

“Epistemological Modernism”:

Bridging the Gap Between the Formal and Stylistic Experiments of High Modernism and  
Contemporary Fiction

By

Evan Liu

Submitted to the Board of Study in Literature  
School of Humanities  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College  
State University of New York  
May 2020

Anthony Domestico, Sponsor

Gaura Narayan, Second Reader

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Defining Modernism.....	3
2. <i>Ulysses</i> and Epistemology .....	9
3. <i>A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing</i> and the Somatic Experience ...	21
4. <i>Ducks, Newburyport</i> and the Linguistic Interior .....	29
5. Conclusion: An Argument For Epistemological Modernism...	37
6. Works Cited.....	41

## 1. Introduction: Defining Modernism

In 2013 the Goldsmiths Prize was established with the purpose of rewarding fiction that “breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form”(“About the prize”). Its call for formal innovation harkens back to the sentiments of High Modernists such as Ezra Pound and his famous command to “make it new.” Critics were quick to make this connection as well, citing twentieth-century modernism in nearly every article written about the prize and its subsequent winners. The title of one article indicates the reaction of critics: “How we learned to stop worrying and love Modernism (again).” The prize and its press coverage display a growing fascination with the legacy of modernism in today’s literary landscape. With so many citing a return to modernism, it has become necessary to reexamine exactly what modernism was/is, when it was/is, and who it was/is. Once these questions are asked it becomes clear that, despite clever headlines, loving modernism requires a great deal of worrying.

Since its perceived beginning around the end of the nineteenth century, modernism has eluded any clear-cut definition or set of parameters. Critics often give too broad and far-reaching definitions of the field, typically giving historical, aesthetic, and philosophical reasons, and this multitude of definitions creates an extremely varied literary canon. For instance, in an early attempt to understand modernism, the writer and critic Malcolm Bradbury gives an historical definition, claiming that modernism “comes out of the rapid social alteration and modernization that occurred in England from about 1870”( *Social Context* 90). He also offers a philosophical definition, claiming modernism arose from the “sudden sense of the Nietzschean imperative that

all men must prepare themselves to reject accepted and traditional values, and face the intellectual and psychological tension of new ones”(*Possibilities* 44). Finally, he also offers an aesthetic definition: “The emphasis on technique, or on perceptual resources of the artist himself as a high subjective consciousness; the emphasis on rendering, or the heightened resonance that might be attached to certain observed objects; the emphasis on tactics of presentation through the consciousness of characters rather than through an objective or materialistic presentation of material; and the emphasis on the medium of art as the writer’s essential subject matter”(*Possibilities* 85).

This tendency to define modernism via multiple and vague definitions persists even in contemporary scholars such as Peter Childs and Christopher Butler. Childs’s book *Modernism* is essentially a record of all of the various ways critics have defined modernism. Childs writes, “Modernism can be taken as a response by artists and writers to several things, including industrialization, urban society, war, technological changes and new philosophical ideas ”(20). Childs also writes that modernism is “aesthetically radical, contain[s] striking technical innovation, emphasize[s] spatial or ‘fugal’ as opposed to chronological form, tend[s] towards ironic modes, and involve[s] a certain dehumanization of art” (2). This frustrating tendency to observe modernism through a historical lens *and* an aesthetic lens *and* a philosophical lens creates a lack of unity over what is and who was modernist. Things become even more muddled when you dive into each aspect of this definition. In trying to historically contextualize modernism, Childs and Bradbury offer various and contradictory social aspects; in trying to define modernism in aesthetic terms, Childs gives a dizzying list of vague qualities.

This fundamental problem in discussing modernism stems from a sentiment which many critics agree on: that modernism is largely defined by its indefinability. Bradbury alludes to this fact when he writes, “If anything marks the new mood in the arts it is the very pluralism of art itself—the very heterodoxy of the forms of the new... If the changed mood is marked by anything, it is not by a single new style or manner or movement, but by the way the developing situation seemed to throw any single tendency into question” (92). Christopher Butler echoes this in his book *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*, in which he writes, “These are works which point in all sorts of different directions and it would be misleading to use them to make any strict boundaries for ‘modernism’ or to offer a ‘definition’ of it. It was all sorts of things, and this plurality and confusion was obvious at the time” (9). I find this notion to be a dead end for any hope of having a meaningful discussion regarding the art that arose during the early twentieth century. It leads to writers such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka occupying the same space of modernism despite how widely their works vary from one another.

We can also see how inconsistent of a label modernism has been by examining two works which fit the historical or aesthetic descriptions, but have historically not been considered modernist. For example, let us compare the works of the writers John Steinbeck and James Joyce. Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath* opens with the lines, “To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks. The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the roads so that the gray country and the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover.” These lines are written with clean, conventional prose, demonstrating a rigid adherence to the rules of grammar and syntax.

Steinbeck does not write to challenge the aesthetic conventions of his predecessors. Yet he does write in reaction to the economic and social ramifications of modernity, such as the Great Depression and the suffering of those living in the Dust Bowl. According to the historicist definitions of modernism, which see modernism as responding from within and in response to modernity, *The Grapes of Wrath* should count. After all, Steinbeck reacts to a moment of historical significance, one that arises from the conditions of modernity. By the historical definition, *The Grapes of Wrath* fits; by the aesthetic definition, it does not.

Now let us compare those lines with the opening to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: "riverrun, past Eve and Adams, from the swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs. Sir Tristram violer d'amores, fr'over the short sea, had passencore rearrived from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his penisolate war..." A clear contrast from Steinbeck, Joyce's final novel breaks from all grammatical and syntactic conventions, creating its own language filled with puns and neologisms. Written in a sort of dream language, *Finnegans Wake* is a clear example of radical aesthetic experimentation. Yet it is often regarded as postmodern just as much as it is considered modernist. These two novels, which in their own ways fit the given descriptions of modernism perfectly yet are rarely discussed as modernist, show just how messy of a label modernism truly is.

Thus, in order to effectively discuss modernism and its continued legacy in contemporary fiction, I will narrow the scope of modernist studies and focus on novels which are aesthetically, and more specifically syntactically, radical. I will discuss these works under a newly defined movement which I will coin, epistemological modernism. By this label, I consider epistemology

as it pertains to language and the question of *how* we know anything in and through language. This preoccupation with epistemology is what differentiates these works from other forms of the literary avant garde. I define epistemological modernism as a literary movement composed of fiction that experiments with style and form in direct response to epistemological issues concerning the inability of language to capture the ineffability of experience itself.

