

EDITORIAL

The Apprehension of Mess

The last sentence of David Trotter's beautifully combed article about modernist *toilette* leaves us with an elegant turn to the reader and the readerly, suggesting that interpretation as much as artistic creation may be analogous to the act of striation, which is an everyday form of tidying up mess. This 'combing out' that is the task (or rather, the privilege) of the reader, is doubly that of the editor, for whom combing implies a more brutal interventionism with texts than is usually involved in the process of 'ordinary reading'. In the case of this issue of this journal, however, the editor has largely been spared the strain, through the diligence of both contributors and copy-editors. Thanks to their generally impeccable tidiness, Trotter's delightful phrase 'inferring a syntax' applied to the process of editing *Moveable Type* Vol. 5 2009 more in terms of the pleasurable puzzle of working out the best order for placing the articles in relation to each other than to the business of putting other people's words into a meaningful sequence. Any mess you *do* spot in and about the final product can thus be attributable solely to the editor's own intractable messiness, for which he begs forgiveness.

That turn towards the matter of interpretation which characterises Trotter's final sentences suggests that there may be two different kinds of mess at work in and around the cultural text, be it in whatever medium. The mess of the writer's material, which is shaped, combed, tidied away in one manner or another by the act of writing, appears to become another kind of mess in the eyes of the reader, who must tidy it up in the act of interpretation. The reader straightens out what has become tangled and obscure, inferring a syntax and a context that is absent in the manifest text, identifying origins for things, examining and re-placing constituent parts back in the drawers they *seem* to have come from. But rather than co-operating as in a relay race in one unified task of tidying-up or mess-making, writing and reading appear to be engaged in a complex dialectic, in which two distinct kinds of mess-making encounter one another and produce through that encounter two distinct kinds of tidying-up. Or is it the other way around? Just as it would be impossible to say whether writer or reader came first, it would be foolish to speculate which of the two could claim precedence, Mr Messy or Little Miss Tidy.

This problem of origins is a good place to start when thinking about mess, and it is a theme that runs (more or less obliquely) through all of the articles gathered together here. John Clare's rude background and its deployment in his poetic voice; the flexible ontology of literary texts in the Conway papers; the traumatic roots of creative compulsion in Kurt Schwitters; the abjection that secretly links the othered *bidonvilles* to the centre of Gaullist Paris; and the idiosyncratic genesis of the poetry of David Jones - all of these papers about diverse forms of mess attend to the matter

of beginnings. *How did this get here? Where does it come from? What is its correct place?* That these complex questions of scholarly criticism are also everyday responses to everyday messes does not attest to their naïveté, but to their profundity. The apprehension of mess, in whatever context, academic or domestic, seems to entail some sort of persistent relation of past to future, some kind of practical application of hypotheses of causality, some attention to (assertion of; play with) an order of things.

The idea of mess hovers problematically between the languages of description and prescription, and it is the ideologically determined slide from one language to another that preoccupies a number of these papers. It is precisely this slippage that provokes in several contributions the articulation of what we might call an ethics, a politics, even, a theology of mess. In Mina Gorji's work on John Clare's celebrations of apparently awkward or unshapely things, from weeds to birds-nests to words, we infer a cultural politics in which a generous kind of solidarity is practised through the perception of beauty in mess. Paul Stanbridge's intentions in unravelling the fractal forms of David Jones's poetry are different, perhaps, pointing to the mystic notion of sacrament rather than to the earthly one of solidarity, but nonetheless there is a similar kind of aesthetic appropriation at issue. For Jacob Paskins, the recognition that the cultural construction of chaotic and unhygienic urban mess is inherent to the abject identity of the modern city might seem to foreclose the possibility (or more significantly, the relevance) of any kind of aesthetic redemption, the only solution being one of genuine and structural political change.

Dan Smith suggests, with an entirely different context in mind, that cultural and aesthetic forms should not be separated from social conditions, and that the former do not only reflect the latter, but seek to make interventions therein. Clare O'Dowd makes another case for a complex relationship between the political and the aesthetic, introducing another messy category that might be seen to mediate the two: the psychological. And, returning to David Trotter, the comb he leaves us with - on the threshold of illusion and disillusionment - keeps several doors ajar, aesthetic, psychological, ideological, material, and, in its allusive promiscuity, resists the autotelic tidiness that was once a core doctrine, or *mode*, of modernism studies.

As Mina Gorji puts it, 'Mess can challenge or disrupt an order of things; but it can also reveal an alternative order, one which is "richer", that is to say, more suggestive and more imaginatively engaging and fruitful.' I hope you find reading these diverse articles and reviews, from an appropriately messy mixture of disciplines including history of art and architecture as well as literary studies, as imaginatively engaging and fruitful as I have. They represent something of the exciting range of papers given at the original MESS conference in March 2009, organised by members of UCL English department's Graduate Society, and hosted by the Institute of English Studies, in Senate House, Russell Square. Enjoy!

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Matthew Ingleby is researching a PhD on the cultural production of nineteenth-century Bloomsbury, as part of the Bloomsbury Project, and is funded by the Leverhulme Trust. An article of his about the representation of building plots in nineteenth-century metropolitan fiction - an early version of which was presented at the UCL MESS conference - will appear shortly in a special 'London' issue of the German literary studies journal *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*.