in order to more completely understand the rational framework of signification that informs our understanding of our reality and ourselves. In this way, *Embassytown* is a prime representative of science fiction as a genre, but even more so as a rhetorical movement.

Post Scriptum: A Short Discussion of This Study's Context in Light of Recent World Events

Much of the preliminary study that informs the preceding thesis took place in a geopolitical environment unmarred by the Russia-Ukraine War. During my second semester as a graduate student, I had thrown myself into a discussion of the ideas of Russian Formalism. I was intrigued by the pre- and early Soviet integration of poetics, semiotics, and hard scientific methodology that aimed at the ultimately failed design of defining a “science” of literature. The doomed Formalist project fascinated me for a number of reasons, not least of which was that the implosion of this movement seemed as much driven by the external forces opposed to the formalist methodology (Stalinists, primarily, but also many “orthodox” Marxist thinkers such as Trotsky and others) as it was by the internal logical pressures that forced a reevaluation of Formalist methodology in the late 1920s.²⁰ To hear the Formalists discuss it, it was as though the stuff of good literature was something that could be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. The literary variables were knowable, even if they were unknown. All that was needed was to reveal them, measure them, and make measurable those qualities which were not so.

Saussure’s revolutionary conception of the “axes” of literary history found practical application in the work of the Formalists, especially Roman Jakobson and Yuri Tynyanov, who were convinced that a dynamic cultural model was the key to finding ways to measure the qualities of literature that defied definition. Of course, bringing a hard scientific interpretation of something as impetuous as culture was always doomed to fail—human culture is, after all, entirely unpredictable and ever-shifting, and the

introduction of a theory to understand human behavior necessarily brings with it new factors that cause changes in that behavior. However, I see also that just as the politics of Lenin's and Stalin's Soviet Marxism brought about the end of this important literary experiment, the competition of thoughts and ideas also provided the antagonism which fueled some of the Formalists' greatest intellectual accomplishments.

As the twenty-first century introduces another conflict (as in the Cold War) with a nuclear-armed Russia at its center, it becomes imperative that we understand the importance of Russian culture. There is a lot to be criticized in the Russian state at the current moment, from the Kremlin's tactics attempting to smother any and all political opposition to the current regime's administration, to its chilling crackdown on free press and public opposition to war. These developments fly in the face of the notion of free speech, a troubling counterpoint to the themes of referentiality and signification that are central to the narrative of *Embassytown*, in which "lie" is offered as a synonym for "metaphor" and, ultimately, the freedom to make Language a tool of the speaker rather than the speaker the instrument of Language. Such a vision relies on the speaking subject's linguistic freedom, the ability to choose how the word will be constructed, how the word will signify. The "lie" takes an idealistic and ultimately hopeful significance in this vision. The Kremlin's disinformation tactics, on the other hand, are an important and sobering reminder of the sheer destructive power which the "lie" possesses. Just as metaphor provides the speaker linguistic freedom, so too can it obscure truth from the listener. In an era when the ability to relate basic factual information for the purpose of improving society has been severely compromised, many on social media are left adrift in a sea of self-validating truth claims with no basis in the reality they claim to reveal. Many

of these claims are outright fabrications, and very many more benefit from a convenient, yet ultimately faulty, relationship with the truth. The Russian state has done everything in its power to project an air of legitimacy while obfuscating objective reality from its people and disrupting legitimate discussions of real issues which it finds inconvenient abroad.²¹ The imperative for writers and linguists to better understand the functions of communication and its implications for personal freedom is crucial in these times, especially when many are having their voices suppressed for reasons of political expedience or convenience.

Russian culture has a long and important history, marked just like any other nation's with both good and bad. Similarly, Russian literary history is important in its own right, as well as in the context of world literature. In the case of Russian Formalism specifically, the intellectual findings of this brief but incredibly influential movement have been felt across the world, all the way into the current day. There has been something of a public revulsion in the West against Russian citizens and refugees as a reaction to the journalistic information covered on the Russia-Ukraine War, directed particularly at those individuals within American or European society who are perceived to be of Russian ethnicity, but also at Russian businesses and cultural/historical figures, all because of the possibility that they might endorse the Russian army's occupation of Ukraine. However, the voice of the state is not the voice of the people, and certainly not the voice of the individual. Russia has seen this strain of suppression before, especially during the era of Stalin and the "dictatorship of the arts" that contributed to the end of Russian Formalism. As misguided as the Formalist project was in its goals, the questions pursued by such thinkers as Jakobson, Brik, Eichenbaum, Shklovsky, and others were

and continue to be invaluable in the study of literary criticism. How much might have been lost if these theorists had not been permitted to seek those answers at all? As I have pursued the completion of this thesis, it has placed upon me a renewed importance not only to locate my own narrative voice, but to seek out and affirm those essentially valid subjectivities wherever I may find them, regardless of whether we agree. This is something I would pass on to my readers, to my students, and to my community.