In this essay, I will analyze three texts which are quintessentially epistemological modernist: *Ulysses* by James Joyce (1922); *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* by Eimear McBride (2013); and *Ducks, Newburyport* by Lucy Ellmann (2019). By placing the failure of literature at the forefront of their fiction, these writers set out to challenge the very notion of what a book can be. Throughout this essay I will make reference to critics such as Roland Barthes and his conception of the “writerly text,” Joseph Frank and his theory of “spatial form,” Eric Auerbach and his analyses of modern fiction, and Gertrude Stein with her idea of a “Continuous present.” Their works will help shape our understanding of how these three texts deal with issues pertaining to the role of the narrator, the sequentiality of language, the temporality of experience, and the depiction of nonlinguistic experience.

In my first chapter I will examine how Joyce experiments with form and syntax in an attempt to capture the dichotomy of internal and external experience. I will show how Joyce attempts to erase the relationship between the text and the reader, break the sequentiality of language to capture the simultaneity of experience, and create a new temporality of a continuous present moment. This will lay the foundation for our understanding of the relationship between form and epistemology. I will then show how Eimear McBride grapples with these same issues as Joyce, but for the goal of capturing an almost purely somatic experience. Once I’ve

established how McBride tries to recreate a mostly nonlinguistic experience, I will then show how Lucy Ellmann creates an almost entirely linguistic interiority. By the end of this essay we will have a clear understanding of how Joyce, McBride, and Ellmann, utilize similar aesthetic methods for the purpose of confronting the epistemological limitations of Literature.



## 2. *Ulysses* and Epistemology

I will be focusing for this first chapter on *Ulysses*, as its many stylistic experiments are rooted in Joyce's concerns with literature and the abilities of language to express experience. We can see Joyce's preoccupation with the limits of language in a 1926 letter. In it, he writes, "One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wide-awake language, cut-and-dry grammar and go-ahead plot"(318). Joyce displays a frustration not only with language, but more specifically with the medium of literature itself. This recognition of the natural limitations of the novel form is crucial, for it takes the emphasis away from narrative and places it heavily on the form of written language itself. The goal of the writer then becomes not to write a story that mirrors life, but to have the writing itself embody the functions of living.

This fundamental limitation of literature as an art form, while being the root for Joyce's experiments, also remains a constant law which is never forgotten. It is important for writers such as Joyce not so much to overcome the limitations of language (an impossible task), but to acknowledge them and refer to them constantly. This purposeful gesturing towards literature's failures is brought to its extreme in *Finnegans Wake*. The critic Anthony Burgess recognizes this tendency to bring the problems of language to the foreground, writing, "*Finnegans Wake* never pretends to be anything other than a book" (17). By placing an emphasis on the form of literature, on the act of reading itself, Joyce attempts to make the experience of reading mime the experience of living as he sees it.

In attempting to do so, the epistemological modernists create a new style of literature which treats the experience of reading with just as much importance as the story being read. This

new conception of what literature can be is identified by many critics and theorists, such as Joseph Frank, Anthony Burgess, and, most notably, Roland Barthes. For Barthes, this new form of literature can be classified as the “writerly” text; for Burgess, it is a “Class 2” novel; and for Frank, it is, simply put, “Modern literature.” In his book *S/Z*, Roland Barthes divides all of literature into two categories, the “readerly” and the previously mentioned “writerly” texts. The readerly text can be summarized as a text in which the reader remains merely a passive audience member; a text in which all its meaning resides solely within the text itself waiting to be consumed briefly by its captive reader. According to Barthes, the vast majority of literature fits into the “readerly” designation. Conversely, the writerly text is a text in which the reader acts as a co-writer; its meanings are infinite and dependent solely on the reader to shape its meaning. It is this type of text that the epistemological modernists strive to create. This notion is echoed by Anthony Burgess, who categorized what I am labelling the epistemological modernists as writers who, “believe [their task is] to organize visual symbols on the page” (Burgess, 16). Simply put, they believe that the reader’s interaction with language, and language’s interaction with language, should be as involved and meaningful as the meaning behind the words themselves.

Joyce explicitly writes on this desire to force literature into abiding the same rules as life in an early letter written to his brother. In it, he criticizes a story by George Moore, saying, “A lady who has been living for three years on the line between Bray and Dublin is told by her husband that there is a meeting in Dublin at which he must be present. She looks up the table to see the hours of the trains. This on [the Dublin, Wicklow & Wexford Railway] where the trains go regularly; this after three years. Isn’t it rather stupid of Moore” (Kenner, 31). Joyce takes issue with Moore’s seemingly inorganic means of imparting knowledge to the reader. The hours

of the trains should not be given to the reader since the character should already be aware of the schedule. Kenner notes that Joyce's philosophy seems to be that "the reader should not be told what no one present would think worth an act of attention"(Kenner, 30). Joyce's letter expresses his own preoccupation with form and, in particular, the relationship between the narrator and the reader.

Joyce responds to the issue of how to impart knowledge organically by attempting to remove any explicit relationship between the text and the reader. Eric Auerbach, in his book *Mimesis: The representation of Reality in Western Literature*, remarks on this new change when he writes, "The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished"(534). If there is no longer an authoritative narrator, who or what then is telling the story? For Auerbach, the answer might be nameless spirits who can "penetrat[e] the depths of the human soul" (532) without clearly knowing how it is operating. For Hugh Kenner, the answer might be a sort of entity which arranges words on the pages to mime the contents of the story. He dubs this entity "The Arranger." Both answers allude to a story, not told through a storyteller's voice, but through a voiceless entity that never speaks to, addresses, or even acknowledges the reader.

Thus, the question arises, who are these books for? The lack of acknowledgment of a potential audience implies that these books aren't *for* anyone. This erasure of a formal dialogue between a fictional person and the audience stems from the attempt to make style mirror reality. For the high modernists, reality was understood through the functions of the mind. This means that the form of the novel must imitate the inner workings of our individual consciousnesses. Just as there is no conception of an audience when we think and feel, the novel about thoughts and feelings must also reject the notion of a reader.

The illusion that there is no intended audience is achieved in *Ulysses* through the aggressive blurring of third-person narration and first-person interior monologue. We can observe this effect throughout the majority of the novel, as when Joyce writes, “He stood by the next door girl at the counter. Would she buy it too, calling the items from a slip in her hand. Chapped: Washing soda. And a pound and a half of denny’s sausages. His eyes rested on her vigorous hips. Woods his name is. Wonder what he does” (59) One cannot be too certain on which lines are from Kenner’s “Arranger” and which are Leopold Bloom’s interior monologue. The uncertainty is created through Joyce’s fractured syntax. In the first line, we know it is third person because of the pronoun “he.” The next sentence is ambiguous, as it could be either first person or a close third person. This ambiguity results from Joyce’s omission of the sentence’s subject: “I,” “he,” etc. Without the subject we can’t be sure who the thought belongs to. We are then interrupted by fragments of isolated thoughts: “Chapped: Washing soda. And a...” These scattered fragments further blur the narration, as we are given mere isolated adjectives and objects. By keeping the Arranger dizzyingly interlinked with the character’s internal consciousness, the figure of a narrator is nearly entirely dissolved. The attempt to erase the narratorial figure is an excellent example as to how the epistemological modernists are able to find success through failure.

In order to understand this, it is important to reiterate that the goal of epistemological modernism is not to *overcome* the limitations of literature but to merely create a new path towards the same failure—one that gestures closer to experience. Joyce’s illusion of a narrator vanished is ultimately just that, an illusion. The third-person narration can ignore the presence of a reader, but the very presence of third-person narration implies that there, in fact, is an intended

audience. Another telling sign that these stories are meant to be read is the very legibility of the texts themselves. Auerbach highlights this aspect when examining the relationship between the temporal experience of the internal in contrast to the external: “the road taken by consciousness is sometimes traversed far more quickly than language is able to render it, if we want to make ourselves intelligible to a third person, and that is the intention here” (537). Auerbach here comments on the necessity to slow down or speed up time in proportion to the speed of consciousness. The slipperiness of our conception of time acts as a foundation for many of Joyce’s experiments in *Ulysses*.

Generally speaking, Joyce’s *Ulysses* can be understood as a novel entirely obsessed with time. For instance, the novel’s main narrative plays out during one specific day in history: its temporal scope is limited to only twenty-four hours, yet its story parallels the timeless story of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. In doing so, Joyce sets out to paradoxically encapsulate the entirety of history all within in the span of a day. The obsession with timelessness is shared by his contemporary, T.S. Eliot, who writes that “the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order”(37). This conception of time forms much of *Ulysses*—so much so, that in the fourteenth chapter, the style changes constantly to mirror the evolution of literature. For the purposes of this essay, though, given my interest in epistemological modernism’s breaking of grammar and form, Joyce’s obsession with time will closely be analyzed at a syntactic level.

Time plays a crucial role in Joyce's more linguistic experiments, precisely because it relates to one of the fundamental limitations of the novel form. According to theorist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a major limitation of literature as an art form is that it is bound by temporality. In the realm of language, images can only be understood through a sequence of words being read one after the other. It cannot achieve, as a painting could, a simultaneous juxtaposition of different parts to create a complete image. This limitation of literature produces one of Joyce's most compelling attempts at twisting language to mime experience: the fragmentation and fracturing of syntax. Through this technique, Joyce is able to accomplish a variety of different literary effects. By breaking apart ideas and overlaying them as Joyce does, he appears to break from this necessary "linear sequence," instead operating under what Joseph Frank coins "spatial form." Regarding Joyce's *Ulysses*, Frank writes, "Joyce composed his novel of a vast number of references and cross references that relate to each other independently of the time sequence of the narrative. These references must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole before the book fits together into any meaningful pattern" (18). Joyce's scattered and repetitive moments are only understood once the reader connects all of them simultaneously. Joyce uses spatial form to try and break out of the linearity of language and achieve more of a painterly effect, in which time is suspended.

In order to narrow my analysis of Joyce's *Ulysses*, I must first acknowledge that the very nature of spatial form permits any complete analysis of any individual part; since each fragment gains its significance through its various reoccurrences throughout the novel, narrowing onto any one passage will inevitably lead to the omission of its fuller meaning. We can observe this on a smaller scale if we look at the onomatopoeic phrase "tap," which reoccurs throughout the

eleventh chapter. While the word “tap” is featured throughout the entirety of the chapter, only at the end do we learn that we are reading the sound of a blind man’s cane outside of the building. We would have to analyze the whole chapter in order to understand the meaning of just one repeating word, “tap.” That being said, I will try and give, as encompassing as I can, a detailed account of how Joyce uses syntactic fragmentation and spatial form to mime his conception of time. One of the most striking examples of what Joyce accomplishes with spatial form is the continuous present moment he creates during the eleventh chapter, the “Sirens” episode.

Joyce begins the episode with a sort of summary of its entirety, offering various fragments of it in a seemingly incoherent manner: “Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing imperthnthn thnthnthn. Chips, picking chips of rocky thumbnail, chips. Horrid! And gold flushed more. A husky fifenote blew. Blew. Blue bloom is on the gold pinnacled hair-” (256). The entirety of the episode is stripped of itself and placed at the beginning and concludes with the line, “Done. Begin!” The first lines are then repeated in a more coherent manner: “Bronze by gold, Miss Douce’s head by Miss Kennedy’s head, over the crossblind of the ormond bar heard the viceregal hoofs go by, ringing steel” (257). By the time these lines are uttered, even though they can be seen as the episode’s *true* beginning, it is actually the first of many repetitions. Just as Frank had said about spatial form, the opening does not make sense sequentially. Rather, it slowly gains meaning as the piece unfolds and ultimately closes.

In having a fractured version of the episode preceding the actual narrative, Joyce breaks the linearity of it. By introducing all of the episode’s motifs before we get their actual deployment in the chapter itself, Joyce accomplishes what Roland Barthes describe as “[drawing] the text out of its chronology (‘this happens *before* or *after* that’) and [recapturing] a

mythic time ('without *before* or *after*')" (16). The narrative's beginning is not the beginning; it is the beginning again!

In order to appreciate that statement, it's important to take a look at a contemporary of Joyce's who is similarly interested in having her language mime its subject, Gertrude Stein. Stein and Joyce share a similar philosophy regarding the contrast between the temporality of fiction and the temporal experience of life. What Stein refers to as a "continuous present," Joyce calls an "eternal present," as read in a letter between Joyce and Jaques Mercanton. Stein outlines her understanding of what a "continuous present" is in a lecture titled *Composition as Explanation*. With regards to her own work, Stein writes, "In the first book there was a groping for a continuous present and for using everything by beginning again and again. There was a groping for using everything and there was a groping for a continuous present and there was an inevitable beginning again and again and again" (511). We can see in these lines how, in talking about the notion of "beginning again," she constantly repeats her thoughts in a slightly new way, as if she were truly starting all over with each line. The emphasis on constantly beginning stems from the idea that our lives are experienced in a constant present moment; the movement between past, present, and future is merely a way for us to understand a constantly changing present moment.