ENDNOTES

¹ Byron's jeers against Southey and his ilk are the first words of his dedication: "Bob Southey! You're a poet—Poet Laureate, / And representative of all the race" (*Don Juan* Dedication, lines 1 & 2). It is clear that he holds some resentment of the poetic form toward which Southey, the "epic renegade," aspires (Dedication, line 5). Byron uses Southey's career, his pretensions, as a cautionary warning for those who might follow in his footsteps: "You, Bob! are rather insolent, you know, / At being disappointed in your wish / To supersede all warblers here below, and be the only blackbird in the dish" (Dedication, lines 17-20). The dedication, as front matter for *Don Juan* sets the tone for the remainder of the mock epic, and the narrator stakes his claims to literary greatness on the basis of its place in the epic genre: "So that my name of Epic's no misnomer" (1.1600). His calls upon the muses also beckon toward the epic direction: "Chaste Muse!" (canto 2, line 49); "Hail, Muse! *et cetera*" (3.1). It is amusing that even as he calls out for his book's reception into the world, he takes Southey's success as an indicator that his own work will also succeed: "'Go, little book, from this my solitude! / I cast thee on the waters, go thy ways! / And if, as I believe, thy vein be good, / The world will find thee after many days.' / When Southey's read, and Wordsworth understood, / I can't help putting in my claim to praise" (1.1769-1774).

² It is for the narrator's genial demeanor (as well as the hijinks of the protagonist) that the readers return to *Don Juan* for subsequent cantos: "But for the present, gentle reader, and / Still gentler purchaser! the bard – that's I – / Must, with permission, shake you by the hand, / And so your humble servant and goodbye! / We meet again, if we should understand / Each other; and if not, I shall not try / Your patience further than by

this short sample – / ‘Twere well if others follow’d my example” (1.1761-1768). Beyond hoping the reader will return, the narrator also makes clear his wish that other poets could make such a favorable impression on readers, which indicates Byron’s attitude toward certain of his rivals and peers.

³ Viktor Shklovsky notes that the “disorder [i.e., disorganization] is intentional” in Sterne’s narrative (148). He interprets the chaotic delivery of the narrative as a “stylistic device[;] . . . The forms most characteristic of Sterne are those which result from the displacement and violation of conventional forms. He acts no differently when it is time for him to conclude his novels” (156).

⁴ The phenomenological experience of an “internal monologue,” insofar as an actually audible narration within the mind, is less a matter of literary study and more a matter of neuroscience which I am ill-equipped to address, though I feel it is important to acknowledge that not everyone who reads has the capacity for this audible experience; nevertheless, whether the reader possesses an audible internal monologue or some other non-audible process for interpreting the text, that process is still akin to a unique voice, separate from the text, which is brought to bear by the reader.

⁵ Hans Robert Jauss’s notion of the “horizon of expectations” is useful here, as it places emphasis on the reader’s agency in the reading and interpretation of the text (Holub 59).

⁶ Bakhtin’s description of the “literary chronotope” is an effective tool in describing this phenomenon: “[S]patial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of

time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” 84).

⁷ Watt’s claims that the novel was “invented” by Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding continues to generate dispute (Bode 37).

⁸ The parallels in Lukács to Bakhtinian dialogism draw our attention once more to the individuated voices of the polyphonic novel.

⁹ By way of example, one literary chronotope Bakhtin calls “adventure-time” is of interest here (though there quite a few others in his essay). This “adventure-time” is a feature Bakhtin identifies in Greek romances as well as any standard form of what we might call damsel-in-distress narrative. While this type of story is not as popular today for cultural reasons, its trope is useful as it evokes a surprisingly specific set of narrative expectations.

The first meeting of hero and heroine and the sudden flareup of their passion for each other is the starting point for plot movement; the end point of plot movement is their successful union in marriage. All action in the novel unfolds between these two points. These points—the poles of plot movement—are themselves crucial events in the heroes’ lives; in and of themselves they have a biographical significance. But it is not around these that the novel is structured; rather, it is around that which lies (that which takes place) *between* them. But *in essence* nothing need lie between them. . . . [I]t is as if absolutely nothing had happened between these two moments, as if the marriage had been consummated on the day after their meeting. Two adjacent moments, one of biographical life, one of biographical time, are directly conjoined. (“Forms of Time” 89)

In experiencing these romances, the reader is drawn toward the moment in which these points converge, in the romance’s conclusion. It is the anticipation of the lovers’ consummation that drives the reader’s enjoyment of the narrative, and all of its episodes are driven toward that conclusion. The intervening struggles are a sort of interruption of that enjoyment, teasing the reader onward until the conclusion brings release.

¹⁰ See the discussions in the notes above regarding *Don Juan*.

¹¹ See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 10.

¹² This also recalls Bakhtin's insistence that "linguistics" were insufficient to answer questions of literature as art (*Problems* 182-183).

¹³ Barthes has a fascinating way of visualizing this multi-linguaged interaction within the text: "it is the fragment, the shards, the broken or obliterated network—all the movements and inflections of a vast 'dissolve,' which permits both overlapping and loss of messages" (20)

¹⁴ Wolfgang Iser points out that "the narrator keeps approaching Tristram's life from different directions in the hope of pinning down its starting-point. But Sterne has also endowed the narrator with insight into the fact that none of his possible beginnings can ever be equated with *the* beginning, and so each individual attempt is counteracted by its consequences which, in turn, undermine its aspirations to be *the* solution" (9-10). Shklovsky similarly notes that "from the very beginning of the novel, we see in *Tristram Shandy* a displacement in time. Causes follow effects, the possibilities for false resolutions are prepared by the author himself" (149). Narrative time in *Tristram Shandy* is a nonstarter. The story of Tristram's life cannot be allowed to begin in proper because to do so would distract the narrator from the circumstances of his family's life at the period of his conception/birth. In truth, the narrative mode of *Tristram Shandy* isn't an autobiography at all, but rather a slice-of-life comedy starring the members of the Shandy family, their friends and acquaintances, and the community.

¹⁵ Notice that "[o]ne of *Tristram Shandy's* central fields of reference is the philosophy of Locke, which was the cornerstone of eighteenth-century English thought

and which, by establishing the empirical tradition, provided a revolutionary impulse for Continental philosophy” (Iser 11). The philosophical rigor with which Locke approached the knowledge and ethics of his day is a hallmark of Enlightenment-era thought, but it wasn’t without its problems, especially in the limitations of how it addresses the association of ideas: “Sterne makes the self the pivot of associations that never occurred to Locke, and thus he radicalizes the blind spot in the latter’s latent anthropology” (15).

¹⁶ It is apparent that Miéville has in mind some of the social consequences of the Opium Wars and Britain’s colonization of China during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are themes in the narrative that parallel the realities of this period of cultural exchange including addiction, war, famine, and economic decline.

¹⁷ Avice’s marriage to Scile is described in the narrative as “a nonconnubial love-match,” i.e., a romantic, non-sexual partnership (Miéville, *Embassytown* 40). A little later in the novel, Scile remarks that he and Avice are “[c]ompatible everywhere but between the sheets” (72).

¹⁸ (Miéville, *Embassytown* 270-271; 274)

¹⁹ In the narrator’s case, Avice is actually recruited to enact a practice where she is left in a dark room without food and caused pain for a long duration before finally being fed, so that the Hosts can make use of her experience as a simile in their Language: “There was a human girl who in pain ate what was given her in an old room built for eating in which eating had not happened for a time” (26). Throughout the narrative, the simile is adapted to a number of different purposes, initially something akin to “making due,” but the manner in which the simile evolves speaks to the Hosts’ resourcefulness in overcoming the limitations of an entirely referential language system.

²⁰ Boris Eichenbaum's "The Theory of the Formal Method" is an excellent manifesto of the Formalist project as it pertains to a variety of interests within the movement; "[i]t is not the methods of studying literature but rather literature as an object of study that is of prime concern to the Formalists" (Matejka and Pomorska 3). Medvedev and Bakhtin's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, just a year later, describes the theoretical framework of Formalism in more critical terms and, crucially, addresses what he believes to be the cause for the movement's decline: "The elements of the artistic program which formalism had borrowed from futurism were no longer relevant to the real literary situation. Therefore, the artistic principles of formalism were no longer relevant either" (70). Victor Erlich's *Russian Formalism—History Doctrine*, a later, Western summary of the Formalist movement, is surprisingly thorough and well researched, given that the date of its first edition was 1955, following very closely on the end of Stalin's régime.

²¹ Peter Pomerantsev has called this form of government "democratic rhetoric and undemocratic intent" ("The Hidden Author of Putinism").

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APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF TERMS, CONCEPTS, AND THEORISTS

Polyvocalism: “Meaning ‘many-voiced,’ a term used to refer to what Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin called dialogic texts, that is, ones in which several viewpoints or discourses are in dialogue with one another” (Murfin and Ray 336).

Intertextuality: “the concept that any text is an amalgam of others, either because it exhibits signs of influence or because its language inevitably contains common points of reference with other texts through allusion, quotation, genre, style, and so forth” (215).