This resembles Joyce's own ideas about time. As he puts it, "There is no past, no future; everything flows in an eternal present"(Deming, 22). Stein's lecture helps put the mechanics of the "Sirens" episode into perspective. Joyce is constantly beginning again and again, showing each moment to be a new moment, every second is a new experience. Just as Stein begins again after every sentence, so too do we find Joyce beginning again and again within the same paragraph: "Miss Kennedy Sauntered sadly from bright light, twining loose hair behind an ear.



Sauntering Sadly, gold no more, she twisted twined a hair. Sadly she twined in sauntering gold hair behind a curving ear” (258).

With this form of beginning again, Joyce makes the act of reading itself a constant present by evading what Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky calls, ‘over-habitualization.’ According to Shklovsky, “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with [their] feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, [they] will agree with us” (2). One way that Joyce avoids this habitualization is by constantly changing the identity signifiers of the two women, Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy. First introducing them as “Gold and Bronze,” Joyce continues to offer a variety of different versions such as, “young goldbronze voices,” “bronze gigglegold,” and “Bronzedouce.” As Barthes would suggest, this forces the reader to constantly interact with the text as they mentally connect each variation to its original. This emphasis on a continuous present clashes with the episode’s overarching theme of music, creating yet another paradox where the text is trapped in the fixed temporality of music while at the same time being timeless.

With regard to the presence of music, most critics such as Hugh Kenner focus on the allusions to Homer’s *The Odyssey*, particularly Odysseus’s encounter with the Siren’s song. Through this lens, almost all of Joyce’s experiments during this episode can be attributed to the replication of music. Yet another way of understanding the significance of music in this chapter is by looking at the temporal experience of music. Music is experienced as a linear sequence

bound by its own time; the listener is not in control of the duration and pacing of the song. The juxtaposition between music's strict temporality and the timelessness of the present moment echoes Joyce's attempt at capturing all of history within a historically specific day. This reoccurring theme speaks to the conflict of our own experience with time—of feeling both eternal and fleeting at the same time.

One way we can understand this paradox is through a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essay "Experience," Emerson writes, "We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight" (265). Emerson's metaphor represents the lack of knowledge as to what came before us and what will come after us. We can see that there was a time before our birth, as we are born into a world that has already existed; yet having no memory of the formative years immediately after birth, we don't even remember a "beginning." The absence of a start causes us to feel eternal for all we have ever known is existence. We paradoxically only experience the present state of existence; at the same time, we are completely aware of our own mortality. The very presence of Joyce's continuous present recreates this conflict due to the nature of a novel having a tangible front and back cover, a beginning and an end. While the motifs of music as a temporal experience lends to this creation the feeling of a fleeting eternity, the presence of music as an auditory sensation allows for Joyce to create a continuous present through the simultaneous interaction of the five senses.

Music, and sounds in general, act as a sort of anchor to the somatic experiences which constantly interrupt the character's interior monologues. For instance, the prose during the passage in which Leopold Bloom composes a letter to his mistress is constantly being fractured

by the reoccurring onomatopoeias of the music being played: “La la la ree. Trails off there sad in minor. Why minor sad? Sign H. They like sad tail at end. P. P. S. La la la ree. I feel so sad today. La ree. So lonely. Dee” (230). Every time Joyce returns to the sound of music he is enacting a form of ‘beginning again.’ Thus, Joyce creates the illusion of simultaneity, as though the music and Bloom’s thoughts are occurring at the same time, as they would in real life. We can see how the presence of music in this chapter serves as a convenient anchor for present experience; it can be relegated into the background and become just another soundscape along with the usual auditory experience of distant chatter and floors creaking. This also means that Joyce can refer back to the experience of music without it becoming the main subject. It is almost as if the characters of *Ulysses* are actively practicing mindfulness, in which the constant experience of the five senses are all brought to the forefront of awareness.



### **3. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* and the Somatic Experience**

In her debut novel, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, Eimear McBride offers her own solutions to the various limitations of literature. Where Joyce tries to capture the ordinariness of life along with the immediacy of the present experience, McBride narrows her scope and seeks to capture the immediacy of physical experience alone. In doing so, McBride sets herself an even more daunting task: translating into language what cannot be understood through language.

While Joyce attempts to put the somatic experience into words as well, he does not put the body at the forefront of his narrative as McBride does. In focusing on the nonverbal experience of the body, McBride faces a new issue regarding the role of the narrator: if the words we are reading are not coming from an entirely linguistic source, then who and what exactly is telling the story?

One of the ways McBride tries to place the narrative within the body is by eliminating the third-person narrator and working solely within her own subversion of the first- and second-person narration. In doing so, McBride not only has to figure out where these words are coming from. She also must find new means for creating the illusion that there is no intended audience.

While Joyce relies on close third-person narration in order to create the illusion that the text is not meant for a reader, McBride has to find her own way of accomplishing this effect with first- and second-person narration. McBride cannot as easily pretend to ignore the reader as Joyce can, due to the very nature of first-person narration being implicitly conversational; the use of the “I” identifier presumes an audience to whom the character is addressing. One way that McBride begins to erase this explicit relationship between the text and the reader is by challenging our very conception of who the “I” signifies. She does this by having the narrative begin before the character is born and end after the character is already dead. This is clear at the

end of the first chapter when we are given the experience of birth with the lines, “Mucus stogging up my nose. Scream to rupture day. Fatty snorting like a creature. A vinegar world I smelled”(6). By using the “I” signifier to relate to the character before and after existence, McBride makes it clear that the “I” does not represent the character’s consciousness; rather, it represents an entity which exists outside the bounds of the character’s mind while also being contained within her undefined, nameless body. In creating doubt as to what is communicating the story, McBride both muddles the implicit conversational nature of the first-person narration and at the same time alludes to a potentially non-mental experience. McBride continues in building the illusion that there is no intended audience by subverting the second person narration.

McBride makes it clear that there is no intended audience by having the bodily “I” address the entirety of the narrative to the main character’s brother. The very first lines of the novel are explicit in their desire to overlook its reader: “For you. You soon. You’ll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she’ll wear your say” (1). The personal pronoun, “you,” gestures towards a fictional character rather than addressing the audience. While this explicitly erases the relationship between the reader and the text, it poses a meta relationship between the text and the brother character. McBride solves this issue by using an indexical “you,” which points to the brother without necessarily addressing him. This use of second-person narration differs from other narratives such as an epistolary novel, in that none of the narrative is actually interacting with the brother. We know this because the brother in question dies before the novel concludes. Nor is the novel a dialogue that *should* have been communicated to the dead brother, considering we remain within the present tense, which means that the brother is being referred to without

knowledge of his death for most of the novel. Thus, McBride creates the illusion that the text is not addressed to anyone, real or fictional.

Another way that McBride erases the implicit relationship between the narrator and the reader is through the novel's broken and fractured syntax. McBride makes it clear that these words stem not from a wholly mental consciousness but from a place of immediate, nonverbal experience. What we get then is what McBride calls the "stream-of-existence." The hyper-broken language alludes to a lack of conscious mediation that further implies that we are not meant to read this narrative. We can see how McBride uses her broken syntax as a means of pretending that there is nothing being purposefully conveyed to a reader whenever we are given the characters ages: "Two me. Four or five or so"(7); "Thirteen me fifteen sixteen you" ( 39). The narrator does not outright say, "I am two years old." Instead, she merely gestures to her age, leaving it up to the reader to piece it together. McBride's technique in giving information to the reader is more akin to the optical illusion, the Kanizsa's Square, in which the viewer's brain creates the image of a square by filling in the blanks. McBride gives enough information to complete the picture without ever giving us the picture. By having her prose appear to disregard coherency, McBride's novel claims, even further than *Ulysses* does, that her book is not meant for a reader.

The intense fracturing of language tries to get past what Auerbach writes as the slowing down of time and thoughts for the purpose of making sense to an outside reader. McBride's relation to time can be understood in contrast with Auerbach's observation of Joyce's slowing down of external time. According to Auerbach, Joyce adjusts the pace of the external scene as a means of portraying the rapidity of conscious thoughts. In trying to capture the immediacy of

somatic experience, McBride minimizes the distinction between external and internal and forces them to move at the same speed. One way she muddles this distinction is by creating a completely ambiguous and intangible external scene. McBride does so through the refusal to include physical descriptors of characters, settings, and actions. She presents us with no spatial conception of an external world, leaving the story to dwell in a constant state of vagueness. We only understand where we are and when we are through the characters fractured experience of her surroundings. Take this scene, for instance:

We scour a house. Sniff all over. See if it's a good bed down. I don't understand marching around thinking upstairs downstairs toilets good bad indifferent, that is fungus that's not foam. Are those rotten windows is there a draft under that door? (40).

Our concept of where we are and when we are remains in a perpetual haze through McBride's syntactic fragmentation. We never get a full description of where the characters are—where they are in connection with each other, with furniture, walls, or rooms. We get only a mere impression of the scene through the scattered references to the beds, toilets, and windows. The impressions are given to us through either incomplete thoughts or non-contextual dialogue, both of which are at times blurred and indistinguishable from one another. The lack of signifiers for action, dialogue, and thoughts gets rid of clean boundaries between both the internal and the external. By blurring what is happening externally and internally, both are united into one, all-encompassing blur of fractured language.

Since Joyce relies on this duality of experience to create a continuous present, McBride must redefine the temporal relationship between her character's physical and mental experience.



The solution for McBride is to find her own sense of constant experience through the complete negation of Joyce and Stein's time. Rather than creating the paradox of an eternal present which is fleeting—an experience of both stasis and progression—McBride creates a present state of eternal fleetingness: a singular experience of constant motion. In other words, there is no clear present and we are instead stuck in a slippery moment of perpetual instability. We can understand this difference of how time functions between McBride and Joyce in part by noting the difference between their respective narrative scopes: *Ulysses* encompasses an entire day while *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* encompasses an entire life.

The temporal ambiguity, achieved through syntactic fragmentation, also allows McBride to resist any clear linear sequence. Instead, it creates a sense of simultaneity. Take for instance the line, “Crumbs on the carpets and insects bite my back I don't care for” (99). Here we see external perception, action, and emotive response all happening at the same time. “Crumbs on the carpets and,” “insects bite my back,” and “I don't care for” are three separate clauses that McBride joins together into one jumbled sentence. The absence of grammatical markers that would indicate sequence indicates a rejection of sequence itself, leading three separate experiences to be unified by their disunity. The fragmentation of syntax is crucial for McBride's goal to twist the experience of the reader with the experience of her character.

The ambiguity created by McBride's fractured language makes *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* a perfect example of what Roland Barthes calls a “writerly text”—a text that puts the reader in a position of control, forcing them to take an active role in the construction of meaning. By creating endless tiny gaps for the reader to fill in with their own personal experiences, McBride crafts a deeply intimate reading experience. McBride cites intimacy as a goal in her

article, “How I Wrote *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*”: “all characters remained unnamed in the hope of closing that very basic sense of separateness down. The reader experiences the narrative from the girl’s perspective, therefore it seemed logical they never receive descriptions of her appearance – for who walks around describing themselves to themselves?” (McBride, 2016). McBride is explicit in her desire to close the gap between the readerly experience with the living experience. The omission of names and physical descriptions for the characters allows everyone to attach themselves and their own experiences to the characters. According to McBride, names and other character descriptors create distance between the story and the reader. As an example, if the main character’s name was Eimear and the brother’s name was Donovan, the reader might be distanced in that their name is not Eimear and they do not have a brother named Donovan. By leaving her characters completely anonymous, McBride leaves our capacities for empathy completely unhindered.

This interaction with the reader, the responsibility to fill in the gaps, creates a sort of shared experience, which causes the emotionally and physically traumatic scenes to be all the more devastating. The most striking moment in which this emotional and physical closeness makes itself felt occurs near the end of the novel, when the Un-named protagonist is being brutally beaten and raped right after her brother dies:

Crushing I hear boines on done he up me fuck me. Smeeling he I  
don’t not to do this I a Jesus. I nme. Go. Away. Breeting. Skitch.  
Hear the way he. Sloows. Hurts m. Jesus skreamtheway he. Doos  
the fuck the fuckink slatch in me. Scream. Kracks. Done fuk me  
open he dine done on me. Done done til he hye happy fucky

shoves upo comes ui. Kom Shitting ut h mith fking kmg I'm fking  
cmin up you. Retch I. Retch I. Dinneradntea I choke mny. Up my.  
Thrtoat I. He come hecomehe. More. Slash the fuck the rank the  
sick up me sick up he and sticks his fingers in my mouth. piull my  
mth he pull m mouth with him fingers pull the side of my mouth til  
I no. Stop that fuck and rip. Scin. Stop heeel. Tear my mouth.  
Garble lotof. Don't I come all mouth of blood of choking of he  
there bitch there bithc there there stranlge me strangle how you  
like it how you think it is fun grouged breth sacld my lungs til I.  
Puk blodd over me frum. In the next but. Let me air. Soon I'n dead  
I'm sre. Loose. Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I.  
VOMit. Clear. CleaR. He stopS up gETs. Stands uP. Look. and I  
breath. And I breath my. (217-218)