Saussure

- The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, introduced several concepts that revolutionized how language is understood:

Sign = Signifier/Signified

- Perhaps the most important concept Saussure deals with is the notion of the “sign”
 - Saussure recognized that each and every word used in language is a “sign,” made up of a signifier (the actual “sound-image,” what is also called an “utterance”) and a signified (the intended meaning, concept, etc.; Saussure 65-70)

Langue and Parôle

- Saussure divides the concept of “meaning” on social lines, separating the individual’s concept of meaning (*parôle*) from the full socio-linguistic system of language (*langue*; Saussure 9 & 13)
 - *Langue* refers to the socio-linguistic complex, the language-state,

the “environment of meaning” of society, within which each individual operates

- *Parôle* refers to the “executive function” of the speech-act, each individual’s own psycho-linguistic complex, the “personal lexicon” that forms the basis of unique personal experiences of language and understanding

Synchrony v. Diachrony

- “Of two languages that exist side by side during a given period, one may evolve drastically and the other practically not at all; study would have to be diachronic in the former instance, synchronic in the latter” (Saussure 101)
- Saussure defines linguistic history along two axes: synchronic and diachronic
 - “Synchrony” refers to the entire socio-linguistic environment at any given moment, that is, how the entire social language system functions, including the *langue* (or *langues*) of any given region and the *parôles* of all individuals within that system
 - “Diachrony” refers to the development of “meaning and the evolution of the language complex over time, say for example how the meanings of individual words have shifted from Early Modern English into contemporary English; diachrony is also concerned with the consequences of this shift in the cultural-linguistic environment for speaking individuals

Bakhtin and Saussure

Similarities:

- For both Saussure and Bakhtin, the word is the fundamental element of dialogue, and its relationship to meaning is found in social space (see Holquist 45)
- Saussure insists on the simultaneously arbitrary and immutable nature of any word's meaning, which is to say that any two separate utterances could be perfectly adequate for expressing similar or identical ideas but any given *langue*'s set of selected utterances is fixed by the social environment, and the scheme of meaning within that *langue* only changes as society evolves gradually (Saussure 71-78)
- Julia Kristeva notes that Bakhtin's understanding of the word as a basic unit of meaning "situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them" (Kristeva 65; see also Bakhtin, *Problems* 47)

Difference

- Michael Holquist, a prominent Bakhtinian scholar, notes Saussure's "failure to discover a dialogic relation between the self/other aspects of language as they are present in individual speakers" (46-47)
- This understanding of the word's relationship to meaning, meanwhile, is rooted in the duality of meanings, the tension between the social context and an individual's intent (47)

Bakhtin on the novel

Dialogue:

- “Linguistics recognizes, of course, the compositional form of ‘dialogic speech’ and studies its syntactic and lexical-semantic characteristics. But it studies these as purely linguistic phenomena, that is, on the level of language, and is utterly incapable of treating the specific nature of dialogic relationships between rejoinders in a dialogue” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 182-183; see also Holquist 68)
- For Bakhtin, “linguistics” is the science of understanding language as a mechanism for communication (grammar, syntax, spelling, morphology, etc.) while “dialogue” is the framework for the process of meaning-making and the exchange of ideas

Simultaneity

- “The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances of the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments” (“Discourse in the Novel” 281)
- The meaning of any given utterance is nuanced and layered, comprising multiple different ideas that at once compete and complement, amplify and neutralize, direct and deflect (see Holquist 69)
- Words are conceptualized as forces in a sense similar to physics; they carry a given weight in a given direction and impart change on their targets (“Discourse

in the Novel” 277; Michael Holquist—among others—identifies this multiplicity of meaning in the term “heteroglossia,” from Gr. for “many tongues” 69-70)

Genre:

- For Bakhtin, genres are self-perpetuating, updating as the social context requires and facilitating the context into which new works respond; this is an idea that emerges over and over again in contemporary genre studies (Bakhtin 106 & 157; see also Holquist 70)

Kristeva and Intertextuality

- It is taken as a given that any given literary work is necessarily referential in nature, that is, that any given written word not only anticipates the expectations of its readership but is well aware of the existence of other texts in its social environment (perhaps not all, but certainly a few) and that an understanding of these texts is displayed in some capacity or another
- As a consequence, any utterance in literature is necessarily characterized by a duality in its meanings: the meaning bestowed by the author and the meaning inherited from context
- It is noted that the novel is not unique in its use of inter-textual reference, but it is Bakhtin’s assertion that the novel is unique among literary works in that it is wholly and inseparably dependent upon them for its existence (“Discourse in the Novel” 263-265; Holquist 88)
- Kristeva’s work focuses on the text as a social literary artifact rather than on human subjects with intentions and agendas, but this allows for the freedom of separating the text as conceptualized in the author’s framework (Allen 36)