The destruction of language amplifies the intensity and true horror of the scene as the reader becomes complicit in creating this disturbing image. We can understand what is happening through the context that we are given leading up to the event. But each line makes the reader work it out in real time in their own head. The first line, “Crushing I hear boines on done he up me fuck me,” with its subtle and easier to identify “boines,” makes the reader complete the image for her through their own deduction that the word actually means “bones.” The reader is the one who conjures the image of bones crushing. The moments during the rape become further and further incoherent, putting more and more responsibility on the reader to help create this horrible moment: “Kom Shitting ut h mith fking kmg I'm fking cmin up you.” Words such as

“mith,” “fking,” and “kmg” are only understood due to the contextual clues given to us. It is the reader who puts the meaning into those clustered letters. The words themselves begin to represent the physical attacks through the use of capitalization towards the end of the passage: “Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY my mOuth. I. VOMit.” The capitalization has only the meaning that the reader gives it.

This passage directly engages with the question of language’s limitations. How could the violence and trauma of such horrific sexual violence be captured and represented through words? It absolutely cannot. McBride breaks grammatical conventions and syntax throughout the entire book to show just how the act of experiencing any aspect of life is failed by language. Since normal experience cannot be described through language, moments that flood the senses through suffering and pain must simply shatter language altogether. Had the scene played out in standard prose, it would have been intensely upsetting through our natural ability to empathize. But only through the destruction of language and immense ambiguity does the reader become complicit in the horror, experiencing it with the intensity that the imagination alone can conjure.

#### 4. *Ducks, Newburyport* and the Linguistic Interior

Lucy Ellmann's latest novel *Ducks, Newburyport* attempts to dig itself into pure interiority by shedding itself of the external, somatic experience entirely. Where Joyce seeks to reconcile the external and internal experience, McBride and Ellmann try to separate and distill them. With *Ducks, Newburyport*, Ellmann counters McBride's distillation of somatic experience with her own distilled consciousness.

We can begin to understand how she achieves the illusion of pure interiority by looking at Auerbach's analysis of the relationship between the external and internal narratives of characters in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*: "In Virginia Woolf's case, the exterior events have actually lost their hegemony, they serve to release and interpret inner events, whereas before her time (and still today in many instances) inner movements preponderantly function to prepare and motivate significant exterior happenings" (538). Woolf and Joyce use the external narrative as a backdrop from which interiority arises in reaction. For Woolf, the catalyst for interiority is a boy being fitted for clothes; for Joyce, it is a man walking around Dublin. Ellmann diminishes this causal relationship by stripping the external scene of its own linear and sequential narrative. The action of the novel is comprised almost entirely within the protagonist's thoughts. Ellmann minimizes the significance of the external by rejecting the idea of an external reality through the subversion of the phrase "The fact that."

Ellmann's protagonist begins almost every thought by saying, "The fact that"—a statement that gestures towards an external, objective truth: "The fact that the raccoons are now banging an empty yogurt carton around on the driveway, The fact that in the early morning stillness it sounds like gunshots" (12). Yet the notion that the tumbling yogurt carton sounds like

gunshots is not actually a fact but is instead the protagonist's own subjective experience of the yogurt carton. Ellmann effectively invalidates the very concept of facticity by actively prefacing non-fact as fact. Without the confidence of an objective reality, the character's relationship to the external reality becomes entirely subjective, miming our own innate solipsism. The use of "the fact that" paradoxically points to the lack of objectivity, relegating all external experience, such as the sound of raccoons, into the realm of subjective interiority. For instance, the sound of raccoons is not depicted as being an external, unmediated phenomena which occurs in a sequence prior to the character's awareness; the sound of the raccoon doesn't precede, and give rise to, the thought of it. Rather, it is the awareness of sound *itself* that is solely being depicted: we do not experience the immediacy of sound; we experience the immediacy of perception. Ellmann creates an immediate experience of purely mediated experience.

The erasure of unmediated, external experience can best be observed whenever the protagonist's thoughts allude to external action:

The fact that now I hear the door slamming, oh here they come, all talking to me at once, the fact that every morning we have to go through this chaos...The fact that Gillian's lost her homework, *again*, the fact that they treat me like Rex the Walkie-Talkie Robot Man, the fact that they have no respect, the fact that this whole house is outta control, and now Stacy's frowning at me, the fact that I don't know what I've done wrong this time" (50-51).

We are given the perception of an external scene of children getting ready for school without actually seeing a linear and sequential scene. We understand that there is a great deal of dialogue

(“all talking to me at once”) yet we don’t actually get any dialogue, nor do we get anything that she herself is saying or doing. The somatic experience, which McBride joins her narrator to, is completely left out. Ellmann does not show the protagonist interacting with the external scene except for mere thoughts about the interaction, thoughts that are detached from the words she speaks to her children and to the physical movement of her body as she helps them. Due to the absence of a clear and independent exterior, the relationship between the character’s thoughts in relation to her external experience are often left ambiguous.

One way to understand this fuzzy relationship is by looking at the presence of headlines as they arise in the character’s stream of consciousness. Take this moment for instance: “coffee and a cruller, dollars to donuts, heart scar, heart operation, Eight Killed In Crash Horror, the fact that I gotta do the dishes before everybody’s up” (18). The character’s thoughts move through a series of word associations before being momentarily interrupted by a headline reminiscent of a social media news article. The nature of the headline in relation to the character is not known, as we are given no context or explanation. We can either read this headline as just a further progression of association—after thinking of her heart operation, she thinks on mortality, which leads her to either remember or invent a headline dealing with death—or we can understand the headline as an allusion to the character’s external experience, as if she were scrolling through her phone and suddenly perceived a passing headline. The latter seems to be a more compelling read, especially when we look at a moment where multiple “headlines” pop up in quick succession:

The fact that I’m not used to having a moment to myself anymore really, uno momento, no problemo, like, just to read a *book* or something, Real-Life Revenge Stories, How Protein Helps you,

*Figaro, Figaro, Figaro!*... The fact that I was the baby of the family too once, Reasons You Can't Stay Focused, the fact that I gave up trying to get Leo to share the housework way back. (19)

Here we can see a far blurrier relationship between the thoughts that lead up to and follow the headlines; even the headlines that follow each other bear no clear link to one another. The juxtaposition of an article about revenge and an article about the benefits of protein is reminiscent of how news is consumed on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Thus, we can *assume* that there is an external scene in which she is on her phone, which peaks through into her linguistic thought while she perceives the written language in front of her. This ambiguity of the external scene and its relationship to the internal thoughts of the narrator pushes the novel closer to Barthes's conception of a writerly text. In trying to capture pure linguistic interiority, Ellmann does not try to capture the simultaneity of experience as McBride and Joyce do. Rather Ellmann binds together various fragments through their common phrase, "the fact that," to create one unified experience of interiority.

If we compare the interior monologue of Leopold Bloom with the stream of consciousness of Ellmann's unnamed narrator, we can see the difference between separating thoughts and unifying them. When we first are introduced to Mr. Bloom, for instance, we read his thoughts like this: "They call them stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to. Vindictive too. Cruel. Her nature. Curious mice never squeal" (45). Bloom's thoughts are broken and interrupted by periods; their movement into each other is implicit. Joyce uses this separation to allow for seamless transitions



into external experience. Since Ellmann minimizes the external experience, the protagonist thoughts are portrayed in a different way:

The fact that I really should do the grouting too, oh dear, the fact that what with my jigsaws and my sciatica and my Pepto-Bismol, and Alka-Seltzer and , my chipped thumbnail, I don't do anything right, procrastination, the fact that two little girls died in their beds in texas because of an explosion at a chemical plant, the fact that it seems like nobody regulates chemical plants enough (91)

Ellmann uses commas and “the fact that” to fracture thoughts, unhinging them from a clean linearity; at the same time, she paratactically glues the them together into one sequence. Through this unification of scattered thoughts, Ellmann constructs her own version of a continuous present.

Ellmann's construction of a continuous present can better be understood by again looking at Gertrude Stein's *Composition as Explanation*: “In this beginning naturally since I at once went on and on very soon there were pages and pages and pages more and more elaborated creating a more and more continuous present including more and more using of everything and continuing more and more beginning and beginning and beginning. I went on and on to a thousand pages of it.” This very well could be a quote from Ellmann since her book is, quite literally, a thousand pages of a continuous present. Stein's emphasis on “beginning again” is exactly what Ellmann is able to achieve through the repetition of “the fact that.” Since the first line of the novel's stream of consciousness opens with, “The fact that,” every subsequent line that begins as such is an

inherent repetition of the beginning. Ellmann achieves what Stein calls “using everything” by constantly beginning again and by layering fractured motifs to create endless, repetition.

Although we could observe the effect of “using everything,” at any point of the book, I will focus at random on a passage which I find particularly striking:

The fact that Trump wants to take cover away from 630,000 Ohioans who took up Obamacare last year, and if he gets away with it, some of those poor souls are possible going to *die*, the fact that I’m glad we’re not on Obamacare, genocide, femicide, the fact that I will never see Mommy again, or Abby, or Bathsheba, or Pepito, and these are permanent sadnesses, the fact that I never liked the idea of anything being permanent, scars and wounds and such, chipped tooth, “never since the loss of her dear mother,” Anne Elliott, Do The Macarena, doing the dab, “A little dab’ll do ya,” the fact that Anne Elliott thinks about her mom every time she plays the piano, and that’s how *I* feel, I mean without the piano, the fact that it’s how I feel *all the time*, the fact that I haven’t felt loved since Mommy got sick, well apart from Leo, that is, and Abby, and maybe Phoebe and Ethan, but they’re far away, and Daddy, and Chuck maybe, and Nanya, I suppose, or Anat sometimes and the chickens, the fact that at least the chickens really do love me, the fact that we kill fifty or sixty billion chickens a year, not *me*, other people, the fact that Mommy’s illness wrecked my life, the fact

that it broke me, the fact that I am *broken*, heartbroken, heart operation, heart scar, broke, Yueyaquan, Leo, the fact that that mean doctor gives me antibiotics for bronchitis, but so reluctantly, the fact that he seemed to *hate* me, and I never knew why, but that was years ago (27)

The layering of fragments here does not indicate simultaneity, as it does for Joyce. Instead their sequentiality represents the circular progression of thoughts. By breaking up a motif and scattering it throughout the passage, each reoccurrence becomes both a repetition and a progression of its initial appearance. For example, the line, “I haven’t felt love since mommy got sick” is both a return to, and a continuation of, the earlier line, “I will never see mommy again.” Since everything is stitched together by the same opening refrain, there is no hierarchy of subject; lines about personal grief are treated no differently than thoughts about Jane Austen. The creation of repetition through fragmentation places significance on even the smallest of details. Take, for instance, the line, “heartbroken, heart scar, heart operation.” While we’ve already seen this line in an earlier passage, the context around the line has changed, making it both a repetition and a progression. Ellmann appears to “use everything” by having even minuscule details, such as word associations, gain significance through repetition. This passage also shows how Ellmann creates emotionally heightened moments through rejecting any hierarchy of significance.

Ellmann’s elevation of seemingly trivial thoughts speaks to what Liesl Olson calls “the modernist proclivity to dwell in the regularity of the ordinary” (4). In her book *Modernism and The Ordinary*, Olson recognizes this goal of capturing the ordinariness of everyday experience as

a fundamental aspiration of modernism. In the passage above, we can see how Ellmann uses a context of ordinariness to ultimately gesture towards the complex experience of grief. The emphasis on everyday life, such as worrying about politics, remembering a song lyric, and thinking about Jane Austen characters, makes it all the more powerful when a moment of strong emotion flashes across the page. The juxtaposition between the lines “the fact that we kill fifty or sixty billion chickens a year, not *me*, other people” and “the fact that Mommy’s illness wrecked my life, the fact that it broke me” catches the reader off-guard to a devastating effect. While the narrative is so occupied with capturing all of the little inconsequential aspects of thought, such as, “Anne Elliott, Do The Macarena, doing the dab, A little dab’ll do ya,” the few moments of real human vulnerability cut through out of the stark contrast. Ellmann heightens the experience of grief by using tragedy to briefly interrupt the aggressive placidity of the narrative. These sudden bursts of emotion linger long after they are read precisely due to Ellmann’s relentless return to the ordinary: “The fact that I have led a lonely bereft life since Mommy died, but I do have Leo on my side, my ‘life partner,’ ow, the fact that now I’ve got a pain in my *side*, the fact that Leo has ankle pain and knee pain” (Ellmann, 26). The character quickly moves from grief to body pains, using italics to emphasize body pains. The narrative does not dwell on such deep emotions, instead they are over as abruptly as they begin. The abrupt nature of these moments amplifies any subsequent mundane action that follows.

## 5. Conclusion: An Argument For Epistemological Modernism

Although separated by almost an entire century, James Joyce, Eimear McBride, and Lucy Ellmann are connected through their shared goal of gesturing towards experience by exploiting the failures of form and language. In trying to capture the ineffability of experience itself, each of these texts are confronted with the same fundamental limitations of literature. While they utilize similar techniques such as the fragmentation of grammar and syntax, they ultimately respond to these epistemological issues in their own ways. The difference in approach lies in their different conceptions of experience.

Joyce indicates his own understanding of experience when he says, “I know when I was writing *Ulysses* I tried to give the colour and tone of Dublin with my words; the drab, yet glistening atmosphere of Dublin, its hallucinatory vapours, its tattered confusion, the atmosphere of its bars, its social immobility – they could only be conveyed by the texture of my words”(Power, 98). Joyce is not after the subjective experience of one consciousness, rather he intends to capture the immense all encompassing experience of humanity. Joyce’s lofty ambitions can be seen in his attempt to capture all of history within the fixed temporality of one day, along with capturing both the internal and external realms of experience.

In an interview for the magazine, “*NewStatesman*,” Eimear McBride says, “Grammatical sentence structure sets a false linear construction on the experience of life. Humanity is far more sophisticated than grammar. We can act, react, think and experience all at once and I’m keen to find ways of making language replicate that”(Boland, 2016). McBride’s emphasis on the sequentiality of grammatical structures in relation to the immediacy of experience gives rise to

one of the more syntactically radical texts we've examined. The desire to recreate the immediacy of experience leads to McBride's highly fractured depiction of the somatic experience.

Ellmann is explicit in her desire to capture experience when she says, "I was interested in burrowing deep into a consciousness. Don't we all long to know what other people are really thinking? You never even know what you yourself are thinking, or not without years of therapy anyway. But we know a lot about how Emma Woodhouse thinks. It's what novels are for"(Feathers, 2019). Ellmann's deep burrowing into consciousness leads to the erasure of a clear and linear external narrative.

The currently accepted definitions of modernism, given by critics such as Peter Childs and Christopher Butler, would preclude the three texts we have just examined from occupying the same space. An early critic of modernism, Malcolm Bradbury, felt that the literary movement around him could only be defined by its plurality, by its lack of unity. This observation should only be valuable in that it reveals what contemporaries thought of modernism, the confusion that arose from not having enough hindsight. For critics to continue defining modernism in its lack of unity, is to willfully ignore the traditions that arose after modernism "ended." For this reason, I believe it is necessary to recognize a new strand of modernism—one that is defined not by the disunity of its beginning but by the unity that has accumulated over time. Each of these texts: *Ulysses*, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, and *Ducks, Newburyport*, experiment with form in direct response to the failures of language and literature in adequately representing the human experience. This aesthetic pursuit is at the heart of epistemological modernism.

The epistemological modernists do not purport to be able to solve the inherent issues with the form of literature; any attempt at overcoming the limitations of literature is destined for

failure. The goal is not to solve the problems of representation, it is to merely expose the failure of literature and thus gesture towards our own failure at comprehending experience. In seeing the ultimate aesthetic purpose of fiction as the reflection of life as experienced, the epistemological modernists view all writing as failure. Conventional grammar and narrative structures offer only one way of failing and forces literature to make the same failure repeatedly. Epistemological modernism argues that we can fail so much more and in so many more ways. We all experience life in our own unique ways which is why we should stop expressing them as the same. We should continue to experiment with form and break syntax precisely because we will never be able to fully understand the anomaly of experience through language. James Joyce, Eimear McBride, and Lucy Ellmann, all redefine what a novel can be through their commitment to failure. To conclude this argument, I will quote a line from Samuel Beckett's, *Worstward Ho*, which perfectly summarizes the sentiments of the epistemological modernists: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better"(1).





## 6. Work Cited

“About the Prize.” *Goldsmiths, University of London*, [www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/about/](http://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/about/).

Auerbach, Erich, and Willard R. Trask. *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

Barthes, Roland, Richard Miller, Richard Howard, and Honoré . *Balzac. S/z*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974. Print.

Beckett, Samuel. *Worstward Ho*. Grove Pr., 1983.

Boland, Stephanie. “Eimear McBride: ‘From a Few Male Critics I Heard the Sound of Petrified Gonads Retracting in Distaste.’” *Newstatesman.com*, 4 Nov. 2016, [www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2016/11/eimear-mcbride-few-male-critics-i-heard-sound-petrified-gonads-retracting](http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2016/11/eimear-mcbride-few-male-critics-i-heard-sound-petrified-gonads-retracting). Accessed 9 May 2020.

Bradbury, Malcolm. *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel*. Oxford University Press, 1973.

Bradbury, Malcolm. *The Social Context of Modern English Literature*. Blackwell, 1972.

Burgess, Anthony. *Joyceprick: An Introduction to the Language of James Joyce*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973. Print.

Butler, Christopher. *Modernism: a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Deming, Robert H. *James Joyce. the Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1997.

Eliot, T. S., and Frank Kermode. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Faber and Faber, 2002.

- Ellmann, Lucy. *Ducks, Newburyport*. Galley Beggar Press, 2019.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays Essays: Second Series*. C.E. Merrill Pub. Co., 1969.
- Frank, Joseph. *The Idea of Spatial Form*. Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- Feathers, Lori. "Lucy Ellmann, a Great American Novelist Hiding in Plain Cite." Lithub.com, 9 Sept. 2019, [Lithub.com/lucy-ellmann-a-great-american-novelist-hiding-in-plain-sight/](https://lithub.com/lucy-ellmann-a-great-american-novelist-hiding-in-plain-sight/). Accessed 9 May 2020.
- Joyce, James, and Richard Ellmann. *Selected Letters of James Joyce*. Faber and Faber, 1992.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Faber and Faber, 1975.
- Kenner, Hugh. *Ulysses*. London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1980. Print.
- McBride, Eimear. *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. Faber & Faber, 2013.
- McBride, Eimear. "Eimear McBride: How I Wrote A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing." The Gaurdian, 10 Sept. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/10/guardian-book-club-eimear-mcbride-how-i-wrote-a-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing>.
- Olson, Liesl. *Modernism and the Ordinary*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Power, Arthur. *Conversations with James Joyce*. The University of Chicago Press. 1974.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique." *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, et al. University of Nebraska Press, 2012.
- Stein, Gertrude, and Carl Van Vechten. *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*. Vintage Books, 1990.